

Theoretical background and links for “Cultures of Listening in child protection”

Link to Audio Obscura and Dark Listening:

To illustrate what these audio diaries and in particularly the reflexive feedback meetings are meant to do, and how this constitutes ‘researching practice as process’ (i.e. research in the actual occasion, encounter), I draw on the poet, novelist and artist Lavinia Greenlaw’s work Audio Obscura and her idea of Dark Listening.

Dark Listening captures the idea at the heart of a ‘sound-artwork’ by Lavinia Greenlaw, commissioned as part of the Manchester Festival and titled “Audio Obscura”. It is described as the oral equivalent of the camera obscura. I came across it when it was staged in London St Pancras International station in 2011 and the blurb says “...the audience experience the project in a solitary way - hearing fragments of individual narratives, glimpses of interior worlds drawn from monologues that glance off one another, hovering between speech and unconscious thought. Overhearing these voices, the listener becomes immersed in private thoughts, emotions, recollections and confessions in a very public space, projecting what they heard onto the people they saw.”

People would turn up at St Pancras, get headphones to put on and then just walk around while listening to fragments of what appear to be thoughts or conversations overheard as they walk around. The idea is that these are projected onto passers by, those waiting etc. The texts are composed by Lavinia Greenlaw, inspired by observations she made while at Manchester Piccadilly station over weeks. The texts were spoken by actors and Greenlaw then edited the audios down to create the apparently fragmented, thought like sequences (also published in a book alongside images (Reference).

<https://soundcloud.com/artangel-2/lavinia-greenlaw-audio-obscura>

The purpose is not to tell a story but to make people aware of what they did with what they heard or not quite heard. Greenlaw calls dark listening “listening to what you cannot hear”, she says: “...there is something we let slip when we are between a and b”, and she wants to get into that, something undeveloped something dark, as when “overhearing but not quite listening to other peoples conversations, where gestures, faces, phrases stand out and are remembered if we like it or not.” She writes “things catch our attention because they raise a question and fail to answer it. We are left in suspense.” And she outlines that where the “fragile, shifting but acute images of the camera obscura draw you in. In Audio Obscura, the idea is translated into dark listening with its connotations of depths and shadows, the impalpable and unreachable. We enter interior lives and discover, somewhere between what is heard and what is seen, what cannot be said. We are conscious of this as transgression but unable to contain our curiosity. And we in turn become less self-aware: caught up in the act of listening we give ourselves away.”

Direct link to the theoretical foundations of my work: process thought and researching practice as process

Dark listening in this sense is aligned with, or constitutes, what we call a liminal hotspot (Motzkau & Clinch in press), or a ‘void’ (Motzkau, 2011), opening up the encounter/occasion to allow a glimpse of the processual nature of being, and the emergent potentialities, but also making it risky as we allow ourselves to be affected and drawn into something that is mobile, not under our control; something that is hidden but not unconscious as it is not just our own; it is public and private at once; it is apparently inaccessible yet experienced as it emerges (Whitehead).

This kind of encounter/experience exemplifies an interstitiality, between speaking and thinking, and between seeing and saying. An instant of being drawn in, momentarily, into a realm abundant of meaning, multiple, but also –apparently- beyond grasp, incommunicable (if communicating something is what we mean by grasp), yet clearly present, luring us in, but not directly efficacious; in this sense an expression/experience of potentialities (an individuation as Deleuze might say).

It is not a representation, but emergent and highlighting the processual, something that occurs, to us and others, personally/socially, and that goes on as triggered by Audio Obscura in that very moment we experience it, so just there in the instant, temporarily.

It is peculiarly personal yet at the same time social: there is talk of interiority but this is a social type of interiority. It is a peculiarly conscious communal kind of interiority, almost embarrassing in its transgressiveness, in the way it exposes us.

Crucially for my approach, this is a staged encounter and suspension.

The audio narratives are created purposely and inserted deliberately between our thinking and seeing. This is an intervention, carefully crafted, and as Greenlaw says, it is meant to suspend meaning making: “Audio Obscura is then situated in tension with our compulsion to construct narratives, to impose meaning, and to seek symmetry and conclusion. The texts hover between speech and thought. They are concentrated fragments of interior worlds which sensitise us to boundaries we depend upon yet break.”

These boundaries could be those of the dominant discourses about childhood and child protection; they could be modes of thought underpinned by established disciplinary frameworks, policies and guidelines, epistemological practices, manners of producing and presenting evidence, which are required to make sense of such evidence but which are at the same time shifting.

So this kind of ‘staging’ through ‘dark listening’, and the resulting suspension puts us at odds with those frameworks and their ordering efficacy; it moves us out of the reach of their ordering efficacy; it alerts us to the abundance of that which is suspended/excluded and now lures us in, but also makes us aware of the operational force those boundaries exert, and that usually direct our thinking and action unnoticed.

Tracing this line of thought, there is an inherent, a direct, link to social workers’ kind of listening, which may also be a ‘listening to what isn’t said’ etc. But I am most of all interested in the manner in which Audio Obscura, as a staged event, a technique, informs methodology and method for transdisciplinary process research. It presents an example for a technique of explorative relating/suspended listening in process:

My own method of “researching practice as process” attempts to stage just such encounters; it systematically summons experiences within different modes of knowing, and crucially, within suspended modes of knowing, to allow multiple potentialities to emerge and be considered; to amplify them and make them efficacious in order to change practice.

This is why the research project is modeled accordingly and based on audio diaries, ethnography and reflexive feedback sessions.

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The reflexive feedback session stages such encounters of suspended listening. It uses the bits of data (from diaries and ethnographic work), identified and grouped according to emergent patterns by the researcher beforehand (instants of paradox or uncertainty – considered – mentioned – negotiated – often laughter or pauses, hesitations); these bits of data are re-recorded into a sound collage; and presented to participants as singular fragments of cases, detached from the person who originally generated them, and abstracted from that person, as they now form a pattern with other, aligned, similar instants. This is to show such general patterns and to enable this patternedness to be shared and experienced by practitioners without having to 'own' or 'justify' the case or example in terms of personal choices/actions.

This works in a manner akin to the dynamics of Audio Obscura, where the peculiarly personal-yet-social interstitiality reveals itself as a pattern, a rhythm of 'hearing and not hearing', a rhythm of problematizing listening as it occurs, thus dark listening, that draws us in as it produces a surplus of meaning outwith itself (pure experience of emergence) while not allowing us to delineate or pin it down. We are suspended between seeing, hearing, knowing.

In this sense the reflexive meeting might be a bit like listening to Audio Obscura, a detached encounter with what are fragments of something that is very familiar to practitioners, but never expressed/discussed/shared, something that is usually understood as just a personal experience of routinely encountered uncertainty/ineptness, thus redundant but at the same time troubling.

Here it becomes negotiable/relatable/shareable as the heart of what it means to listen in child protection practice.

Greenlaw's work follows an artistic legacy of exploring the differences between 'hearing' and 'listening' both in music (Oliveros, 2005) and more widely (Voegelin, 2010), relating perhaps most famously to art such as experimental American composer John Cage's 1952 three-movement composition *4'33"*, which in turn had earlier antecedents in compositions such as Alphonse Allais's 1897 *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*, consisting of twenty-four blank measures. Such pieces fundamentally open-up the difference between 'hearing' and 'listening', because, as music historian Paul Hegarty argues, Cage's *4'33"* represents the beginning of 'noise music' proper, which is music made up of incidental sounds, which marks the tension between 'desirable' sound and undesirable 'noise'. However, the fact that *4'33"* is often described as 'silence', without any noting even of the 'undesirable noise' (audience moving or coughing etc), hinges on the difference between 'hearing' and 'listening'. More recently, the actor Andrew Sachs wrote and starred in his radio play 'The Revenge' (1978) which has no words, and of which critic Alan Beck (Beck, 1999, 'Is radio blind or invisible? A call for a wider debate on listening-in', World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), electronic publication, <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/wfae/readings/blind.html>) asks: 'Do non-verbal sounds really need words to render them meaningful? Could a range of natural noises not provide meaningful entertainment?' (accessed on 22/04/2016 at: <http://www.savoyhill.co.uk/technique/revenge.html>). Here, as with Cage, what is heard is split by Beck into 'non-verbal sounds', 'words', and 'natural noises', where what is seen to be at stake is what 'provide[s]', or generates, the 'meaningful'. This is crucial to what we propose to explore in our project; considering where and how meaning is located in the 'space between' 'hearing' and 'listening', or more accurately, where and how meaning is emergent, as part of a process where the hearing and listening are in turn shaped by factors both prior and subsequent to themselves. [here: link into Whiteheadian notion of process]. This is, similarly, reflected on recent (2016) performances of Samuel Beckett's first radio play *All That Fall* (1956), where the audience were blindfolded so that they listened to the play in complete darkness, in order to 'test the theory [...] that even a temporary loss of vision may improve hearing'

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(<https://www.wiltons.org.uk/whatson/125-all-that-fall-by-samuel-beckett>), which also reflects that hearing and listening are thought to be influenced and determined by other factors in ways still to be explored further.

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