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The mention of flies: *chance, environment, depiction*

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ABSTRACT

Acting as a bridge over the river of “academic” and “artistic” contributions to this special edition, this article explores zones of chance (with a particular focus on Surrealist objective chance and the work of English Professor Wendy Wheeler); environment (often relating to the motion of a river and the mention of various of insects, revolving around the author’s attempts to listen with tinnitus to the environment, and to listen with the environment to tinnitus); and depiction (notably the work of the painters Edvard Munch and Gastone Novelli, the poet Robert Grenier, and the philosopher Michel Serres). Placed in relation to the author’s own lived experiences with tinnitus, these zones are channeled into the undulation of a wave symbol (∩), in an attempt to acknowledge, hold, and communicate different lived experiences and possibilities of tinnitus. As such, each zone may be read either as part of as whole, in any order.

KEYWORDS

Tinnitus; listening;
biosemiotics; surrealism;
chance; depiction; sound

Introduction

This article is the last in a series concerned with ∩,¹ hearing, listening and balance.² Where possible, I’ve tried to avoid confining ∩ wholly to a situation, position, mechanism or person. In this instance, ∩ is not treated as just spatial and temporal, but relational. I have tried to approach ∩ amidst the confluences of mind-body-environment, and as such, the structure of this article drifts among three zones; depiction, environment, and chance.

I briefly focus on popular tropes in Edvard Munch’s painting, *The Scream*, in order to arrive at the ambiguity of *Boat in the Sun*, a painting by the lesser known artist, Gastone Novelli <https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/boat-under-the-sun/>. The latter portrays a kind of painted language, one seeming to contain a foreknowledge of a host of hidden implications that I explore through such things as Surrealist objective chance³ and the lens of Biosemiology.⁴ I ask what ∩ life could mean in this instance, considering how the difficulties and contradictions of ∩ experience often spill over into its communication, whereby attempting to describe ∩ linguistically, for example, can lead to an amplification of ∩, subsequently clouding one’s ability to think and communicate, an issue partially attenuated by a brief exploration of asemic writing and the consideration that depictions of ∩ need not always directly refer to or represent ∩. I also think through a “drawing-poem” by the poet Robert Grenier, though I’m at pains to state that whilst

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Grenier's work is not directly "about" ~, it has however, helped me to listen to it, revealing a number of subtle contextual parallels.

Subsequently, this article looks not only at modes and methods of depiction that focus on ~, but possible ways of doing so, notably in the work of the writer Michel Serres, experimenting with the ways we might experience ~ if some of its more popular tropes and methods of depiction, such as placing hands over ears, were otherwise.

It's my hope that this ongoing process of seeking and considering alternative ways to engage with ~, ultimately as something that can benefit from varying degrees of chance and ambiguity in both its encounter and subsequent communication, can help to soften the continua of its communicative difficulties.⁵ As such, I continue to try and find ways to convey ~ experience without directly mentioning it, acknowledging it without pointing straight at it.

River

During a discussion about the surrealist concept of the marvelous and its possible relations to ~,⁶ a friend suggested that if I wanted to come close to understanding their ~ then I should spend some time watching,⁷ not listening (in fact, they requested I "go out of my way" not to listen) to the movement and interaction, the life, of a river.

I managed to do this several times over the course of a month, and made many drawings, as if I were somehow drawing variations of my friend's ~.⁸ One of the most curious and synchronous things I observed was that there always seemed to be a part of the river that was flowing slightly faster than its neighboring region, serving to speed up the water around it, exerting a drag on the faster flow.

At some point I realized that I'd only been paying attention to the river, and not what surrounds it, which I have attempted to address in this article. I believe this is part of the reason why my friend asked me to experience the life of the river for myself, in mind of the difficulty of writing several simultaneous events at once, having by necessity to split them up and order them sequentially. With this in mind I imagine one way of navigating the three zones of this article would be to them read out loud at the same time, akin to a performance.

Spending time with the river helped me comprehend the ~ multiplicity around and outside of my friend's body-mind-environment as anything but laminar, as conveyed in ways other than the sound of human speech, which can so often serve to further amplify the parallel presence of ~. This led me to picture the motion of ~ like the motion of gnats over the surface tension of the river.

Each part of the river seemed to act in a perturbing fashion on all of its other parts, I was reminded of Italo Calvino's Mr Palomar, trying to count each individual wave on a beach (Calvino 1993, 3). The effects constantly cycled and fed back into each other. I observed innumerable vortices swirling behind river rocks, the water turning back on itself. Such observations, in which each new advance of the water is partnered by understanding and amnesia, for me reflects the difficulty of talking and writing about ~, as soon as I think I understand it, it changes, leaving me at a loss.

I haven't pressed my friend as to exactly why they wanted me to pay attention to the motion of a river, to search for fixity seems to miss the point entirely. It helped to remind me that there is much more complexity inherent in ~ than I can perceive, or that I can

remember, it can be so much more than a tone. As stated, this article is ultimately concerned with my own lived experiences of ~, and so by necessity, it focusses on environment as much as my own thoughts and feelings, trying not to separate them, whenever and wherever possible.

In an essay titled, "Field," art-critic John Berger writes; "the field you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life" (Berger 2009, 205). It's interesting to consider how ~ and environment can suddenly flip, as motion and mention, one feeding into another to the point that one seems to disappear as the other increases in intensity. This is akin to what the artist Sarah Hughes, in relation to Berger's essay, has called an "encounter," wherein Berger "writes from a position of being surrounded" (Hughes 2013). The field we are standing before contains elements of whoever and wherever we are, and in this doctrine of similars, regardless of whether we live with ~ or not, we might explore and take note of the ambiguities, an act akin to layering field upon field, in the hope that, whenever such a flip occurs, when the experience of being surrounded becomes singular, we find ourselves among living relation more than opposition.

I often perceive my ~ outside of me, not only (as explored in the zones of this article) in the motion of flies and the sound of cicadas, but in the undulation of gnats. This relation doesn't make ~ "better," it doesn't always make it disappear, but during such encounters I begin to feel like I have been taught another way to communicate, a way that doesn't always lead to an escalation of what I am trying to depict, or even hold in mind, to the point that it shuts down that very attempt.

Depiction

To depict ~ is often to encounter, or even embrace, a paradox, that one need be in at least two places at once. ~ can be both simple and complex at the same time, inside and outside, a surface simplicity both concealing and implicated in layers of complexity.⁹

As part of the first ever 2018 "Talking Tinnitus"¹⁰ Expo', the British Tinnitus Association (B.T.A.) asked some of their 'celebrity supporters' to draw their tinnitus. The drawings, primarily insectile in nature, ranged from an ant crawling over a brain, surrounded by the onomatopoeic, 'scratch, scratch'; an aurora of tightly wound spirals bursting from the head of a person crying; ubiquitous bees flying around a person clearly in distress, 'bzzzz bzzzz bzzzz'; a bell ringing in the concha of the ear, as if emerging from a cave, resounding amidst pulses of sharp lightning; a mosquito about to draw blood from an ear; and a septet of octopus tentacles, choking the individual whilst also stabbing them in the head with swords and spears.

Having lived with ~ for over fifteen years now, I've no desire to tell anyone how to communicate their own experiences, I've spoken with enough people to appreciate its diverse, temporal, oft-antagonistic, sensitive, contradictory and dynamic natures. It's interesting to note however, that the prevailing tenet of the drawings mentioned above, which I find hard to interpret any way other than literally, is one of inherent discomfort, a list that would, I imagine, promote a feeling of anxiety, as well as sympathy, for those reading it, regardless of whether they "have" ~ or not. Conveying the overall impression that people who experience ~ are "trapped" within it somehow.

One of the most prevalent ~ tropes is that of a person at the mercy of their inner and outer environment, covering their ears with their hands. This is keenly felt in a famous painting by Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, otherwise known as “Shriek.” In 1892 Munch wrote in his diary that he sensed “an infinite scream passing through nature,”¹¹ a sense that he would later transmute to hearing. This is not a concern I will be following here, but nevertheless it remains a curiosity for me when I consider the predominant association of *The Scream* with ~ experience, of placing hands over ears in desperation, which for all intents and purposes, has provided something of a lacquer that has not only obscured many deeper and more interesting interpretations of the painting, but has also served to define ~ in a very narrow and stereotypical sense, folding it into a fixed mien of detail, reception, and intent. As stated, it’s not my intention to linger on the reception of this painting, and all its “nervous dissolving treatment of colour” (Watkins 2007). This brief introduction merely serves as a hopeful means that when we shortly return to it we will subsequently be able to move away from it, or at the very least, add to it.

Returning to the B.T.A. drawings, I can’t help but wonder if it’s possible (through some hybrid form of mark-making and writing) to make clear just how ~ can feel, how, even where, it takes place? Equally, I can’t help but ask, if satisfied by a particular rendition, would it then feel as if there were a particular concept of ~ that must be validated above all others? It could be that this is where dynamic understanding makes itself known, in the process, in not managing to pin it down, but following it. An ongoing depiction of ~ that consists of the lived and varied moments of ~.

I imagine rendering ~, or following, like the river, in such a way that each utilization of a curve¹² is itself an ongoing experience of ~, blurring and bending, detaching, obstructing and drifting. Perhaps one curve would denote the only time I would (or would not) notice my ~ that day; another could reflect a moment that actually created a sense of kinship; triggered a memory; made me miss something important; annoyed a friend because I couldn’t hear what they were saying ... The gaps between the curves feel crucial, perhaps denoting the aforementioned cancellation in between mention and motion, and yet the more gaps there are, the harder it can be to distinguish one thing from another.

One means of exploring such depiction is ascemic writing, which is wordless and open with regard to its semantic potential, as far as it is possible to be so. I’m not trying to get at the prototypical dictum of “the thing in itself,” neither am I trying to abstract ~ from any personal reality, rather, I would like to point toward an instance of depiction in which we might find ourselves able to communicate in a register somewhat apart, or alongside, disposition and expectation, one that remains open enough to carry within it a number of different ways of speaking, drawing, painting, writing and thinking about both the experience and communication of ~.

In *The Rustle of Language* Roland Barthes uses ascemic as a term for a word produced by typographical mistake, which he called a “pure signifier,” released into “efflorescence” (Schwenger 2019, 1). To pay attention to ascemic writing can mean to try and resist the very pull of words and their associations, focusing on the emotional effects of the marks before our senses. Thinking back to my time with the river, I can’t classify ~ as an object because I can’t discern its limits. Perhaps to trace its lines, its curves, is a naive attempt at plotting an ever-vacillating topography? This seems as difficult as mapping the position of every stone in a river bed. One interpretation will perhaps vary from the next in this

dynamic topography of ~ experience, just as one classification could so quickly negate another, but perhaps, over time, such readings will be drawn closer until they are felt. ~ could be imagined without ever needing to form a fixed and objective pattern, a constant flight that is in essence a pattern of patterns that may appear periodic but rarely stabilizes into a fixed location or sensation. But equally, such layered patterns might be reduced to the unrelenting intensity of a single and continuous tone.

In W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, the narrator retells a story he first encountered in Claude Simon's novel, *Les Jardin des Plantes*, about a painting by Gaston Novelli. At the end of the second world war, Novelli is so traumatized by his experiences that he heads for Brazil, living for a time with a tribe whose language consists, Sebald (paraphrasing Simon) tells us, "almost entirely of vowels, particularly the sound A in countless variations." (Sebald 2011, 35) Upon his return, Novelli began to paint pictures. "His main subject, depicted again and again in different forms and compositions . . . was the letter A . . . in ranks of scarcely legible ciphers . . . rising and falling in waves like a long-drawn-out scream" (Sebald 2011, 35/36).



If we consider this depiction of the "long-drawn-out scream" alongside Munch's *Scream*,¹³ what, if anything, might happen to the aforementioned lacquer of certain conceptions of ~ if we replace, or even blend, the ~ ubiquity of the Munch's *Scream* with the morphemic scream of the Novelli?

For a time I was under the "mistaken" believe that the Novelli painting I have been thinking about with regard to ~ depiction and possibility, was focussed around a cicada, surrounded by the yellowed verdigris of vowels and consonants, flecked with red veins, the "top" row of which, so resembles an undulating wave, a microcosmic ecotone along which the cicada's chirp and its environment periodically blend. Upon learning its title, *Boat Under the Sun*, of course my perception of the painting couldn't help but shift, and yet, I still see the insect, surrounded by the linguistic by-products of thrumming bodies and environments in whirling relations.

The cicada, the boat, (the ambiguity appears to be more than binary, as friends who have spent time with the painting have seen a variety of things in the foreground) the grammar of the atmosphere (which I feel could easily be interpreted as the sun, "the great scream of nature," but equally, as a schema that follows the blurred line of the famous symbol of ambiguity, the 'rabbit-duck'¹⁴), leads me toward a somewhat Gestaltian state of mind where I try to hold all these floating parts until they ascemically dissolve and are recast, similar to how I continue to try and think, to dynamize, the behavior and myriad causes and effects of ~ in relation to the aforementioned motion and mention of flies.

Can Novelli's *Boat* . . . be considered as an addition to a predominant tropes of ~, with all its ambiguity and pattern, alongside Munch's *Scream*? If we perceive these paintings together, it's as if figure and ground are inverted, or even oscillating. Their screams pass and map each other like a warbling moiré of allusion.

As part of a series of recordings available at the PennSound Archive,¹⁵ the poets Robert Grenier and Stephen Ratcliffe discuss, among many other things, "Cicada," a "drawing poem" by Grenier. They attempt to place Grenier's practise in relation to *The Cratylus*, a Platonic dialogue primarily concerned with the role of imagination in literature.

I mention this here to once again call into question the term, which I will type here rather than symbolize, tinnitus.

Whilst the primary motive for this section is to think about how Grenier has quite literally, “drawn” a series of poems as testimonies to his engagement with sound-patterns in the environment, and to think through some of the implications for ~ depiction, I feel it’ll be interesting to, however we can, reassess some of the constructs that surround tinnitus.

Constructs and processes, such as meaning, onomatopoeia, diffusion . . . can create an antagonistic relationship with the volume of attention,¹⁶ often serving to keep many individuals who live with ~ (myself included), at a remove from a sense of understanding or reconciliation, i.e. “I do not experience my ~ as ringing, what is it, where am I?” Perhaps a subtle reassessment of some of the terms and their implications, by way of spending time with Grenier’s depiction of “Cicada,” may help to foster a perception of ~ as that which, for example, not only rings or buzzes, and not only resides in the head.

Grenier alters the morphology of the word, “cicada,” in part, to reflect its sound, he changes its color that it might correspond with greater intensity to its dynamic environment. We might imagine that both name and term formation arise from a kind of natural grounding through consistency, an encounter that repeatedly reinforces itself, creating habits of naming. But what about tinnitus? A term so invested in its etymology, in its “ringing.” For me the ~ symbol reflects the need to devise new ideas of what tinnitus “has,” its qualities, its relations, its confusions; keeping in mind the difficulties inherent in its depiction. Tinnitus (a term supposedly coined by Jean Itard in the nineteenth century (Lane 1984, 121/141)) cannot be contained by a single definition, there is so often something left over that can be molded into the dynamism of its ongoing relational depiction, in whatever medium/s.

Throughout the conversation with Ratcliffe, Grenier enunciates the sound patterns of his Cicada drawing-poem in what he calls “electric rhythmic relation.” Grenier is recalling and performing a concert, we might say, of the possible phonemic and spectral elaborations of the word in relation. The drawing-poem holds this possibility in its productively ambiguous form, with Grenier standing in and among any number of the insects as they call, responding to their imagined pitch changes in accord to temperature, intent, proximity, perhaps even stress . . . This is all part of a reverberating field of energy that reflects the relationships between words on a page, and a sound-pattern familiar to the author. Visual bugs, contained and invented by their name, feed into an onomatopoeics.

Grenier’s cicadas are partly seismographic, their many possible registers of delivery in the drawing-poem for me reflect the tonal dynamisms of ~, a highly sensitive curve that arches in accord with mood and circumstance, the atmosphere of the air, the ground, the weather, sometimes to nothing in particular. Imagine drawings, paintings, writings, depictions of ~ that follow such undulations in accord to body-mind-environment, tracing these endless (for some) marks that correspond to its subtlety as well as its volatility.

I wonder, as this practice of depiction unfolds, whether the possible pitfalls of prolonged attention—*anxiety—volume—attention—anxiety*¹⁷—would somehow be negated, or altered, through repetition? What information would such an endeavor impart about a person’s ~, about their environment?

Environment

Cicadas make sound by arousing paired tymbals on their abdomens. This means that unlike many other stridulating insects, cicadas undulate, and by rapidly vibrating (almost phasing) their bodies, they are akin to resonant chambers, highly sensitive and responsive to environmental influence. This phenomenon enables them to modulate the intensity of their call by positioning their abdomens toward or away from the direction of the substrate upon which they are projecting.

“The press of my foot to the earth // springs a hundred affections,”¹⁸ writes the poet Ronald Johnson. I often feel like speaking and writing about cicadas is tantamount to communicating, or even perceiving, dare I say learning, more about ~~, and at certain times of year, walking through fields full of crickets and grasshoppers,¹⁹ it feels like the pressure and motion of every footstep produces an emergent ~ of the soil. It’s this, seemingly insignificant perception, that helps to pull ~ out of my body and into the world, drifting back and forth in what becomes an articulated semiosphere²⁰ that helps to temper the isolation that can so often be a quality of the experience.

The voices of cicadas have the punctuality of a fever, as it’s well known that the volume of their chirp can correspond to the temperature of the air. The hotter it gets; the more vociferous certain species can become. Being as these creatures, at least in part, call in order to attract a mate, the hotter it becomes, the larger their population grows. The next part of this article will digress slightly (I can’t help but think of the river I spent time with) in order to return to its initial direction.

In the Platonic dialogue known as *Phaedrus*, cicadas are uttering with the hot sun, addressing one another like refractive weather patterns. Socrates insists he is resistant to their sound. “If one gives into them, they laugh. But if the cicadas perceive us steering clear of them, they might feel respect and grant that boon which heaven permits them to confer upon mortals” (Plato 1995, 52). Upon hearing this, Phaedrus, Socrates’ interlocutor, states that he knows nothing of the myth surrounding it, and so of course, Socrates takes this opportunity to tell the story of the cicada people, or those who cultivate music.

The story goes that cicadas used to be human beings who lived before the birth of the Muses. When the Muses were born, and song was created for the first time, some people were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; they died without even realizing it. It is from them that a race of the cicadas came into being; and, as a gift from the Muses, they had no need of nourishment once they were born. Instead, they immediately burst into song, without food or drink, until it was time for them to die. They started to sing with such joy, “stranded in a living death of pleasure,” (Carson 2009, 139). Cicadas, transmogrified humans, by dint of their singing, set themselves outside themselves, ubiquitous as pressure changes.

Earlier in the *Phaedrus*, we encounter the following passage:

A lover will admit that he’s more sick than sound in the head. He’s well aware that he is not thinking straight; but he’ll say he can’t get himself under control. So when he does start thinking straight, why would he stand by decisions he had made when he was sick? (Plato 1995, 8).

Typing in the sentence, “more sick than sound in the head,” into Google, primarily brings up websites that relate in some way to ~. Looking at the “Images” section of the search

reveals hit after hit of people covering their ears with their hands, a figurative rendering of course, as has already been mentioned, symbolizing the torment and exasperation of this so-called “sick sound,” this “scream,” somehow symbolic of the cicada’s undulating membrane. Yet placing our hands over our ears will so often serve to make this seemingly internal affliction “louder.” The irony overpowers any rationalization we may wish to proffer, being as ~ is more often than not described as a sound with no “external correlate.” Though I see no reason to assume that ~ requires a solely auditory correlate.

One type of ~, described in an ancient Babylonian clay tablet, was “singing” tinnitus, which was regarded as stemming from someone being seized by a ghost (Dauman and Erlandson 2012, 1). This is verified by scholar Irvine Finkel, who claims that in ancient Babylon, some ghosts were thought to enter the body through the ear. “The word for ghost,” writes Finkel, “could be written in several ways . . . one sign combined the signs for ‘to open’ and ‘ear,’ giving a literal reading of ‘ear-opener.” (Finkel 2021, 288) Ghosts, then, could cause the ears to open wide, inviting all sorts of roaring and ringing, quite the opposite to attempting to “close” them with one’s hands. Its intriguing to note the etymological relationship between ghost and phantom, “something having the form, but not the substance, of a real thing.”²¹

Chance

Gastone Novelli professed an admiration for the semiologist Ferdinand De Saussure,²² indeed, as we have already seen, many of his paintings are inhabited by flecks of language, distended and repeating morphemes that compost and grow between semantic layers. With this in mind, I would like to further consider Novelli’s *Boat* . . . through the semiosis of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, and by extension, the field of biosemiotics. As both practise and wider field, biosemiotics is a process based semiotic biology working under the assumption that all living organisms are made of, and live within, sign-relations. As a field it brings together both biology and the study of language, redescribing one in light of the other so to hold mind-body- environment within a fluctuating and conceptual framework that moves beyond the classical world of objective mechanism and dead matter. In short, biosemiotics helps me to understand that I understand very little of ~, mechanically and otherwise.

Biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer states that there are at least two stumbling blocks that need to be transcended in order to comprehend a biosemiotic view of the world. One of these is the need to move away from a mechanistic and gene centered understanding of biology, the other is an understanding of the triadic Peircean²³ concept of a sign (Kull and Velmezova 2019, 376). Said concept concentrates on the positions of the sign vehicle (the bearer of manifestation of the sign, regardless of its significance), the object (that to which the sign-vehicle refers), and the interpretant (the system which construes the sign-vehicle’s relationship to its object) (Hoffmeyer 1996, 19). A contextually relevant understanding of such a relationship of the three interrelated and cycling entities that form a sign can be found in the example of a child who suddenly breaks out in a rash of red spots. Upon taking their child to the doctor, the parent/s learn that the child has measles. For the doctor, and now the parent/s, the red spots are a sign of measles, but previously, to the parent/s, the red spots were a sign that the child was sick (Hoffmeyer 1996, 19).

I see this part of the article primarily as a note for future research, but we might briefly think here of certain semiotic differences between the sign-objects and vehicles (tinnitus and ~) whilst remaining aware that, because of the close proximity of one to the other in this article, it can be quite a difficult process trying to keep them separate enough to enable the ~ symbol to retain any semblance of plurality and chance. In other words, a sign-action is a process wherein an individual (in the context of biosemiotics this term can also refer to a cell or organism) encounters a sign-vehicle and responds to it in such a way that there is a reinforcing effect on that response toward that sign. Such sign-readings lead toward what's known as "semiotic habits." I'm not saying that this is true for everyone of course, but if I encounter the term "tinnitus" several times over the course of an hour, let's say, the chances of my ~ becoming aggravated exponentially increase. As mentioned, the ~ symbol is not a guarantee of anything, but its capacity to hold disposition as multiplicity brings with it a kind of sympathetic articulation in which its mention can be encountered without my ~ becoming more present, creating new and shifting motion within the patterns.

Here we find an opportunity to return to the surrealist practise of objective chance, which we might finally, albeit loosely, define as unfathomable, beyond any single predicate wherein the imagination is part of the capacity to think about something that is "not there." In this context, "not there" is that which is paradoxically revealed, or made present, through efficacious coincidence, the paradoxical cultivation of attention to chance encounters. Such a practise of cultivated serendipity and coincidence is akin to trying to write about ~ in those briefest periods of its seeming absence,²⁴ paying attention to chance moments, to environments, that aren't consciously sought out. I often feel like I have ~ as much as the environment is ~, and such a relationship undulates and shifts, filling with positive feedback loops that push things into new directions and negative feedback loops that keep things from flying off into oblivion. During an experience of ~, however it manifests moment by moment, I feel there are many subsets of self-similar experience, each with its own particular degree of regularity and confusion. To try and communicate ~ is rarely to communicate ~ and ~ alone.

What I term the motion of flies is that which can help me write and think alongside, perhaps even through, ~, fostering communication, in other words. In this sense motion is associated with the "outside," the environment, the "inaudible," it is the chance encounter and the means with which to indirectly draw attention to ~. In this straw duality, the mention of flies is the opposite, it is the term, tinnitus, it is the inside, the person, the audible, drawing direct attention to the symptom, so often causing an increase in awareness and possible aggravation. The mention of flies makes it very difficult to not think about tinnitus, let alone communicate. The motion seeps into my porous self-world (in which we find the association of the mention), producing a sense of engagement and often transitory phasing wherein one cancels out the other.

Thinking about this in relation to Novelli's *Boat in the Sun*, in my initial interpretation amidst its inherent ambiguity, we could say the cicada acted as sign-vehicle, which in my case has an environmental connection to ~, acting in the triadic concept of a sign. So the cicada is here a sign-vehicle of ~, and ~, as object, then partly determines the response of the interpretant, myself.

Glancing at Novelli's painting, the cicada becomes a boat, and subsequently I find myself in the mind of the writer Michel Serres, who in his book, *Genesis*, refers to his ~ as

a “mad murmur,” tense and constant in hearing, speaking to him of his ashes (Serres 1995, 7). Serres speculates that such ashes may refer to those from “whence I came, the ones to which I will return” (Serres 1995, 7). This seems to be something of a ~ trope for him, as in another work of his, *Biogea*, he speaks of his ~ as being borne of the sea. “The sea and I used to vibrate with joy” (Serres 20101989, 9). He then goes on to recount his time at sea and the noise that prevented him from hearing other people onboard, the noise that transmuted into his ~, a permanent affliction that “reproduces with high fidelity the whistling and silky sounds, the implacable mass of moving water that, overflowing its regular bed, was then occupying the flood plain.” (Serres 1989, 13). In this particular depiction of experience, one that so reminds me of my friend’s request, a slow shift of layered and emergent environments, ~ provides the link, “at least my sense of hearing has never left the Garonne” (Serres 1989, 13).

As stated, biosemiotics seeks ways of being in the world that are capable of describing natural and cultural life alike, from the cell to society, from the inner environment of the organism to the outer environment in which it lives, to provide a language for talking about the language that is inseparable from life. Theoretically and practically it states that living systems have agency to the extent that there is flexibility in all information processing capabilities, such as immune responses, sensing internal and external conditions, regulating internal operations . . . discussions of which, are saturated in the language of semiosis.

Semiotic habits can of course vary in accord to myriad influences, namely environment, just like ~ can be more easily, or tacitly, ignored or passed over in certain environments, or contexts, than others, a busy gallery compared to a workshop focussing on ~, for example. Another way of thinking about this can be found in Anne Carson’s explication of the anthropologist Mary Douglas’ definition of dirt as “matter out of place.” “The poached egg on your plate at breakfast is not dirt; the poached egg on the floor of the Reading Room of the British Museum is” (Carson 2000, 143). Dirt, like ~, confounds categories and mixes up definitions.

What could it entail, referring to ~ not so much as a signal, but a sign? According to biosemiotics, signals are signs (Kull and Velmezova 2019, 376), and in the triadic Peircean concept of a sign we find a means to utilize relation instead of opposition. A common definition of tinnitus, “the term for the sensation of hearing a sound in the absence of any external sound,”²⁵ appears to express a reduction of ~ (as a triadic sign-relation) solely to a sensation. As a biosemiotic sign, ~ need not be thought of in isolation from environment or from the person as a whole.

For example, the layers of ambiguity in Novelli’s painting can lead to the articulation of affinities of correspondence, potentially different every time the painting is considered. If the background of the painting is not fixed, but representative of a moment of time, a switch, then perhaps we could consider the structure of letters in mind of what’s called Brownian motion, the constant movement of molecules caused by their mutual impacts, a movement that I would compare to the scholar Wendy Wheeler’s understanding of a kind of passive alertness on the part of buffeted organisms (Wheeler 2006, 133). For Wheeler, what provokes difference is an organism’s creative response to chance (Wheeler 2006, 136), which as stated, for me is akin to a surrealist notion of objective chance, or to try and perceive ~ without always being perceived by it. The role of chance is important because we can use it creatively and thus do things with it, such chance is also a form of logic, what Peirce calls “abduction” (Pierce 1992). Abduction resonates in the context of discovery more

than that of assessment, and is closely tied to feeling and affect, to the patterns, sensations and tacit knowledge intuited, for example, during my time with the river.

I am writing under the premise that ~ is alive, if only for the simple matter that were I to presume it was dead (or otherwise, if we skip over the binary notion that if something is not alive then it must therefore be dead), that to me feels even stranger, and indeed, harder to comprehend. ~ is part of me as much as I am part of it, the same goes, I feel, for environment, and so we may also hold it in an entirely different fashion, one that need not be confined to such a dualism. Of course not every environmental affect “appears” directly in a self-world, such things can of course be felt, those who live with ~ may also say heard, but not necessarily experienced. I’ve found this to be the case when looking back over the drawings I made of the life of the river, drawings that I would not necessarily classify as ascemic, though Barthes’ utilization of floating (Barthes 1977, 39) seems to me an apt way of considering the seemingly random form of the drawing without evoking any predominant quality in favor of “passive” impact.

The work of anthropologist Gregory Bateson is generally considered to be that of a precursor to the development of biosemiology (Hoffmeyer 1996, 5). Bateson’s definition of what he termed information is that of “a difference that makes a difference” (Bateson 2000, 459), and it’s among such differences that some of the scattered meanings, patterns, and experiences of ~ reside, and so here I find myself wondering, in a vaguely yet I hope positively contentious fashion, among such complex variability, what are some of the ways in which we might think of ~ as meaningful? And by extension, how might we begin to respond to such a question

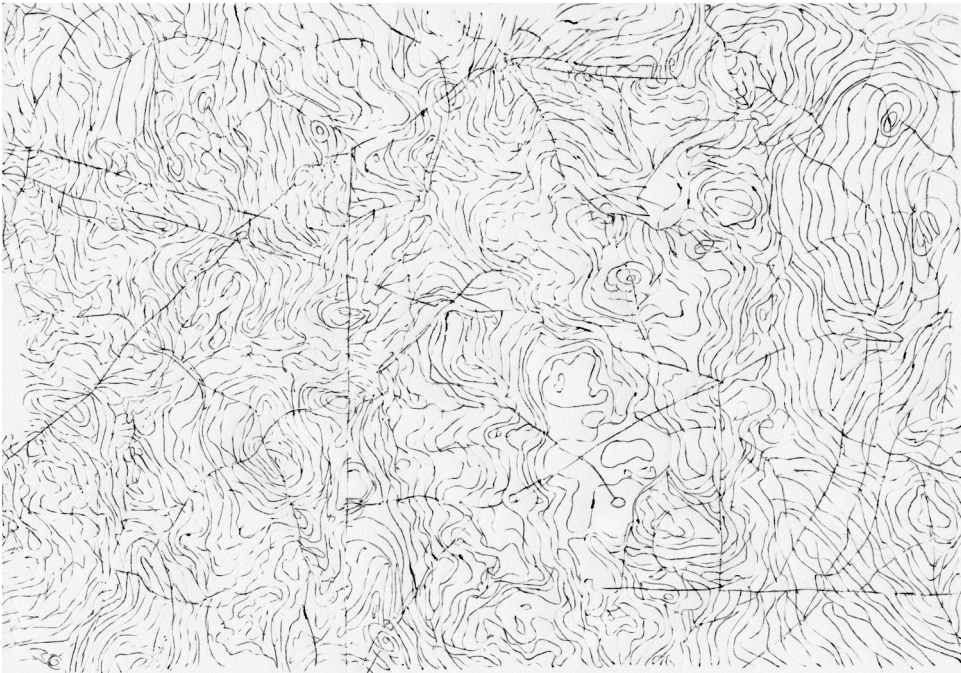


Figure 1. Patrick Farmer – ~.

without abstracting ~ from environment? How can we avoid simply addressing it as an object in isolation, to not think of ~ as some sort of “meaningless” accident? I admit, herein lies an obstacle, as I cannot in good conscience enthrone ~ as some sort of tacit neo-liberal principle, implying that, if we think of ~ as meaningful we must learn to embrace it, live with it, get over it, or worse, if we think of ~ as meaningful, ~ will automatically get better, and so will our lives, and even worse, if we fail in such endeavors then we have no one to blame but ourselves . . . I feel there needs to be a middle ground, even if it is always shifting, one that does not fold into the cyclical nature of conflicting opposites, but considers meaning as emergent and processual.

Perhaps this enlivens the potential of ~ as subject, even as verb, a process of creative translation that is far from a panacea (whether ~ is thought of as a subject or not, it doesn’t mean that nights won’t still be hell sometimes), rather, it’s not that I speak with it in the same way I speak with myself, or a friend, a colleague, but I don’t ignore it in a way that makes me think of it as some sort of clamoring and misbehaving mechanism, a malfunction that, whilst I wait for it to be “fixed,” for a “cure” to emerge, I just have to grin and bear it, hope for the best.

Biosemiotician Thomas A. Sebeok writes, “To be alive is to be semiotically active” (Emmeche and Kull 2011, 2), what can it mean then, to acknowledge some sense of ~ life? Probing a comprehension in which elements of relation and contingency, self and environment, predominate, wherein complex systems, such as ~, are not necessarily required to show such recognizable qualities as foresight or altruism in order to be considered as “living,” at least in some operational sense of the term. Perhaps ~ is indeed best suited as a verb . . . and this leads me upstream, returning to the mouth of this article, reflected in the words of Cyberneticist Norbert Wiener, “we are but whirlpools in a river of ever flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves” (Wheeler 2006, 100).

Let’s briefly return to the fluidity of Novelli’s *Boat in the Sun*, the rubbing together of self-worlds in the ambiguous co-production and emergence of cicada, of boat . . . woven among the enfolding flux of environments, “the ongoing throbbing of all life” (Wheeler 2006, 108). Biosemiotics is helpful in cultivating an integrated field in which something previously understood as the preserve of humans alone (semiosis) is actually a feature of all living things, and a sensorium (integrated systems through which body and mind are interwoven whether it be nervous, endocrine, immune . . .) is never, as biosemioticians are so keen to show, properly understood as separable from its environment, whether natural, social, or otherwise (Wheeler 2006, 108).

Conclusion: where was i?

Aside from the river, a good amount of this article was written in my living room, and during particularly hot days, with all my windows wide open, a number of small flies would congregate around the center of the room, in constant motion.

Things twirling tend to englobe, who knows if I’d have had the same response if I weren’t writing this . . . but I can’t be in the presence of the motion of flies without perceiving some form of ~, without imagining the flow of a river, as if the motion of one mentions the other. ~ permeates the interactions of mind, body, environment, it is part

of the “secret” rapport within (Serres and Latour 1995, 80), but also through and out of, such bodies. For me ~ is an experience that is most receptive to a multiplicity of approaches, a confluence of fields and subjects.

With this in mind, in *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, Michel Serres asks Bruno Latour if he suffers from “that constant whistling in the ears, which never ceases, day or night?” (Serres and Latour 1995, 79). Serres compares such whistling to the heat of our bodies, a heat that doesn’t just originate in our bodies, bringing with it an intensity of background noise, the subtle difficulty of inner awareness (Serres and Latour 1995, 78). Unfortunately, though perhaps predictably, we might even say understandably, if Latour does indeed “suffer” from such whistling, he then takes the conversation elsewhere, without giving an answer.

I encounter such iterations of “constant whistling” in the patterns of cycling dust motes, in pollen that drifts along the surface of a body of water, sheets of turbulence whose presence accompanies us as both hot organism and noisy universe. Indeed, in his essay, *Literature and the Exact Sciences*, Serres implicitly compares one to the other, describing the “the chaotic and Brownian leap of the wasp, a sounding that goes deeper than the deepest strata of language,” to the “wave, the clamour, to the dust-haze” (Serres 1989, 23). In a similar fashion, the ever present volume, of the “amount” of attention given to ~, which can so often fall into an involuntary and deeply recursive loop, can cycle the edges of transforming the emotional state that it initially signaled into one that bears self-similarity to the ~ itself.

The ~ symbol, which ultimately is a medium for the conveyance of information that can often hinder that very process, has become a part of this, often acting as a mnemonic trigger,²⁶ one I don’t so much read as observe. It helps me to develop ways in which I can reflect, adumbrate, and expand upon, what I hope to mean, and indeed feel, when I communicate ~, without it always taking over completely.

Notes

1. Using this symbol instead of the term, “tinnitus” and its variations, such as “tinnital”, is an attempt to acknowledge, hold, and communicate the many different lived experiences and definitions of the term, incorporating them into the life of this article in a way that tries to be neither loud nor quiet. It’s my hope that it will be as beneficial to readers as it has been for me. I’m not saying that replacing the term with the symbol is a guarantee of avoiding aggravation, but it is nevertheless an attempt at an ethics, a linguistic equivalent we might say, of thinking about alternatives before using a sinetone to audibly represent tinnitus. For me, the symbol also represents a will to drift, often creatively, from theory to theory, field to field, as a kind of wavework.
2. www.patrickfarmer.org for list of other articles and for “notes on the ear”.
3. In Eileen Agar’s text, “Am I a Surrealist?” She writes: “Chance is not a neutral but a distinctly positive force, the surrealists believe that you can get on good terms with chance by adopting a lyrical mode of behaviour and an open attitude” (Ed, Caws 2001, 5). I visit some of the variations of surrealist objective chance, particularly Andre Breton’s application of the comingling of inner and outer experiences, throughout this article.
4. Biosemiology operates within the understanding that all life lives in a world of signification, seeing living creatures as active producers of signs. (Emmeche and Kull 2011, 1).
5. Difficulties I often consider to, at least in part, arise from seemingly erroneous classifications of objective and subjective ~, classifications that can give credence to descriptions such as

phantom sound, or ~ as that which has no external correlate (Farmer 2021). As such, the practise of Surrealist of objective chance can help to mediate between reality and imagination in matters of conveying ~ experience, so often considered as an obstruction.

6. Particularly, but by no means exclusively, in relation to Suzanne Césaire's essay, "The Domain of the Marvelous", in which Césaire writes: "Here at last the world of nature and things makes direct contact with the human being who is again in the fullest sense spontaneous and natural. Here at last is the true communion and the true knowledge, chance mastered and recognized, the mystery now a friend and helpful" (Ed. Caws 2001, 157). Perhaps even more so in the work of Alberto Giacometti, as he tries to grasp "in the emptiness the invisible white thread of the marvelous that vibrates . . ." (Ed. Caws 2001, 228).
7. As I watched I also spoke, with the river, its springs, banks, cycles, vapors, beds, its creatures, even the globular spume and slime of plastics.
8. See Figure 1.

Patrick Farmer – ~.

9. Again the Surrealist practise of objective chance rises to the surface, wherein Andre Breton's expectation of the comingling of inner and outer experiences, and the subsequent balance of such polarities, nevertheless requires a constant wearing away of their thresholds, remarked upon as the dynamism of an activated image (Breton 1988, Xiii). Observing, for example, flies (the chance nature of such an encounter is explored further, with insects such as gnats, in subsequent sections) consists of the chance comingling of polarities in their "mention" and "motion". Held together these experiences can produce, but also emerge from, the marvelous, a relation of self and world, a kind of similitude wherein the so-called "outside", the oft-inaudible motion of flies and gnats, can periodically cancel out my ~, or what is loosely conferred to as the "inside". The dynamism of an activated image is here understood as the comingling of external inaudibility (motion) and internal audibility (mention).

After having written this, I happen to encounter the following passage from the Babylonian Talmud:

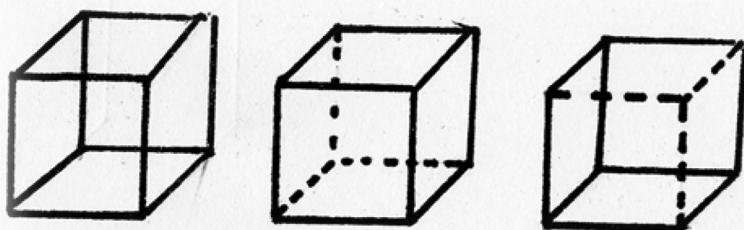
A gnat entered his nostril and pecked at his brain for seven years. One day Titus was passing by a blacksmith. He heard the noise of the sledgehammer and the gnat became silent. Titus thus said: 'Here is the remedy.' Every day he brought a blacksmith to bang in his presence. [...] For thirty days this worked fine but then the gnat became accustomed [to the banging] and it resumed pecking (Dan 2005, 211).

Evidently paying attention to what we might here call an environmental presence to periodically cancel out ~ is nothing new, however, a curious difference lies in the fact that what seems to currently "work" for me is observing motion of gnats, as if the inaudible image of the gnats in motion were superimposed onto my ~ (and/or the other way around) in order to somehow create or at least intimate a whole approximating cancellation. It goes without saying, I hope, that I am not peddling this as a cure, it simply interests me at this stage to note the strange effects of the integration of such phenomena.

10. It seemed apt to not use the ~ symbol here as the B.T.A. of course use the term, tinnitus. I should also note the potential differences in reception regarding viewing the drawings and the linguistic descriptions of said drawings. <https://www.tinnitus.org.uk/blog/expo-tote>.
11. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/the-mysterious-road-of-the-scream-by-edvard-munch/>.
12. See Figure 1.
13. Elements of both paintings bear witness to the depiction of the "sick sound in the head" (SEE PG>>>), the individual, full of fear, torment, desperation, trying to stem the flow, to haul up inside. If nothing else, the military associations with the word "scream" (which is etymologically related to "screaming meemies", World War 1 army slang that was originally the name for a type of German artillery shell that made a loud noise in flight, and was extended to the battle fatigue caused by prolonged exposure to enemy fire: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/scream>) suggests that, in mind of the pervasive and everyday nature of metaphor, in intimate proximity not only to language, but thought, ethics, and action, it is indelibly

“worthwhile” seeking out other ways of communicating ~, in whatever register or medium. See also (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 4).

14. It’s important to note that neither rabbit nor duck are ambiguous in themselves, and that the dynamic alternation between one and the other in perception, which is not possible for all of



course, seems to happen as much at random as it does willfully. For those who have never seen this image, a quick online search for “rabbit duck” will do the trick.

This is also exemplified by what’s known as Necker cubes. The impetus here is to somehow situate oneself in a weave of interpretation and subsequent meaning that can lend itself to the undulating nature of ~, which is to say, a pattern that can represent more than one aspect of ~ experience and yet can avoid becoming resolutely fixed on any single aspect.

15. http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/On-Natural-Language_Conversation-4.php.
16. Grenier and Ratcliffe testify to the importance of listening to stop thought with regard to their own experience with poetry and depiction. Of course, such a process, when brought to bear within a ~ method of depiction, may only serve to push one further away from depiction and into tinnitus.
17. I don’t feel like it’s an overestimation to say that anyone who has experienced ~ in their life will understand the phenomena. Where paying attention to ~ only serves to exacerbate, or amplify, its presence.
18. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/30329/letters-to-walt-whitman>.
19. Here I hope the reader will indulge me in a little suspension of disbelief, being as there is only one species of cicada native to the UK.
20. The semiosphere is a sphere just like the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, and the biosphere. It penetrates to every corner of these other spheres, incorporating all forms of communication: sounds, smells, movements, colors, shapes, electrical fields, thermal radiation, waves of all kinds, chemical signals, touching, and so on (Hoffmeyer 1996, vii).
21. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/phantom>. Whilst the term, “phantom”, is not used to describe tinnitus quite so frequently as it once was, there are still scientific articles being published that reference tinnitus in such a way: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2022/01/220126122458.htm>.
22. See: <https://blog.dorotheum.com/en/contemporary-week-gastone-novelli-2/>.
23. Peirce felt that the “dyadic” nature of a sign, that of signifier and signified, was too limited. “Bound as it is to the single dimension of a linear chain, it cannot be made to branch out” (Hoffmeyer 1996, 17). As we’ll soon see, Peirce favored a multi-dimensional network, or what he called a “triad”, that often consisted of cause and effect, plus the observer who connects them.
24. See Farmer, P. ~ Eds. Hugill, Andrew. Drever. John. *auraldiversity*. London: Routledge. (forthcoming).
25. <https://www.tinnitus.org.uk/all-about-tinnitus>.
26. As stated in the introduction, this article is the last in a series about ~, hearing, and balance. As such, a variety of different elements have come into the orbit the wave symbol. See: patrickfarmer.org.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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