

My very first filters

I have a memory, from when I was around four, of putting my head in the cupboard under the sink. I believe that I did this on many occasions, though not because I was a particularly naughty child — I simply enjoyed the sensations that I experienced there. The cupboard smelled of detergent and exhaust fumes. There was a grate to the outside offering a view of the adjacent motorway through its grid of holes and, most importantly, a filtering of the noise of the many passing cars. I can't tell you exactly how it sounded, perhaps something like comb filtering, but maybe I'm wrong — memory can play tricks on us. In fact, many years later after we'd moved house, I asked my mother about the grate in the cupboard below the sink in the old flat and she said that she had no recollection that such a thing ever existed. I'm pretty sure I didn't dream it up though, and I can also, I believe, explain my delight in this particular set of sounds, images, and smells. It was a recasting of the familiar into an unfamiliar form, an adaptation of the real world via a commonplace architectural feature juxtaposed with the scent of floor cleaner.

I have another recollection from around the same age, this time of being driven home from my great aunt's house in Essex in the dark, sitting in the backseat of our car. I've always felt a strange sense of cosiness while travelling in a vehicle on a motorway at night. The light cast by the sodium lamps makes the eerie, enjoyable in-betweenness of the motorway even more other-worldly. 'Real colours' leach out of familiar things: my red shoes, blue coat, and pink jumper are all turned alien non-hues that are nearly impossible to describe. A similar memory: while eating a Quality Street chocolate and looking through the dark pink cellophane wrapper with one eye — a strange monochromatic (though pretty!) version of our family living room emerges.

The force of these early memories, and the way that filtering is embedded within them, seems to suggest that filters themselves have a kind of evocative power — that their ability to alter or remodel one's environment creates a certain sense of particularity.

Another experience: I'm a little older in this one, around eight I think. I've discovered a reel-to-reel tape recorder in an old wardrobe and, perhaps unwisely, my parents allow me to use it. At this point in my life, I am obsessed with pop music and decide to employ the tape recorder to make my own 'radio' shows. I am struck by how things sound when I play them back. My favourite singles lose their quality of nearness and immediacy when I tape the record player from across the room, and I am surprised most of all by the sound of my voice — finally liberated from the filtering of my own skull and the echo chambers of my sinuses and chest. This is, more or less, what I sound like to the rest of the world; fortunately I don't hate it too much.

Much later I become a keen field-recordist. Examples of filtering are utterly ubiquitous in daily life, of course, and the process of recording and editing real-world sounds brings this fact into sharp relief. If I record myself walking through a shopping mall, a combination of my own focussed attention and the amplified sound on my headphones reveals how the music on the mall's speaker system is altered by the changing architecture of the building. It is hard to convincingly splice together two recordings made in different parts of a room or with my microphone positions slightly altered. As probably every sound designer knows, although we

may not attend to it very often, we are extremely sensitive to the small changes caused by filtering.

My favourite sound in the world, recorded at a castle in Umbria, is unusual and beautiful precisely because of the way that it is filtered — rather than due to the nature of the ‘original’ sound. From the castle grounds, at all times of the day, one can hear a continuous, random melody hovering around the middle register. It is created by the sound of cars and lorries on a motorway (yet another motorway!) located a kilometre or so away from the listener. I’ve never experienced this magical motorway close up; I imagine it must be loud there and the pitches less prominent due to the full-spectrum noise. Something strange happens when you are at the castle, though. The intervening landscape filters the motorway sound, sieves out white noise, and delivers simple notes instead. It’s a relatively quiet sound, this filtered motorway, and as a result it’s not easy to record well. It is a conundrum: get closer to the source to make a more robust sound recording and the effect of pure ghostly pitchiness diminishes.

Perhaps the presence of filters in real life — across landscapes, in architecture, and even within our own bodies, and the ways in which these filters can alter what we hear and see is a reminder of the constant flux of the world. Nothing is ever the same or can be repeated exactly. There are no fixed points, only alterations. My favourite pop song from when I was eight doesn’t have one definitive sound. There is only a collection of filterings of it — the way it sounds on the television in the living room, on my reel-to-reel taping of the record player, on the small radio in the kitchen when heard from upstairs. Luckily, these filterings of the song are similar enough for me to condense them into one thing. I wouldn’t fancy trying to negotiate a universe where all the different versions of a source were treated as discrete entities. I love the fact that we are able to generalise quite extensively in a world full of one-offs. And yet, at the same time, we can notice the differences when we focus our attention on them. Filterings of sounds form part of a category of things, such as different people speaking English or varying shades of the colour blue, that require us to both conflate and finely differentiate. Filters are there all the time, doing their frequency attenuations and reinforcements in the background, patiently waiting for us to notice their subtle work.