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Etheric Ocean: An Underwater Multimedia Soundscape

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Full text (PDF file)

Fig. 1



<http://luckysoup.com/ethericocean>

In 350 B.C.E. Aristotle’s articulation of air and water as “betweens” transformed the Greek preposition “between” into a philosophical concept: “the medium.” As a result, as German media theorist Friedrich Kittler observed some 2,350 years later: “between absence and presence, farness

and nearness, being and soul, there exists no nothing any more, but a mediatic relation¹.”

This text aims to articulate the mediatic relations of sound within the “betweens” of ether and ocean. It is intended to be read in conjunction with the navigation of the underwater soundscape presented by “Ethereic Ocean” [<http://luckysoap.com/ethericocean>] (Carpenter 2014). This web-based work was commissioned by *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, a Liverpool-based experimental literature and new media project exploring contemporary approaches to sound, voice, technology, and writing².

“Ethereic Ocean” presents a Deleuzian assemblage of sonic distortions born of the difficulty of communicating through the imaginary media of ether and the deep, dense, dark media of ocean. This assemblage détournes diverse textual, visual, and audio sources from multiple disciplinary contexts. This is a world of inversions. Noises are made. Islands are heard. Sounds are harbours, or are they ocean depths?

On his second voyage for the discovery of the Northwest Passage, attempted in 1586, Mister John Davis of Dartmouth, Devon, observed, “This land is nothing is sight but isles³.” On the 29th June, “after many tempestuous storms” he discovered “a mighty company of isles full of fair sounds⁴.” Within these sounds he sent his boats. When the sea is nothing in sight but isles, what will you do?

I'll ['wade in', 'wait', 'wait a while'].

I'll ['walk in', 'walk away', 'walk on water'].

I'll ['water', 'down', 'fall', 'front', 'log', 'mark', 'meadow'].

I'll ['weaken', 'wean', 'wear', 'weather', 'warn', 'proof'].

I'll ['weather this storm']⁵.

The close association between sound and deep water hearkens to a nautical epoch, before radar, when the depth of the ocean was measured by sounding, by dropping a weighted cable overboard to see how far it would sink. Philip Hoare observes:

Until 1773, when Constantine John Phipps... began to sound the ocean bed, many people thought the sea was bottomless... During his voyage towards the north pole in search of the fabled north-west passage... Phipps employed a

1 Friedrich Kittler, “Towards an Ontology of Media,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no 2-3, March/May 2009, SAGE, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore, p. 26.

2 “Ethereic Ocean” has been performed at *The Museum of Water*, Somerset House, London (UK), 2014; *The Other Room*, Manchester, UK, 2015, and *The Post-human*, Cerisy, France, 2016. It has been exhibited at *No Legacy*, University of California, Berkeley (USA), 2016. This text is an adaptation of a paper presented at “Sound Studies: Art, Experience, Politics,” Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), University of Cambridge 8-10 July 2014.

3 Richard Hakluyt (1598-1600), *Voyages and Discoveries: The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. J. Beeching, London, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 301.

4 Richard Hakluyt (1598-1600), *Voyages and Discoveries: The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. J. Beeching, London, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 298.

5 J. R. Carpenter, “Ethereic Ocean,” *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, [Online] <http://www.electronicvoicephenomena.net/index.php/jr-carpenters-etheric-ocean/> [accessed July 19th 2016].

lead weighted line to measure the distance between himself and the bottom of the ancient sea between Iceland and Norway. That strand of hemp linked the Enlightenment with the pre-history of the earth... for a century this northern nadir remained the profoundest known ocean⁶.

During the years 1873-1876, H.M.S. Challenger sailed the globe taking soundings toward the establishment of a global submarine telegraph network⁷. Most of the world's digital data now flows through fibre optic cables laid along roughly these same routes. During this voyage,

On the ['2nd', '3rd', '4th', '5th', '6th'] February, at ['1', '1.30', '3', '3.30', '3.40', '4', '4.30', '5', '6', '7', '7.30', '9', '9.30', '10', '11'] ['AM', 'PM'] the ship ['proceeded under sail towards', 'was unable to prosecute the search for', 'was unable to make much progress toward', 'bore up for the supposed position of'] Heard Island. ['Bottom', 'No bottom'] was obtained at ['80', '120', '130', '200', '300', '425'] fathoms. It was deemed imprudent to proceed further, ['because of the rocky, uneven nature of the bottom', 'on account of the uncertain position of the island', 'as the ship was surrounded by Penguins, uttering their discordant cry']⁸.

The ocean is a noisy place. In 1490 Leonardo da Vinci observed, “If you cause your ship to stop and place the head of a long tube in the water and place the outer extremity to your ear, you will hear ships at a great distance from you.”

> play second sound file

Sounds like ['a signal', 'a sure sign', 'engine trouble'].

> play third sound file

Sounds un-like ['the ocean', 'the wind', 'distant thunder', 'the rain'].

> play fourth sound file

Sounds not un-like ['voices', 'whispers', 'whale song', 'dolphins', 'singing', 'sobbing', 'static'].

> play fifth sound file

Sounds a bit like ['an echo', 'a false positive', 'a hoax rumour', 'a harmonic'] (Carpenter, 2014).

> slowly turn off sound files

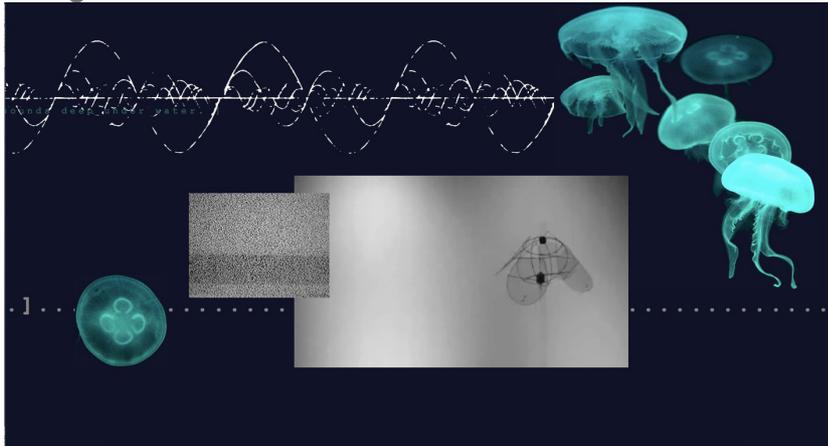
If you can't hear sound here, it's possible that your computer or browser doesn't support the sound file format. Or, that you have your speakers turned off. Or, that you are a land mammal bending your ear to hear sounds deep under water.

6 Philip Hoare, “MH370: the forlorn bleeps remind us of the vast depth of the ocean,” *The Guardian*, 8 April 2014, [Online] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/08/mh370-bleeps-vast-depth-ocean-secrets-americans> [accessed July 19th 2016].

7 J. Murray and C. W. Thomson (1885), *Report on the Scientific Results of the Voyage of H.M.S. Challenger During the Years 1873-76*, London, By Order of Her Majesty's Government.

8 J. R. Carpenter, “Ethereic Ocean,” *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, [Online] <http://www.electronicvoicephenomena.net/index.php/jr-carpenters-etheric-ocean/> [accessed July 19th 2016].

Fig. 2



Ether is a hypothetical medium supposed by the ancients to fill the heavens, proposed by nineteenth-century British physicists to account for the propagation of electromagnetic radiation through space.

The notion of “ocean” was once as vague. Aristotle perceived of the world as a small place, bounded by a narrow river. Columbus believed the Atlantic a shorter distance across than we now know it to be.

In *Haunted Media*, Jeffery Sconce suggests, “Through its early association with shipping, the sea, and distant lands, wireless evoked both the wonders of distant communication and a slight apprehension over the depthless and inescapable void the technology had revealed to the world. The ether was its own ocean, at once vast and diffuse, that beckoned explorers to navigate its unfathomable depths⁹.”

As the flurry of news items pertaining to the underwater search for pings emitted by the black box of the missing Malaysian Airlines flight 370 revealed,

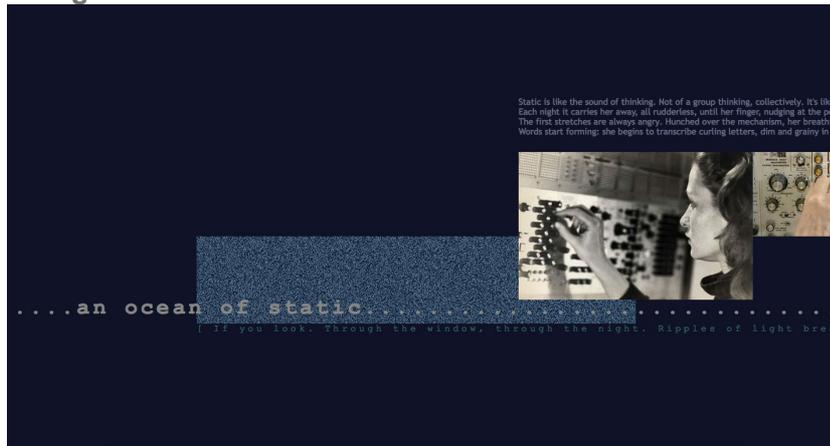
[‘This watery planet can still keep its secrets from us’,
‘When humans first heard whales singing, they believed they
were listening to ghosts’,
‘Marconi believed his radio signals might pick up the sounds of
sailors drowned in the Atlantic’,
‘He spent his last years trying to establish contact between this
world and the next’]¹⁰.

Even as early electromagnetic telegraphic and wireless transmissions propagating over, under, and through oceans appeared to collapse distances between ships and shores, they revealed vast new oceans—oceans of static, oceans of noise.

9 Tom McCarthy, *C.*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2010.

10 J. R. Carpenter, “Etheric Ocean,” *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, [Online] <http://www.electronicvoicephenomena.net/index.php/jr-carpenters-etheric-ocean/> [accessed July 19th 2016].

Fig. 3



In his novel *C*, Tom McCarthy suggests: “The static’s like the sound of thinking. Not of any single person thinking, nor even a group thinking, collectively. It’s bigger than that, wider – and more direct. It’s like the sound of thought itself, its hum and rush¹¹.”

Within the wireless writing apparatus, the listener becomes a human interface, translating from static into sense. Détourning McCarthy, of the listener we might say: each night the static ['recoils with a wail', 'rolls back in crackling waves', 'carries her away, all rudderless'], until her finger, nudging at the ['dial', 'pencil', 'pen', 'cursor'], can get some traction on it all, some sort of leeway.

In this sea of dubious decipherability, the listener serves as a cipher, a vessel, a Marconista (as wireless operators were known), a hybrid creature enacting a hybrid role —between that of a secretary and that of a medium.

['Her breathing an extension of the frequency of the air she’s riding on'], she gets the first quiet clicks. Words start forming: ['she jots down the signals as straight graphic lines, long ones and short ones', 'she begins to transcribe curling letters'], dim and grainy in the arc-light of her desktop¹².

The Marconista transcribes without understanding, from ear to hand. Both mouth and eye are erased. Thus wireless creates a blindness, an hallucination of meaning.

On the 12th of December 1901, three short sharp clicks representing the Morse letter “S” travelled from Poldu, Cornwall, to Saint-John’s, Newfoundland, where they were received by a telephonic headset held to the highly sensitive receiver of Marconi’s waiting ear. Although Marconi claims to have heard the Morse “S” distinctly, his colleague confessed he couldn’t be so sure. In Marconi’s 1901 diary, held in the Bodleian Library, in the space designated for 12 December the word “received” has since been over written. Hoax rumours abound. Some suggest that what Marconi heard was actually a harmonic - a sound born of reflection, reverberation,

11 Tom McCarthy, *C*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2010, p. 63.

12 J. R. Carpenter, “Ethereic Ocean,” *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, [Online] <http://www.electronicvoicephenomena.net/index.php/jr-carpenters-etheric-ocean/> [accessed July 19th 2016].

coupling, or echoing¹³. The Morse “S” was no doubt chosen for its ease of intelligibility. But three dots are, after all, an ellipsis, a grammatical indication of an intentional omission...

Distance ['distracts', 'distorts', 'distends']. The ['heart', 'head', 'ear'] hears what it ['wishes', 'wants', 'needs'] to¹⁴.

What is the discursive difference between a sound and a noise? In her essay “disquiet,” Lisa Robertson states that in using the word “noise,” she wants “to obliquely approach the irregular and constant fabric of sounding that fluctuates through any given and situated present¹⁵.”

Consider the mediatic relations that fluctuate through this situation:

On the 22nd of February 1902, Marconi sailed westward from Southampton to New York accompanied by a team of engineers and wireless operators. No soundings were taken on this voyage. Noises were made. 2,100 miles from Poldhu, Cornwall, three dots were received. These were recorded on inker tape, and witnessed by the captain, leaving little room for doubt.

This map presents the Certified Track of S. S. Philadelphia American Line Showing Points Where Mr. G. Marconi Received Messages From Cornwall, England.

What I wonder about
is what those who were
on board this ship spoke about
amongst themselves
between themselves
off the record
during the off hours
in between messages
in between signals
in between sending and receiving
in between shores
between in receiving and sending
between in signals
between in messages
between in hours
off the during record
the off themselves
between themselves
amongst about spoke ship
this board on were
who those what is
about wonder
I what know you¹⁶.

13 Marconi Archives, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, UK, [Online] <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/marconi/marconi.html> [accessed July 19th 2016].

14 J. R. Carpenter, “Ethereic Ocean,” *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, [Online] <http://www.electronicvoicephenomena.net/index.php/jr-carpenters-etheric-ocean/> [accessed July 19th 2016].

15 Lisa Robertson, “disquiet,” *Nilling*, Toronto, Book Thug, 2012, p. 57.

16 J. R. Carpenter, “Ethereic Ocean,” *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, [Online] <http://www.electronicvoicephenomena.net/index.php/jr-carpenters-etheric-ocean/> [accessed July 19th 2016].

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