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"Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World"

Whitehouse, Andrew

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Ever since Rachel Carson predicted a "silent spring" environmentalists have been carefully and anxiously listening to birds. More recently the musician and scientist Bernie Krause has examined the effects of human activity on avian soundscapes throughout the world. He argues that human activities cause ecological and sonic disruptions that really are rendering the world silent or discordant, submerging the "animal orchestra" beneath noise. A healthy natural environment can be heard, according to Krause, in a rich and harmonious soundscape that has evolved over millions of years. The loss of wildness thus elicits a loss of harmony. I consider these Anthropocene interpretations of silence, noise and dissonance by comparing the environmentalist concerns of Krause with responses to the *Listening to Birds* project—an anthropological investigation of bird sounds. These responses emphasise the significance of bird sounds for people's sense of place, time and season and the longing that many have for their own lives to resonate with the birds around them. I argue that this has less to do with desires to hear harmony in pristine nature but with developing relations of companionship with birds living alongside humans. While listening to birds can still iconically and indexically ground people, signs of absence and change can precipitate anxieties that stem from the ambiguities implicit in the Anthropocene's formulation of human relations with other species. Using narratives and field recordings I explore the anxious semiotics of listening to birds in the Anthropocene by drawing on Kohn's recent arguments on the semiotics of more-than-human relations and Ingold's understanding of the world as a meshwork. (Text from author's abstract)

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