

Research Article

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Sonic Becomings: Rhythmic Encounters in Interspecies Improvisation

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Abstract: David Rothenberg, a philosophy professor and Jazz musician, has been improvising with non-human animals for years, among his playing partners are birds and whales, known to be territorial animals. As Deleuze and Guattari propose that the origin of art is precisely the territorialising animal and more a function of nature than a specifically human cultural achievement, their concept of territory and rhythm offers a non-anthropocentric way of looking at these encounters. Rothenberg's sonic experiments in resonance and interspecies interaction do not rely on language, thus I argue that the human and the nonhuman animals form a temporary joint territory via sonic rhythms and engage in a mutual becoming by forming a rhizome. His sound thinking practice thus also helps in decentralising further anthropocentric models of music and art.

Keywords: sound thinking, sonic thinking, animal studies, rhizome, deterritorialisation, art, interspecies improvisation, interspecies music

1 Animals in/and music: Representation or encounter?

As a jazz musician, improvisation is of course a constitutive part of David Rothenberg's life. But Rothenberg, who is also a philosophy professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, improvises with species other than humans and over the last twenty years, has played music with birds, bugs, and whales. His concept in a nutshell: Rothenberg takes his clarinet, goes where his nonhuman co-musicians reside and tries to engage them in a musical dialogue, which he records and later reworks in his studio. One of his recent projects has taken him to Berlin (2018), longtime home to colonies of nightingales, where he attempted to play with them and a few other human musicians. In the context of thinking about sound thinking and sonic research, one might wonder: What does it mean to think with sound in interspecies encounters?

Animals and music are not at all a new story. Besides the myriad ways in which animal sounds are naturally part of human cultures, for example in herding or hunting cultures, animals in formalised music as motif or simply as inspiration are also far from new in all kinds of music.¹ There are a great number of compositions that take up "animal themes" and rework them in the idiom of classical music. Prominent examples are the *Carnaval des Animaux* (1886) of Camille Saint-Saëns, where different animals are represented in music to give the impression of slow and heavy-footed elephants or elegant and melancholic swans. The examples that could be mentioned here are truly innumerable. Birds are especially prominent:

1 Doolittle, "Crickets."

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Robert Schumann's *Bird as Prophet* from the *Forest Scenes*, Maurice Ravel's *Oiseaux Tristes* from *Miroirs*, or Walter Braunfels' opera *The Birds*. Other animals are also featured in classical music in the above-mentioned way: *The Trout* (Franz Schubert), *Flight of the Bumble Bee* (Nikolai Rimski-Korsakow), *Butterfly* (Edvard Grieg, *Lyric Pieces*) are among the best known pieces, and lesser known pieces might include several pieces from Ravel's *Histoire Naturelles* or Jaques Ibert's *Le Petit Âne Blanc*.

Pieces like this follow a logic in which animals' representation necessarily includes their absence. The impressions that animals give are fully absorbed into the human realm of cultural production, their calls and songs are "subsumed to the thematic development around them"² and although works like this have lost nothing of their beauty and power, animal voices are fully represented in the human musical idioms.

Different examples, like Olivier Messiaen who in his *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* directly transcribed the songs of birds he listened to in extensive bird watching sessions, neither imitate animals nor simply record them, like a field recordist would do, point to a different direction and show that a more direct involvement is possible. There are by now many other composers who use a similar technique and work directly transcribed or recorded animal song into their compositions, for example Magnus Robb, Michel Gonnevillle, or Stephen Preston.³

A number of musicians and sound artists all over the world have engaged with the sounds of the animal world in numerous ways. Some record rare or rarely heard animal voices, others record animals' songs and sounds for reasons of research.⁴ Bernie Krause as a prominent voice in raising awareness for the worldwide extinction of species and the sonic consequences of the massive ecological crisis we are in should be mentioned here,⁵ as well as R. Murray Schafer, who, besides initiating the World Soundscape Project in B.C., Canada, also incorporated bird song in his compositions.⁶ Very often at the same time engaged in environmental activism, sound artists like Jana Winderen or Chris Watson bring forth unheard animal voices in their work.⁷

Artists engage to different degrees with animal sounds. In most cases, animals' songs are first recorded and then either simply cut and made available to a wider public or otherwise worked on in more complex ways by means of software before publishing it. Improvising with animals' songs is comparatively rare when we look at the overall musical engagement with animal sounds.

In 1982, Jim Nollman produced a landmark recording in the animal music realm called *Playing Music with Animals*, in which he presented pieces that were both improvised with animals and songs in which animal sounds were simply built in as an effect. The jazz saxophonist Paul Winter, who is also an outspoken environmental activist, often records in nature and also used whale songs in his 1987 record *Whales Alive*. Both Nollman and Winter attempt improvisation with animals but both keep more to their original idioms than Rothenberg does. The same can be said of Evan Parker, who also played with birds – meaning that he duetted with prerecorded field recordings.

Especially, reviewing these two musicians who both also focus on improvisation and animal songs reveals what is different about Rothenberg: He directly engages with animals, he does not just record them and later improvises in the studio to bird sounds: He tries to establish a musical interaction on site. There is this strong sense of trying to make contact on the terms of the *other*, the attempt to find common ground with the animal via a musical code. His method seems simple but depends fully on the contribution and cooperation of the other singing animal: Armed with the necessary technical equipment, Rothenberg goes where the animals he tries to play with are, be in their natural habitats or in places like the National Aviary

² Fischer and Cory, *Animal Music*, 15.

³ Doolittle, "Crickets."

⁴ There are several extensive sound libraries for animals sounds, see for example the Macaulay Library (www.macaulaylibrary.org) or the Wildlife Sound Recording Society (www.wildlife-sounds.org).

⁵ See for example his books Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra*; Krause, *Voices of the Wild*.

⁶ Doolittle, "Crickets."

⁷ See for example Winderen's, *The Noisiest Guys on the Planet*, a piece about the sound of shrimp (in Fischer and Cory, *Animal Music*, 60–5).

in Pittsburgh, and then tries to play along with them. He records those encounters and subsequently uses them for study purposes or the production of music albums, with which he often publishes a book as well.

In his books and talks he stresses again and again that he wants to learn from the animal musicians he encounters and tries to play along to what they are playing: foreign rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. In one of his books, *Why Birds Sing*, he stresses: “Playing with birds, rather than merely thinking about birds, I begin to feel what it’s like to be a bird. I do not look for proof but only possibility, and hope for new ways to interact, new sounds to surprise.”⁸ Rothenberg’s aim is nothing less than an artistic encounter with animals, one that “convey[s] the actuality of bird’s experience from within.”⁹

2 Going beyond: Sonic thinking-with

For the analysis of an artistic encounter between human and animal, a possible point of entry would be the field of Animal Studies. The interface of Animal Studies and Sound Studies offers a unique perspective on Rothenberg’s concept and his music, but I would argue that there is more at stake here than the most final proof that (some) animals are artistic individuals or another analysis of sonic environmental activism. An analysis of what Rothenberg does conceptually and musically *only* in the light of Animal Studies and Sound Studies is extremely valuable as it adds to those good causes, however, it is my impression that what can be said and thought in those disciplines does not pick up all there is to be heard. The Deleuze–Guattarian philosophy of immanence and difference could offer a fresh set of connections. Or, put differently, analysing the Rothenberg concept under these parameters may set us on a new line of flight, one that doesn’t stop at the subjects who partake: (sonically) thinking with the world, not “just” about it. Becoming-with the world instead of being-in it.

As an interdisciplinary field, Animal Studies or Human–Animal Studies explore how animal lives and human society intersect and how the spaces that animals occupy in societies are structured. It draws from disciplines like ethology, (behavioural) biology, comparative psychology, zoology, and primatology and thinks about a wide array of problems ranging from how animals figure in culture and art, exploitation of and violence towards animals, the domestication of animals, meat production, animals in the wild, animals in sports and performance, and so on and so forth.¹⁰ On a larger scale, Animal Studies tackle issues of anthropocentrism and speciesism¹¹ by trying to think interactions between animals and humans from the perspective of the nonhuman. But, as Borgards et al. point out, the attempts to think with animals, not about them, to resist the endless anthropocentric pathways, often result in thinking about the human after all, especially in those texts that in determining the animal reflect on the anthropological difference.¹²

Gardner and MacCormack add another layer of critique. Deleuzian difference, they maintain, is a positive difference that stands in opposition to other systems of thought where difference always needs a reference: a thing always has to be different to something else or different from something else. This anthropocentric system of signification is also prevalent in the field of Animal Studies which makes it necessary to always speak “about” or “of” the animal: “Speaking about animals at all inserts them into a form of discourse in which they have no consent or voice. Discussing animals reduces them to objects

⁸ Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 11. Other books by David Rothenberg, include *Thousand Mile Song*; *Bug Music*; or *Nightingales in Berlin*. His written work also features titles that are not about animals and music, for example *The Possibility of Reddish Green*; or *Is It Painful To Think? Conversations with Arne Naess*.

⁹ Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 17.

¹⁰ See for example DeMello, *Animals and Society*; and Waldau, *Animal Studies*.

¹¹ Speciesism both entails the absolute divide between human and animal and valuing humans and animals differently (DeMello, *Animals and Society*, 36). It is used to justify that nonhuman beings can be treated as “mere commodities” (Waldau, *Animal Studies*, 34).

¹² Borgards et al., *Texte zur Tiertheorie*, 11.

discussed between humans.”¹³ If we can only ever speak about animals in relation to ourselves, if the “nonhuman animal and their allies can never win”¹⁴ and all difference we can talk about is only a “difference from,” if, in short, we can in Animal Studies only look at how animals figure in our discourses, there is still nothing wrong with studying those discourses – for ethical and many other reasons it is necessary to do so. But it might prove insightful to try to go beyond through studying the works of Deleuze and Guattari: First of all, because their understanding of art is profoundly connected to the concept of territorialisation and rhythm and is explicitly not restricted to human culture alone. Second, the movements and de- and reterritorialisation help with getting around the anthropocentric discourse and describing a sonic thinking-with the world.

3 Deterritorialising identities: Art, rhythm, music, excess

The cultural achievement of music as art seems to be judged as a very human affair. For example, most people will not have a problem in affirming that birds and whales sing songs, but calling it art in human terms is another story. Richard Prum’s theory of sexual selection, Darwin’s second evolutionary principle, as the evolution of aesthetics was not welcomed among evolutionary biologists, who focus very much on beauty as a feature or function in the process of finding the healthiest mate.¹⁵ It seems hard to think of nature’s abundant beauty as a token of pleasure.

For Deleuze and Guattari, however, the domain of art is by no means restricted to the symbolic order of human cultural organisation. “[A]rt does not wait for humans to begin”:¹⁶ On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari understand art with natural preconditions, not cultural ones.¹⁷ Art is seen as a function of nature more than a conscious action of an individual and has its origin in territorialisation: “Perhaps art begins with the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory.”¹⁸ Art originates in nature with the territorialising animal: Derived from the concept of sexual selection where bodies are intensified, for the sake of pleasure, to create non-functional abundance, to foster the “appealing, irregular, unpredictable.”¹⁹ Art is therefore an issue of making territory and for Deleuze and Guattari it begins with architecture: “Art is [...] the extension of the architectural imperative to organize the space of the earth.”²⁰

Deleuze and Guattari suggest a continuity among human and nonhuman species in their modes of occupying space: artistic acts make territories; music makes territories. Humans and nonhumans use sound and music to establish a territory and Deleuze and Guattari give the example of a child that sings in the dark.²¹ With its song the child creates a safe space, it structures the darkness around it by the use of a song. Nonhuman animals also use sounds to establish a territory, for example bird song which is recognised as a basic component of marking a bird’s territory. From there, Deleuze and Guattari abstract the sonic motifs to “extend the notion of the refrain to refer to any kind of rhythmic pattern that stakes out territory.”²²

When we look more closely at how territories are formed with Deleuze and Guattari, we have to disentangle first their idea of milieus and rhythm. Milieus are described as “vibratory”:²³ they are erected by periodic repetition, yet are always on the move: “Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic

¹³ Gardner and MacCormack, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵ See Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty*.

¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 373.

¹⁷ Grosz, “Eight Deleuzian Theses,” 46.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 183.

¹⁹ Grosz, “Eight Deleuzian Theses,” 48.

²⁰ Ibid., 49.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 362.

²² Bogue, *Deleuze on Music*, 16–7.

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 364.

repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction.”²⁴ A milieu is internally organised but always open to change; it is threatened with exhaustion or intrusion by chaos²⁵ materials from the outside and the internal of the milieu interact at the limit of the milieu, the “annexed or associated milieu.”²⁶ The milieu’s answer to chaos is rhythm and chaos, in turn, is the backdrop of everything here: it is “the milieu of all milieus.”²⁷ Rhythm then takes place between milieus, it is never “on the same plane as that which has rhythm.”²⁸

How does a territory come to be? A milieu as such does not constitute a territory yet, it is an *artistic act* that territorialises milieus and rhythms: “milieu components emerge as qualities, and rhythms become expressive.”²⁹ Whereas the milieu is directional and functional, the territory is dimensional and expressive.³⁰ The territorialising function of the expressive quality establishes the space, the space does not determine the territory, which makes the territory an act: “Rhythm itself – the differential, incommensurable relation between milieus – creates the territory, and with it expressive qualities that stake out a possession.”³¹

A territory is formed from the present milieus and rhythms and is built by milieu components but the difference between territory formation and simply creating a bigger or more complex milieu is that in a territory those components are no longer functional but expressive: “There is a territory when rhythm has expressiveness. What defines the territory is the emergence of matters of expression.”³² or even more precise: the act of expression makes the territory. The matter of expression, be it sound, colour, or products, is a mark or a signature to other living beings that signals the formation of a domain.³³

When Rothenberg sets out to seek animal musicians willing to improvise with him, we have one territorialising animal meeting another territorialising animal, and in this case both animals territorialise via sound. The rhythms and temporalities that encounter each other couldn’t be more different: body rhythms of different sized musicians (bird vs human or human vs whale), different ways to produce sounds (birds have different vocal tracts than humans, whales probably produce their songs via a larynx-like structure in their throat), different preconditions of perceiving sounds, not to mention the different hearing ranges, and so on and so forth. Each animal, be it human or nonhuman, is a specific formation of milieus and comes with different degrees of openness to the outside world and to chaos. If we were to talk about communication and the exchange of factual content, there would be ample space for misunderstandings. All those milieus and rhythms are part of the audible encounter: body size influences lung capacity, that in turn will influence the airflow during singing or playing the clarinet and will have a direct impact on the rhythms and melodies played or sung.

If we see rhythm not just as regularly repeated beat (Deleuze and Guattari would call that meter³⁴), but as a productive and expressive means of creating territory, the encountering rhythms exceed the individual participant and the music they bring. Their sonic territories overlap and interact. Rothenberg and the animal form a rhizome, much like the wasp and the orchid, they engage in a mutual becoming-other via sound and rhythm. As Kleinherenbrink writes: “If milieus concern *what* happens *where*, rhythms are about *how* and *when* things within and between milieus happen [...]”³⁵ The common rhythm Rothenberg and the animal find and play with forms a stable centre, while a set of de- and reterritorialisations are underway.

²⁴ Ibid., 364.

²⁵ Ibid., 364.

²⁶ Ibid., 59.

²⁷ Ibid., 364.

²⁸ Ibid., 365.

²⁹ Bogue, *Deleuze on Music*, 19.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 366.

³¹ Bogue, *Deleuze on Music*, 19–20.

³² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 366.

³³ Kleinherenbrink, “Territory and Ritornello,” 216.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 365.

³⁵ Kleinherenbrink, “Territory and Ritornello,” 215, emphases in original.

Human music, here jazz, and its socio-cultural conventions are deterritorialized: They are taken from the jazz club out into the wild: The fixed relations and expectations of the genre in a human-only environment, the specific position of the clarinet in a (more or less typical) jazz combo, and the jazz idiom itself are loosened and new creative potential is opened up. Animal song is likewise taken out from its usual intraspecies context and the ensuing sonic dialogue creates a joint rhythm and with it, a joint space, a temporal habitat for all involved animals, the human and the nonhuman ones. Both ways of producing music are deterritorialized from their original context and reterritorialized in the encounter, as a new territory emerges when human and nonhuman musicians find common ground by creating a common rhythm.

What are the properties of this joint territory? It is temporary, as all territories, yet it is stable and site-specific, as it has some form of internal structure because of the specificity of the interacting rhythms, but it is not static. Made up of different milieus and rhythms and neither human nor animal but a space of becoming both at the same time. It asks many questions about how we understand art and music, it sets us on a course of discovery instead of looking for answers that fit the questions. In fact, it can tell us something about how sound thinking itself can work.

It is not only that Deleuze and Guattari see music as originating in nature with the territorializing animal and expressive rhythms. As Michael Gallope reminds us: Music also exceeds our notions of “socio-cultural identities,” of historical classification, or of taxonomies of any kind, be it biological or musico-logical. Where does this excess point to? Not to musicking individuals but to the connection to something altogether different:

We know a Deleuzian musical work is not first and foremost a culturally or historically situated musical practice. What music does or expresses is rather indifferent to our apprehension of any specific situation in the world. So instead of expressing or representing something about socio-cultural identity, history, or a composer or performer, music would challenge, or “deterritorialize” precisely these wordly, actual properties. What is musical about music is something that exceeds the boundaries of social formations.³⁶

In this improvisatory act of forming a joint territory via music, we can see how the sonorous has the potential to exceed the social formations at hand. The socio-cultural identities who partake in that improvisation, the performers, be they animal or human animal, fade from the spotlight. We witness the deterritorialization of partaking subjects *as subjects*: Their distinct individualities become less important while they join an improvisation that deterritorializes their identities in distinct discourses. This constitutes not a thinking-about, but a thinking-with, or as Deleuze and Guattari famously stated: “[...] to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune.”³⁷

To conclude, as an example of becoming, of reaching out beyond the logic of language and representation, Rothenberg’s interspecies improvisation follows the rhizomatic “and [...] and [...] and [...]”³⁸ and strongly resonates with François Bonnet’s description of thinking with sound:

As such, thinking with sound, *making music*, is already taking sides. It is opening up to the silent but sonorous world that speeches cannot reach. It is to be on the lookout for the future of the world, that is, to embrace the field of metamorphoses, and of worlds in the making. To think with sound is to refuse to base any reflection on the imperial logic of words and speeches. It means exploring what is hidden outside words, outside the logic of power, outside the control zones. It is about turning around ideas, like turning around a sound, which never repeats itself, always almost the same but never itself. It does not build, but collects, accepts. It is to trace from traces, to walk in the dust. It is thus learning to deal with the unspeakable, without seeking to pacify or tame it. It is living in the company of shadows and resonating with them.³⁹

³⁶ Gallope, “Is There a Deleuzian Musical Work?,” 101.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 362–3.

³⁸ “The tree imposes the verb to be, but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction “and [...] and [...] and [...]” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 26.

³⁹ Bonnet, “Thinking with Sound,” 129.

Rothenberg's making music with animals is a sonic thought about an alternative to anthropocentrism and a rethinking of power structures. It is not an ethologist's endeavour to find out something *about* the animal via observation and interpretation but a sound philosopher-practitioner's experiment in resonance and cooperation via rhythm and sound.

Through his improvisation with species other than the human and through the creation new nonhuman rhythms and joint territories, Rothenberg decentralises an anthropocentric model of thinking music, and with it, thinking art, and with it, thinking our concepts of culture and nature, and maybe with that, thinking about our own status in this world, our position and perceptions, our perspectives and politics.

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