Crackling Branches

The Kereita Forest Block is an area of approximately 81,2 kilometres squared of cypress plantation. It lies on the ascending escarpment of the Great Rift Valley, just past Kijabe town in central Kenya. The species planted there are *Curpressus lusticana* and *Cupressus macrocarpa*, exotic Cypress Species originating from Guatelmala and the Central Coast of California. The trees grow well in the cold, foggy Kenyan Highlands and on the steep slopes of Escarpment area. They are planted in rows of 5 by 5 foot. The first thinning happens after 8 years when the tree has a hight of about 4 meters. Thinning is when the lower branches are cut off and single trees are pruned to give the others more space to grow. After another 8 years the forest is thinned out again, single trees cut down and the lower branches of the remaining ones cut off. Then they grow for another 8-10 years, reaching a height of approximately 25 meters and a diameter of about 30-50 cm. At that stage they are then harvested. And then the process begins again.

The plantation is a monoculture, with no other crops or trees in between. As the trees stand so close to one other there is not enough light to support other shrubs, plants or even grass beneath them. The floor is covered with

little dead branches and fallen needles from the trees, making it even more difficult for other plants to settle.

When I first got into the Kereita Forest Block I was very impressed by the hall-like appearance it had. The thick, tall trees were like pillars, the crowns forming a roof that only occasionally lets light through onto the barren floor underneath. A strong wind travels almost undisturbed through this natural chamber, not visibly effecting the tree trunks. Only the crowns of the trees sway. The view at ground level is undisturbed and the atmosphere is calm and quiet. Apart from the wind in my ears there was only one other constant noise. A dry wooden crackling from above. It came from the dried out, dead branches and needles being knocked off the Cypress trees by the constant wind, raining down onto the ground and the dead branches of the trees knocking onto each other when the wind moved the trunk. It produced a permanent crackling through the whole forest. An immersive sound which soon took over my whole hearing sensation. After a while I could not hear anything else, the crackling was just too present.

My *acoustic space*[1] got narrower and narrower, focussed only on one sound. The sound made perfect sense for me in the monoculture forest, where no other being has space; no insects, no animals, no other plants.

Listening back to my recordings I realized something different. The crackling sound was not present in the foreground at all. Rather there was a sound mesh of bird-, insect- and cow and sheep noises which I had completely blocked out. I had not noticed them in the forest at that moment. I discovered them only afterwards. I had completely suppressed the other sounds.

Michel Chion differentiates three different modes of listening: *causal listening*, *semantic listening* and *reduced listening*.[2]

Causal listening describes the way of listening, which is to gather information about the source or the cause of the sound. When the cause is visible, sound can provide additional and profound information about it. When the cause is invisible, it can be identified by casual listening. This is through knowledge based on previous sonic experience or logical guessing. Causal listening is easily influenced and the most deceptive mode of listening.

Semantic listening is listening to decode or interpret a semantic structure like any language or Morse code. Hereby, one listens to sound and its acoustic property as part of an entire system. Although the process of interpreting is based on differentiation there are various degrees of differences. One usually tends to overlook differences in pronunciation, which is essentially sonic information used to understand the language. Semantic listening can go hand in hand with causal listening: We hear what someone says and how he says it at the same time.

The third mode Chion calls *reduced listening*. It refers to a mode of listening where one focusses on the characteristics of the sound itself and tries to listen to it independent of the meaning or the source. This means to listen to sound with its unique qualities as the object of research and to free it from its source or its meaning. Listening to sound reduced to itself is a quite difficult task and one soon realizes that we lack a language for describing sound in itself. Chion gives the example of assigning a sound the attribute of „squeaking". This makes us question if that is really the description of the sound or rather

are we thinking of the source of the sound that squeaks or are we thinking of an unpleasant effect that the speaking sound produces in us. As reduced listening is difficult to grasp Chion gives a further illustrative example. This is of reduced listening in action which we often practice in a „rudimentary form". It is the listening for pitch, as pitch is one of the inherent traits of a sound, which is not referring to its cause nor its meaning. Since it is only one characteristic of a sound and since one sound often has more than one pitch. But further reduced listening has to be understood as a very complex practice.

These three modes of listening offer a very useful framework for listening. Yet from my perspective they do not exist independently from one another. In my experience with the crackling branches I can trace at least two modes of listening. I listened causally, as I heard the sound of the branches and tried to figure out the source (the dry and porous wood sticks and needles falling from the trees hitting first other little branches before they hit the floor which was already covered in them). I heard the sound of the crackling branches and connected it immediately with my cultural knowledge of that place, referring it back to why it sounded like that (because it is a monoculture and in my understanding no other sound could be present). It made perfect sense for me.

When I listened back to the recording of the place, I actually could listen to the sound of the place itself. I realized the the place had more sounds than only the crackling. By this I could actually listen to the sounds as opposed to jumping to the cause of it. My experience was shaped by my biased perception, which blurred out all the other sounds that make the forest (amongst them was the chirping of crickets, the beeping of birds, wind swooshing and

human voices). All of those are rich with sonic information, their data valuable to create a more complex idea of the forest.

So can we listen to our surrounding as voices and value them the same way we value a human voice in language? Can we learn to extract the same information or data out of sound as we do of sound as language? Can we listen to sound semantically even if the language is unknown to us?
Would this mean either defying the meaning of language in sound, or would it mean putting the same meaning in sound as it is in language? This suggests trying to un-listen to the meaning of words which we are conditioned to perceive and understand as language, or to learn and understand the data in sound and interpret it to extract valuable information.

Don Ihde differentiates into these two characteristics: Language as word and language as signification. He says the language of word lies in the centre of language, whilst the signification, which is communicated through, i.e. touch, facial expression, gestures, etc, is at the periphery. [3]

Although these categories can be some what formally distinguished, they are blurry. When we hear a spoken word, we are already perceiving that word on both levels; of signification and of linguistics (word). The linguistic meaning is influenced by the way the word is said. „Language-in-word is normatively embodied in sound.“[4] And perceiving and sensing sound happens on other levels in addition to only a linguistic understanding.

Looking at written language, which is language-as-word not embodied in sound, explains the signifying character of sound. If we look at one word written on a piece of paper and one word spoken, the context of the written

word remains fairly hidden. Although there are assumptions which can be made, about the ductus of the pen or the quality of the paper, the significance of the word is obscure. Whereas if we hear the same word spoken (in a rough voice or in a silent whisper) we have another dimension of meaning, which contextualizes the word.

Language-as-word needs a vehicle, it needs an embodiment. This might be in writing or in sound. Language-as-word is not separable from its vehicle.

Sounds can be seen as a vehicle of language that transports signs and messages which can be interpreted like words in language. In the Kereita Forest it is an experiment to try to understand the complexity of the place by listening to all the sounds in the environment as voices. A sensitivity to the characteristics of sound is required for this practice.[5]

By listening back to the recording of the Kereita Forest Block, I was able to put the sound of the crackling branches, which I had already assigned with meaning, into the realm of sound itself as "bare sound". I could hear its acoustic tokens. From my position this made the experience afterwards more complex. It was an almost forced reduced listening. Only after becoming conscious, and stepping out of my pre-established idea could I re-interpret the sound of the branches and put them in a broader context. I had experienced the sound with the idea in mind that the forest was a dead place. The crackling trees were the symbol of this experience and their sound became amplified in my head. But actually the sound of the forest was different, it was more than only this one sound. I heard multiple sounds in the recording. So is it maybe

the complex intertwining of the sounds that actually gives an interpretation that can tell us something about the place. If we manage to listen to it.

Listening to the language of sound evolves for me as trying to listen to the acoustic characteristics, the pitch of the voice, the envelope, which describes how sound changes over time, the speed of the rhythm and interpret this data to try to understand a place in connection with all the other sounds in the constellation. I think this is what I see as the language of sound. It does not consist of only one separate sound in a space, it is rather the connection and the interrelatedness which is to be interpreted in a semantic way.

Language has one more feature. It is a tool of communication that allows us to understand each other. It is also a concept through which we try to understand the world around us. If we understand sound as a language through which we make sense of the world, we could think of the world around us as connections and interrelations rather than separation and exclusion.

1 *Acoustic Space* is a term coined first by Marchall MacLuhan and Edmund Carpenter. (vgl. : Carpenter, Edmund, Marshall McLuhan. *Explorations in Communication*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1960). Many Scholars have defined the term amongst them Murray Schafer (vgl. Schafer, Murray. „Acoustic Space.“ *Circuit, 17(3), S. 83–86.* https://doi.org/10.7202/017594ar). I refer to it here as the acoustic environment one perceives.

2 Chion, Michel. „The Three Modes of Listening“, In: *Audio Vision – Sound on Screen.* Michel Chion. New York: Columbia University Press. 1994. pp 25-34

4 Idhe, Don. „The Center of Language.“ In: *Listening and Voice. Phenomenologies of Sound.* Don Idhe. Second Edition. New York: State University of New York. 2007. pp 147-154

5 Ibid, 150.

6 Ibid.