

Sounding out the field - sensory experiences of an ethnography on tour

Anna Lisa Ramella

On a music tour, sound occurs in diverse qualities: it *appears* through bodily movement and practices, and it is *produced* by habitual technical and artistic procedures. It is tuned, modelled, transformed, as much as it is unpredictable, situative and subordinate to space, materiality and technology. Touring musicians and their sound engineers are constantly moving within this routinized yet unforeseeable field, setting up a sonic atmosphere in different venues every night.

To classify sound as “random” or “deliberate” proves to be insufficient when describing the sonic environment of a music tour; after all, even those sounds produced by setting up, or the seemingly messy tuning of instruments during a soundcheck contribute to a spatial and temporal orientation.

During my fieldwork on the road with rock bands, sound challenged at the same time as it facilitated my process of understanding. While sound was a connecting element between me and the musicians, as we were all exposed to the same sonic environment, the perception of sound is closely related to skill, experience, and familiarity with a sonic condition. In this way, learning to tour for me as an anthropologist also meant learning to understand, differentiate and codify sound. In this presentation, I will attend to the different qualities of sound encountered on a music tour and how I have experimented with its effects in my audiovisual work. Leaving aside common differentiations between music and sound (Farnsworth 1958, Merriam 2006) or sound and noise (Jones 1992), I am interested in how sounds “enact” (LaBelle 2010) sonic familiarity in a setting such as a music venue or a tour van, and, particularly, how this experience can be rendered into an audiovisual experience. In doing so, I will reflect on the editing process of one specific piece, my two-channel video installation “Rhythms of Attunement”. In this installation, the process of attuning on a sonic level during a soundcheck provides the basis to consider attunements otherwise, such as getting used to an unknown space or finding comfort and familiarity in changing surroundings. I will show how this attention and focus on sound have affected my experience of participating, and how the editing process has supported my understanding of the field. Drawing from my experiences both in the field and in the editing suite, I will consider the various effects sonic environments and their rendering may have on the relatability of experience and how we can use this method to sound out the possibility of sharing the field with others through audiovisual means.