***Sonic Camouflage***

**Surface Sounds**

**Review by Colin Perry**

How might sound perform as a camouflage? Can we hide in sound, using auditory worlds to shelter our voices? On the Greek island of Evia, a whistling language has been used for centuries (millennia, perhaps), to communicate across the craggy, shrubby terrain. The language, Sfyria, consists of sharp birdlike sounds that travel great distances, ricocheting across hillsides and valleys to far-flung listeners. The ‘language’ is a speech-register of modern Greek that can form complex sentences – to ask questions, haggle or joke. The whistling language is partly fascinating because it is such an oddity, a cultural curio.[[1]](#footnote-1) But it is also inspiring because of the way it disrupts our conception of what speech is. Whistling loudly enacts a form of joy, or *jouissance* in the terms of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva: a gleeful rupture in constraining language systems (*langue*) in favour of the complex anarchy of speech (*parole*). Sfyria’s origin-myth richly embodies this sense of speech’s potential for sonic subterfuge: it was, so the story goes, developed 2,500 years ago by Persian soldiers hiding out after losing the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. Hiding out amongst the hills, the soldiers merged their voices with the language of birds. Encoded speech within the envelope of the island’s avian life, they remained audible yet hidden. Like Polari or Cockney, their language became a cloak to slip past the persecutor, a way of hiding and surviving together in sound.

*Sonic Camouflage* (2022) is a video record of a series of performance workshops that invoke the communality, agencies and world-making possibilities of sound. Produced with students from Arts University Bournemouth[[2]](#footnote-2) and tutor Richard Waring, the sound-based workshops took place over a period of several months in the UK, before the group travelled together to Greece in early 2022. Sessions took the form of free-form, call-and-response sound-making using a variety of humble instruments to incrementally develop a polyphonic synergy.[[3]](#footnote-3) The video recording of *Sonic Camouflage* includes recordings of sound performances made at various locations in Evia, including a cave, a valley, at a large outdoor table, on a street and in a taverna. The sound they produce is a gentle, often-tentative proto-music: non-verbal vocalisations, hums, drones, lightly tapped or scraped percussion. The effect is generally calming, like the wash of waves.

The video’s imagery consists of a black-and-white slide show of students performing in each given site. These slide-like images uncouple the sound from the image track. Watching it, I become aware that I am not glancing through a window to the event itself, but rather am encountering a mediation of the world. Mediation is further highlighted by the draining of colour from the image, further focussing the mind on the sonic event. These visual techniques recall the ‘distancing effects’ that have been a feature of experimental film and video art for several decades now.

*Sonic Camouflage* was made collectively by a group of students and a tutor exploring sound, voice and the sonification of space. This goes against the common conception of speech as an emanation from an individual sentient being. For Aristotle, the voice was the proof of a singular animal’s soul and even for Roland Barthes, the ‘grain’ of a singer’s voice, its rasp and rattle, is an index of its singular embodiment.

The field of Higher Education also falls victim to this notion of individual speech. A cliché of the discourse of self-development in art schools is that students should ‘find their voice’, and ‘develop their artistic language’. Students rightfully crave a creative outlet to develop personally, and perhaps also push formal boundaries. But a language or speech (*langue* or *parole*)is not something one person can have or make alone: it is necessarily a communal exercise, the product of encounters with others. *Sonic Camouflage* both recognises the need for students to develop artistically and refutes the individualised egocentrism of ‘finding a voice’ or ‘developing a language’.

This can be seen as an exercise in critical pedagogy, whose outline is well-known: the ‘teacher’ steps back to enable the development of social and political consciousness amongst students as a ‘practice of freedom’ or ‘emancipation’. For Freire, critical pedagogy was the process of becoming-human in a dehumanising world; but as a Marxist, the individual subject of learning was always situated within a wider social corpus. By contrast, within neoliberal higher education, the student is conceived of as an atomised individual. This process of individuation is troubled by *Sonic Camouflage*’s communal sound-making: one finds one’s voice only alongside others.

1. Like other ‘whistling languages’, such as the UNESCO-protected Silbo on the Spanish Canary Islands, it has appeal of the ethnographic curiosity. Sfyria is dying out, a result of the evisceration of rural traditions under contemporary pressures of capital and urbanisation. As a disappearing culture, it is an easy object of what James Clifford called the ‘salvage paradigm’ (1989) in ethnography, art and film, whereby natives re-enact passing ways of life for the benefit of the outsider’s camera and audio tape. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Students in *Sonic Camouflage* were: Eden Alarcon, Sophie Baudains, Jovita Bhengra, Jessica Brauner, Lauren Nulty, Indra Nyquist, Taylor Stankowski. Performances were documented by Tilly Collins. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are echoes here of the radical musical collectives of the 1960s and ’70s such as Cornelius Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra in the UK or Musica Elettronica Viva in Italy – which were as much exercises in freedom as anything conventionally *musical*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)