

El Tren Fantasma: A Familiar Journey into Unknown Narratives

Fiamma Mozzetta

“Pensé en un mundo sin memoria, sin tiempo”¹

J. L. Borges, *El Inmortal*

On Sunday morning I left home and flew back to London, where I now live. Then from Gatwick I took the Southern line for just one stop, heading towards East Croydon. The train was crowded as usual, packed with tired, clumsy, curious tourists’ eyes, self-absorbed commuters, luggage everywhere: I stood up. As the train was leaving the station, a woman in her late thirties with two kids, a girl and a boy in the stroller, sat on the empty seat in front of me. Mom and daughter, both with long, beautiful brown and blond hair, respectively, started to sing this counting song, very popular in Spanish speaking countries, “laaa gaaaallina turuuuleca, haa puesto un huevo, ha puesto dooos, haa pueesto trees...”,² and then started to play with mom pretending to be some old-time friend knocking on daughter’s door, TOC TOC, “¿Quién es?”, “Soy yo. ¿Me dejas entrar?”.³ I stood there, staring at them as if I knew them, smiling all the way through. Reaching the station, they stopped, called father, “Daaaad,” who was lost in the crowd near the train doors, “Yes, sweetie,” collected their belongings and we all got off. It was such an emotional moment for me, filled with joyous, melancholic nostalgia. They reminded me of my family, mother from Argentina and father from Italy, and of all the years spent travelling from place to place, growing up switching languages and customs. She reminded me of my mom as I recall her with my childhood eyes, same hair, same straw bag, same laid-back, slightly ‘freak’ attitude. And of all the times she sang that same song to us. But, most of all, that fifteen-minute journey reminded me of the way I felt when I first listened to Chris Watson’s *El Tren Fantasma* (The Ghost Train) and how it accompanied me through overlapped and fragmented memories, either lived or acquired, of my early childhood and teenage years. It was as if, suddenly, I was on Watson’s train.

Founding and former member of Cabaret Voltaire and The Hafler Trio, Chris Watson is a sound recordist who specialises in natural history, recording sounds of animals, environments, wildlife and locations. In 1999, he spent more than a month recording the sounds of a train journey for an episode of the BBC’s travel documentary series *Great Railway Journeys*, and later used, edited and recombined the audio material he collected into ten tracks released in 2011 as *El Tren Fantasma*. The BBC episode was “Los Mochis to Veracruz,” which was obviously set in Mexico and whose main aim was to document the people, the atmosphere and the landscape of the train journey, running from the Pacific Coast to the Gulf of Mexico. Since the train ceased to run shortly after, what interested Watson was to recreate the atmosphere of that train journey going beyond the historical project of documenting the real for future generations and delving, instead, into a new dimension in which the real fuses with the fictional: a recording of a specific time and place that is nevertheless able to capture a multiplicity of experiences, narratives and recollections. The record, inspired by the musique concrète work of French composer Pierre Schaeffer and by drawing on electronic musical techniques, tells the ‘ghost’ train journey combining the heavy, industrial and mechanical loops of the locomotive with the voices of passengers and workers, and the natural sounds of the environment.⁴ Touching upon the issue of whether Watson’s ‘unmelodic’ sounds should be considered as

¹ Trans. I thought of a world without memory, without time.

² Trans. La Gallina Turuleca has laid an egg, has laid two, has laid three.

³ Trans. Who’s there? It’s me, can I come in?

⁴ Listen, for example, to “Los Mochis,” *Youtube Video*, 6:31. Posted by “Touchmusic33,” 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGA2jYffWx0>; also “El Divisadero,” *Youtube Video*, 5:37. Posted by “Touchmusic33,” 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDQZTXz2-7o>.

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I am a British Composer, currently studying for a PhD in Musical Composition at the University of Birmingham under the supervision of Michael Zev Gordon. As a graduate of the University of Cambridge, and the Birmingham Conservatoire, I previously studied under the tutelage of Richard Causton, Howard Skempton, and Errollyn Wallen, partaking in masterclasses with Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Judith Weir, Colin Matthews, and Mark-Anthony Turnage.

My current research explores how musical eclecticism is understood and manifested across new music platforms, with a specific focus on stylistic construction in concert music, and the historical evolution of the relationship between composer and performer. My latest paper (on Schnittke to Zorn) was published by the University of Southampton’s *Emergence Journal* in Autumn 2016, and my new graphic setting of Shakespeare’s ‘When icicles hang by the wall’ was published in the *Birmingham Journal of Literature and Language* (BJLL) in Summer 2017. I am currently the recipient of both The Sir Thomas White’s Music Scholarship, and a University of Birmingham College of Arts and Law Doctoral Scholarship Award, which fully funds my study and research.

music and be enjoyed by pop music fans, journalists wrote that the intrinsic beauty of Watson's manipulation of field recordings comes from the fact that he is able to give a sense of space in sound and create "an elaborate electro-acoustic collage," whereby the sounds of the railway "are heavily echoed and stretched until they turn into ambient drone music." The emerging and dissolving rhythms open the record up to a much more nuanced, complex and 'three dimensional' narrative of the train journey, which is able not only to transport the listeners into "a ghostly, auditory diorama," but is also able to carry them into the contrasting end points between the untouched bucolic landscape and the 'civilised' technologic environment.⁵ In Watson's own words, furthermore, *El Tren Fantasma* serves almost as a personal mnemonic exercise in order to remember the feelings and the atmosphere associated with the place in which the recording was made. The act of recording itself along with the later manipulation and reconstruction of the audio material into compositions, he says, is a way to represent the identity of that specific place through its sounds and the layers of memory those sounds have ossified in the artist's mind.⁶

By contextualising these opinions and words in the wider academic literature on popular music and to let my personal experience resonate in the collective, it is worth pointing out that *El Tren Fantasma* certainly draws attention to those debates concerned with the relationship between popular music and time, including issues on nostalgia and memory, and to debates focused on the cultural, political and musicological implications of the intricate dialogue between the more recent past and the present.⁷ The latter, to recall the arguments of previous contributors in issue one of *Riffs*,⁸ has been widely categorised as an 'obsession' of our present time for whatever pop music style or attitude, recording technology or format, have been used in previous decades. Today's culture of retro, moreover, the increased interest in memory and the pervasive feeling of nostalgia, according to the 'hauntology' theoretical framework,⁹ leaves the realm of pop music with nothing but 'ghostly' references to the past, ubiquitous faded traces of cultural memories into the present, a fetishism for the analogue in the digital era and a sheer melancholic and decadent state of mind through which music becomes a cultural and political device. A device used to resurge both personal memories and collective sensations, especially those coming from the more authentic and pure experiences of the childhood years. To be labelled as 'hauntological,' music must demonstrate "an existential orientation":¹⁰ must be indeed haunted by the aesthetic presence of deconstructed ghosts, must be embedded into a consciousness that a linear historical narrative is no longer achievable and that temporality as such collapsed on itself. While being a ghost, but shying away from the demonic spectres of the Mexican past or possibly from Watson's idealised upbringing, *El Tren Fantasma* seems to provide a strong connection with the debates on the ways in which personal and collective memory is evoked, articulated and reconstructed through the emotional associations provided by the sounds themselves as well as the potentialities offered by recording technologies in shaping perceptions of time and space.

What surprised me, as I listened to *El Tren Fantasma*, was the immediate, intense sense of familiarity and mystical reality elicited by the soothing rhythmic and mechanical patterns of the railway, by the resonance

⁵ "TO:42 - Chris Watson El Tren Fantasma." Reviews. *touchmusic.org.uk*.

⁶ "Sounds Outside: The Art of Field Recording," *Ableton.com*, June 2016.

⁷ I am thinking of works such as Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), in which the use of the past and the construction of musical memories in today's culture is often considered as a purely nostalgic and commodity-driven practice. Further accounts, such as Caroline Bithell, "The Past in Music: Introduction," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no.1 (2006), have analysed such dialogue through a more historical framework, addressing questions on cultural memory, heritage and tradition.

⁸ I am referring to David Kane, "Bob Dylan: Nobility, Lyrics and Ghosts," *Riffs Journal* 1, no.1 (Feb. 2017), where Kane draws attention to the 'retrospective' discourse and the notion of hauntology.

⁹ See Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writing on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014); Reynolds, *Retromania*, 311-361; Adam Harper, "Hauntology: The Past Inside The Present," *rougesfoam.blogspot.co.uk*, 27 October 2009.

¹⁰ Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 21.

of the bell ringing, human voices muffled by the absorbing, disturbing and deep noises of the brakes and horn, the tweeting nature passing by in the background, a cacophony of sounds of the insects, of the chickens, and by the chaos of people moving and talking, by the hurry of the *anunciante*, by the combination of Spanish and English. A suspended sonic dimension, an echo of a familiar, distant place. 'El Divisadero' got me hooked: I could see mom singing Mercedes Sosa's 'Duerme Negrito' to my siblings and me, her record collection of Latin American folk music, the summers grandma spent with us in Italy cooking *empanadas* and *budín de pan*, the pizza with mortadella we used to eat at lunch time, laying on the grass, after having walked for hours in the mountains near dad's hometown. I saw the videos, that my parents recently showed us, of my siblings unwrapping their Christmas gifts, when I was 9-months old and we were living in Argentina, and I saw the pictures, together with my parents' stories, of the trip we made to Chile that same year, the six of us and my aunt, in a white brand-new 1993 Lada station-wagon: Córdoba, San Luis, Mendoza, the Cordillera and Aconcagua, Valparaíso, finally Viña del mar. This intense sense of familiarity and tranquillity, the feelings associated with the vividness of these recollections and the obfuscation of the mediated memories, and the strong sense of nostalgia, came perhaps not only from Watson's ability in narrativizing the train journey, but also from the specific circumstances in which I listened to the record: in my early twenties, living in a new country and, for the first time, by myself. Writing on the emotional potentialities of sound, language and the human voice, writer and broadcaster Seán Street argues that memory and nostalgia in a young audience are articulated "by the recollection of the safe world of early childhood," against the complexities associated with the process of becoming an adult, recollection that can be built upon personal images either 'imagined' or 'accurate.' With a specific emphasis on the communicative power of the radio and the practices of field recording, Street writes that sound and speech are crucial in the construction of a personal cultural and mnemonic identity, regardless of distances in time and space, and that although they remain ephemeral their 'physical representation' – and therefore the technological repeatability that allows the human capacity of remembering – should stand as an instance of a preserved sonic past.¹¹

Young adults and seniors, José van Dijck similarly explains, respond differently to recorded music, for while the former are able to recall specific events, the latter refer generically to past moods and ambiances. The verbal process by which parents' and older siblings' cultural and musical memories are told to children, moreover, often makes it more difficult for young adults to distinguish between actual, lived personal memories and acquired, mediated ones. However, although the act of remembrance differs with age and changes accordingly to the circumstances of the present time, recording technologies, recorded sounds and the materiality of music, more broadly, are nonetheless influential in the processes of evocation and reconstruction of memory narratives, whether individual or collective, and remain responsible for materialising these memories into a historical, nostalgic feeling. Coining the term 'techno-stalgia,' van Dijck writes that "media technologies and objects are often deployed as metaphors, expressing a cultural desire for personal memory to function *like* an archive or storage facility," and draws a line between the widespread, more recent appeal for past popular music technologies, referring to it as mere commercial retro culture, and the somewhat more passionate involvement in the (re)enactment process. Such a process, certainly, being embedded in a technological metaphor, is not able to portray an exact representation of the original context and sound, but serves as an allusive, referential manifestation of what the past 'sounded' like.¹² Furthermore, it must be said that these imprecise, blurred visions of the past characterise also the commodified aspect of today's retro culture, whose main appeal comes from the 'nostalgia aesthetic' which is made possible and reinforced by digital audio techniques – the hope of better times offered by digitisation in making a new record sound old: 'the phonograph effect,' as Mark Katz would put it – pop music memora-

¹¹ Seán Street, *The Memory of Sound: Preserving the Sonic Past*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 31-37 and 83.

¹² José Van Dijck, "Record and Hold: Popular Music between Personal and Collective Memory," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no.5 (2006): 357-374.

bilias and marketing strategies, towards the search of a more 'authentic' sonic past-ness.¹³

Recalling Watson's words on the act of remembering a specific place through its sounds and the thoughts on Watson's digital manipulation in creating depth in sound, it might be said that a listening experience of *El Tren Fantasma* can be described as a response to the new perceptions of space and time in the technological, highly mediated cultural environment of our age. Considering the record as a postmodern cultural artefact and reflecting on the listener's awareness that what they are listening to is the sound of a journey already turned into collective history, the ten tracks could be analysed within the discourse on the aesthetic characteristics of what has been referred to as the new phase of the 'time-space compression.'¹⁴ It might be, indeed, that both the fluidity through which the listeners' mind moves in time and space, either real or fictional, and the evocative sense of familiarity that surrounds the record, point to the need for a more secure sense of place and time, a 'romanticized escapism,' against the confused and conflictual changes of today's immaterial spatial-temporal global relations.¹⁵ Although being worried by the 'disappearance of space' and by its increased commercialisation, which suffocates any Situationist-like practice of the *dérive* – the creative, fluid association between the mind and the city – David Toop acknowledges the importance of music and ordinary sounds in the representation and experience of an urban environment. In his investigation of the relationship between time, space and sound, Toop illustrates, through some instances of soundscape compositions and field recordings, how a musical narrative, that "can be a story without closure, a story without beginning or end or surface development," is often completely guided by the sounds being recorded and how sounds themselves become, in turn, essential in the formation, evocation and fixation of memories and meanings.¹⁶ The sounds of *El Tren Fantasma* have transported me into a familiar place, where personal memories passed by, and a distant one, where the story of the real train journey was told; particularly: they have been crucial in the recollection of past narratives and equally important in the formation of new ones as was the case with that Sunday morning in London. Far from looking for temporal and spatial security, nonetheless, the 'unmelodic' patterns of the railway and that fluidity of the listeners' minds can easily be perceived as an attempt to increase the loose and disorientating effect, to consciously mediate the sense of time and space, to enhance the mysterious, the unpredictable: "the way in which a harmonically complex layer or reference allows us to 'rest our ears' so that the mind can travel without undue focus or purpose (in other words, daydream or relax)."¹⁷

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¹³ Christina Baade and Paul Aitken, "Still 'In the Mood': The Nostalgia Aesthetic in a Digital World," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20, no. 4 (2008): 370-371; See also Andy Bennett and Susanne Janssen, "Popular Music, Cultural Memory, and Heritage," *Popular Music and Society* 39, n.1 (2016): 1-7.

¹⁴ David Harvey, "The Experience of Space and Time." In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1990), 308-323.

¹⁵ Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place." In *Space, Place and Gender*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

¹⁶ David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 117.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

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