



COLLEGE OF
MUSIC

Volume 23 ▪ 2025-2026

HARMONIA

The Journal of the Graduate Association of
Musicologists *und* Theorists (GAMuT)



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Volume 23 ▪ 2025–2026

The Journal of the Graduate Association of
Musicologists *und* Theorists at the
University of North Texas

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The membership of GAMuT would like to extend sincere appreciation to Dr. April Prince and Dr. Benjamin Graf for their service as faculty reviewers for this volume.

Congratulations to Salvador Hernandez, whose paper “De-Structuring Sacred Sound: Exploring Sonic Preservation as a Response to Death Anxiety” was the winner of the 2025–2026 Graham H. Phipps Paper Award.

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De-Structuring Sacred Sound: Exploring Sonic Preservation as a Response to Death Anxiety

SALVADOR HERNANDEZ

According to the Holy See's 2002 "General Instruction for the Roman Missal," the *Gloria* of the Mass Ordinary "is a very ancient and venerable hymn in which the Church, gathered together in the Holy Spirit, glorifies and entreats God the Father and the Lamb."¹ Almost certainly, the Vatican was referring to "hymn" in the textual sense, as there have been dozens if not hundreds of known musical settings for the Mass in the Western art music tradition alone. Following the Second Vatican Council, Catholic church choirs in the United States are even encouraged to use vernacular musical settings for the Mass as needed (Holy See 1963).² However, the constant across these settings is the text, with the "General Instruction" stating that "it may not be replaced by any other text" (2002). Similar restrictions are prescribed for all other parts of the Mass ordinary, which include the *Kyrie Eleison*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*.³ Although an argument can be made regarding the longevity of the Catholic plainchant tradition associated with the Mass starting in the first millennium of the Common Era, the music culture of the Mass today is stylistically diverse and dynamic, with the Holy See allowing for "other types of sacred music, in particular polyphony . . . provided that they correspond to the spirit of the liturgical action and that they foster the participation of all the faithful" (2002).⁴

¹ As of 2025, an English translation of this document—as well as other resources pertinent to Roman Catholicism—can be found at the Vatican's website, <http://www.vatican.va>.

² The Sacrosanctum Concilium, published following the Second Vatican Council, states: "In certain parts of the world, especially mission lands, there are peoples who have their own musical traditions, and these play a great part in their religious and social life. For this reason due importance is to be attached to their music, and a suitable place is to be given to it, not only in forming their attitude toward religion, but also in adapting worship to their native genius" (1963).

³ Per the "General Instruction:" "It is not permitted to substitute other chants for those found in the Order of Mass, such as at the *Agnus Dei*."

⁴ The Catholic Church plays a key role in the preservation of plainchant tradition. The aforementioned Sacrosanctum Concilium acknowledges "Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services." The document also called for the completion of Gregorian chant books, as well as "a more critical edition is to be prepared of those books already published since the restoration by St. Pius X" (1963).

It is curious, then, that seminal ethnomusicologists Alan Merriam and Bruno Nettl mention the notion that religious musics are more resistant to change. Merriam states that “less change can be expected in religious than in social or recreational music” (1964, 307–8), and Nettl suggests, fifty years later, that “a music may resist change if it is associated mainly or exclusively with a particular domain of culture that changes less readily than do most other activities. Religion is the most obvious example, and religious music seems in many societies to change less readily than the secular” (2015, 281). Of course, the diversity of Catholic Mass music settings is by no means grounds to dismiss this idea. Certain religious musics, including the aforementioned plainchant tradition, demonstrate an outstanding resistance to change compared to other musical styles. However, the co-existence and continued creation of numerous musical settings set to fixed texts, presented during a pivotal religious ceremony in the Catholic tradition, point toward different manifestations of temporal stability in the same tradition. That is, whereas the prescribed text of the Mass ordinary appears to be more constant over time, the accompanying music is more subject to change. This is different from the temporal stability that Merriam mentions regarding some Native American songs, for example; some of which had allegedly maintained the same pitches and tempi over several decades (1964, 304–5). This raises an important question: in what ways are sacred sound traditions more temporally stable than other forms of musical expression?

Considering that the Native American songs Merriam mentions demonstrated temporal stability through pitch and tempi, whereas the music of the Mass demonstrates resistance to change in the text, it may be more prudent to consider that sacred sound expressions demonstrate greater resistance to change through particular sonic components, rather than as holistic styles. Thomas Turino notes that musical components—such as pitch, timbre, tempo, and dynamics, among others—can and “often do function as discrete . . . signs which may be meaningfully combined to produce a macrolevel sign, although the significance of certain components may be foregrounded in the musical context” (1993, 236–7). Since the sonic components demonstrating temporal stability can vary, it is important to consider that there may not be any particular category of sound that is inherently more stable, but rather that there may be shared links between temporally stable components and the meanings that they hold for listeners. Bruno Nettl makes a similar claim, suggesting that “the best [theory] one may expect at this point . . . is a theory that would be enumerative, pointing out a group of regularities and patterns stemming from a variety of circumstances and contexts” (2015, 292).

Through a literature review of ethnomusicological research focusing on diverse musical traditions around the world, I interrogate the meanings tied to sonic components within sacred sound expressions that communities have striven to maintain more intently than others. Using Terror Management Theory, I suggest that a common thread across these stable components is their intended role to either delay death, reify post-mortem realities, or express death-resilient identities. Developed by social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon: Terror Management Theory (TMT) argues that humans respond to death anxiety via cultural worldviews that serve as bases for self-esteem and grant humans “the possibility of immortality” (Greenberg et al. 1986, 197). As of 2019, findings from hundreds of TMT studies—internationally and cross-culturally—support the theory’s central claims that individuals reminded of their mortality demonstrate heightened efforts to defend their worldviews, that people gain a greater subconscious awareness of death when the validity of their worldviews are threatened, and that self-esteem operates as a buffer against existential dread (Routledge and Vess 2019, 1). Research participants who are primed to think about their deaths beforehand consistently demonstrate both greater fondness toward those who share their cultural values, and greater prejudice toward those who do not (Rosenblatt et al. 1989; Arndt et al. 1997; Greenberg et al. 1986, 1992, 1994, 2000; Jong et al. 2012).⁵ This suggests that an individual’s interest in maintaining the integrity of their worldviews connects directly to their efforts to mitigate death anxiety.

Alongside cultural values and behaviors, symbols also contribute to a worldview’s capacity to address the terror of death, with Solomon et al. noting that “as representations of the cultural worldview, these icons should also serve to assuage mortality concerns” (2000, 202). Accordingly, Greenberg et al. found that research volunteers who were made to think of their own deaths were more apprehensive toward using “culturally loaded objects” inappropriately to solve creative tasks (1995, 1226). Notably, this apprehension did not just manifest around culturally-loaded objects

⁵ A caveat here is that increased worldview defense generally requires a period of time to elapse before manifesting, with TMT research supporting the notion that the mind must first exert significant cognitive energy to remove immediate thoughts of death (proximal defense) before increased worldview defense becomes measurable (distal defense). See Greenberg et al. 2000 for a comprehensive discussion on these defense mechanisms, and Arndt et al. 1997 for research demonstrating that increased worldview defense can manifest early if research participants made aware of their mortality are given high cognitive loads immediately after. This research suggests that cultural behavior in response to death anxiety most often occurs at a subconscious level.

tied to worldviews offering literal immortality (in the case of Greenberg et al.'s 1995 study, the Christian crucifix), but also with objects tied to worldviews offering more symbolic forms of immortality (the U.S. American flag).⁶ Indeed, Terror Management theorists argue that even in the absence of any answers to questions concerning death, cultural worldviews nonetheless “provide a form of symbolic immortality, the sense that one is a valuable part of something larger, more significant, and longer-lasting than one’s individual existence” (Dechesne 2003, 723). Particularly, art is considered “fundamental to constructing and maintaining supernatural death-transcending conceptions of reality” (Solomon et al. 2015, 75), pointing toward the music’s potential to validate the death-defying capacity of cultural worldviews.

Considering sacred sound expressions as symbols operating in the context of broader worldviews, I suggest that communities strive to preserve the specific components within these expressions that most assuage concerns about mortality, since letting those components change or fade could compromise their role in maintaining the overall expression’s capacity to mitigate death anxiety. These sonic components need not be analogous across cultures. For example, whereas the Murid (Dang 2013) and Diné (Spickard 1991) peoples—from the nation-states of Senegal and the United States, respectively—share the same concern as the Catholics for maintaining proper text during sacred expressions, the Venda of South Africa demonstrate greater concern for rich musical densities that reflect the stability of their broader community (Blacking 1974), while the Mbuti (Turnbull 1961) and Shona (Berliner 1981) show concern for the supernatural-invoking sounds of their ceremonial instruments. Each of these components are connected, however, through their perceived power to either delay death, reify death-defying realities, or express death-resilient identities.⁷

⁶ This study was conducted in two parts, both of which asked participants to execute certain tasks only using the items provided for them. The first involved hanging a crucifix, and was designed so that the crucifix itself needed to be used to hammer the nail into the wall. The second involved sifting dye out of water, which necessitated the use of a U.S. flag. Compared to control groups that received wood blocks and white flags, respectively, participants who were asked to think about their own deaths beforehand and presented with culturally-loaded objects took longer to complete the assigned tasks than those in control conditions who either were not asked to think about their deaths beforehand or did not receive culturally loaded objects.

⁷ Early on, some Terror Management theorists generally preferred the phrase “death-denying” as opposed to “death-defying” (see Greenberg et al. 1986, 196). However, later studies acknowledge that cultural worldviews ultimately fail to erase the problem of bodily death, yet produce beliefs that

Defying Death

Among the sacred sound expressions associated with a cultural worldview, communities tend to demonstrate greater concern with maintaining certain music-related components over others. A notable number of these temporally stable components also tend to function either as tools reifying death-defying realities pertinent to the cultural worldviews that the expressions are associated with or for expressing more death-resilient identities. For example, the text of the Catholic Mass fulfills the immediate ritual repetition of the Christ's actions during the Last Supper, an act that is believed to unify the entire Catholic Church, while also including pleas for mercy and salvation. This repetition in the form of the Eucharist is done so in memory of Christ, and "is celebrated in communion with the whole Church in heaven and on earth, the living and the dead" (Holy See 1993). However, not only does this ritual reify a death-defying reality, but it also grants some degree of access to that reality, as "by the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life" (1993). Pleas for mercy in this context reflect—according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church—the belief that "each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ" (1993). This reified community, maintained by the Mass context, adds extra weight to supplications and praises expressed during the services. The *Kyrie Eleison* and *Agnus Dei* express unified pleas for mercy from God, the *Credo* functions as an affirmation of faith in the worldview, and both the *Gloria* and *Sanctus* are allegedly sung by the living along with the "heavenly powers," "gathered together in the Holy Spirit" (Holy See 2002).

The Sufi Murid brotherhood also focuses on maintaining the texts associated with their sacred sound expressions. When singing sacred poetry known as *qasa'id*, the Murid aim for the proper recitation of original prose written by their spiritual leader in the early 19th century, Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba, even though he often disregarded the "conventional rules of grammar and syntax" (Dang 2013, 84). The musical conventions surrounding the recitation of Bamba's *qasa'id* are not maintained quite as strictly. It is not even mandatory to chant them, with Murids having the option to either read or recite them at will (84). Furthermore, although there is a

either point toward literal life after death or more symbolic forms of immortality" (Dechesne 2003, 723–724). Thus, I use the phrase "death-defying" to highlight the capacity of cultural worldviews to subvert the expectation of death as a total end of existence.

belief that some qasa'id melodies are passed down by elders connected to Bamba, Christine Dang mentions that "when sung individually, qasa'id can gain melodies, rhythms, elaborations, and improvisations" (86). Celebrated soloists may even sing their own melodies, so long as the melodies are deemed "'respectful' of Bamba's verses" (87).

Whereas the exact way Bamba's qasa'id are chanted can vary, the original prose is maintained, prose that is often full of appeals to God and the Prophet Muhammad for blessings and immortality. Out of a collection of nine translated qasa'id written by Bamba and published in 2017, seven include references to an afterlife, appeals for immortality, or both. One of these poems, "Sab'un Taqī," points toward the value placed on recitation itself, stating that "whosoever can reflect upon them and imitate them, they are useful in that they bring him the treasures of this world and the hereafter. They close the seven gates of Hell" (57). This poem also states that "whosoever does not recite [these poems] will not be heard in his prayers" (53). A line in another poem, "aṣ-Ṣindīdi," states "Be our own Protector against any cause of death!", with the following seven verses containing more specific details about what these causes could be. "Tuḥfatu l-Mutaḍarri'ina" ends with "Give me and the one who inspired me to write this poem protection and satisfaction . . . Freedom from the interrogation of chastisement, of the pains of death and of the Last Judgement, my Lord, The glad tidings and the joy of our death and resurrection [*sic*]!" (111). "Mawāhibu n-Nāfi'i fī Madā'ihi sh-Shāfi'i," the longest poem in this collection, lauds the Prophet for being "the path by which we manage to join the Generous One, O you, dispenser of the best wealth" (93). In this context, the recitation of Bamba's qasa'id serves as a source of good fortune for both this life and the next, while also operating as a means of legitimizing prayers that include—at least in these poems—numerous appeals for immortality.

However, ritual text is not always the music-related component that most mitigates death anxiety in a sacred sound expression. By contrast, the Venda arguably show greater concern for a shared harmonic pattern that enables maximum participation in their *tshikona* national dance, which ethnomusicologist John Blacking describes as their most highly valued musical expression (1974, 51). Familiarity with this pattern, which even informs Venda children's songs, encourages maximum *tshikona* cooperation over time as children mature and start contributing to the ritual. Blacking makes this connection clear by noting that the youth actively draw connections between their songs and the *tshikona* by referencing instruments and fanfares associated with the latter while performing the former (95). Furthermore, melodies derived from the pattern

allow performers to add density and complexity to each performance, which the Venda see as beautiful “not only because of the quantity of people and tones involved, but because of the quality of the relationships that must be established between people and tones whenever it is performed” (51). Its performance involves the largest number of people possible, and its music incorporates the largest number of tones in any single piece of Venda music involving more than one or two players” (50–51). As such, the tshikona arguably plays a key role in reifying the death-resilient identity that is the Venda community, with Blacking stating that the tshikona “is an example of the production of the maximum of available human energy in a situation that generates the highest degree of individuality in the largest possible community of individuals. Tshikona provides an experience of the best of all possible worlds” (Ibid.).

Yet the community that the tshikona invokes is not just one of the living, but one that incorporates members who have since passed away. Blacking states that “the dance is connected with ancestor worship and state occasions, incorporates the living and the dead, and is the most universal of Venda music” (1974, 51). The Venda believe that “each individual birth in theory marked the return of an ancestral spirit in human form,” which can be encountered while in a somatic state during possession dances (Blacking 1985, 67). However, the experience of the tshikona did not have the typical effects of possession. Instead, experiences of the other world during this ritual “were associated rather with the world around them, in which ‘the other self’ within themselves and their fellow human beings communicated with time past and future” (68). Rather than reifying death-defying reality at the individual level, the tshikona reifies it at the communal level across time, while also reinforcing the identity of those adhering to this worldview.

As another non-text example, the Shona demonstrate efforts to preserve multiple aspects of music performance tied to spirit possession during their *bira* rituals. These include efforts to preserve specific timbral qualities, ensemble instrumentations, and recognizable music compositions. For example, the Shona place great value on the sound of the *mbira dzavadzimu* instrument, believing that it has “the power to project its sound into the heavens, bridging the world of the living and the world of the spirits and thereby attracting the attention of the ancestors” (Berliner 1981, 190). Mbira music requires intense physical performances that are aestheticized during the bira ceremony (197), since the music ultimately culminates in “the possession of mediums who then serve as counselors to the villagers” (43). This intensity needs to be maintained even after possession occurs, as it is believed that the

spirits draw power from the energy of the musicians, and may drift away if this intensity is relaxed (201).

Beyond the sound of the instrument itself, a successful Shona spirit possession hinges on the preservation of musical performance practices and compositions that would be familiar to ancestors who have since passed away. This creates a simultaneous need for both the preservation of diverse performance practices and the maintenance of orthodoxy within these practices. Shona performers deliberately preserve classics of the mbira repertoire for bira ceremonies, believing that in order to trigger possession by a particular spirit, songs that appealed to that spirit when they were alive must be performed (Berliner 1981, 199). Although Berliner does not identify any specific songs as necessary for all bira ceremonies, it is nonetheless important for musicians to at least know particular songs depending on the spirits that they are calling. Berliner states:

In order to bring about the initial possession of the medium, musicians perform the pieces which they say the medium's spirit favors. If the musicians are familiar with a particular spirit . . . , they know the spirit's musical preferences, and this enables them to bring about the possession of the medium with the least difficulty . . . If the villagers hire mbira players to play for a medium for the first time, the musicians experiment with different pieces until they discover the ones that will bring about possession (198-9).

In some cases, Berliner notes that Shona spirits can be very picky about the music they prefer. Based on incidents during which performers struggled to bring about possession, he suggests that "the spirits have preferences not only for particular mbira pieces but for a particular type of mbira, or even for the members of a particular mbira ensemble" (199).

An additional aspect of mbira performance that combines the Shona need for a powerful sound and familiar performance practices is the buzzing timbre produced by the instrument, which is "considered to be an integral part of the music" passed down to the Shona by their forefathers (39). This buzzing sound is sometimes amplified by pebbles placed in the gourd resonators that performers use (11), creating the implication that some communities are open to altering music-related components of their sacred sound expressions if the result strengthens a music-related component that mitigates death anxiety. There is also special value placed on the instrument itself, which is "regarded by the musicians as the only Shona mbira to have originated in Zimbabwe itself" (34). However, even though all the bira ceremonies Berliner attended involved the

mbira dzavadzimu, he acknowledges that some regions may add drums or replace the instrument altogether based on the availability of musicians, regional practices, and the needs of spirits (188). Ultimately, the invocation of death-defying ancestors would not be possible without the combination of intense sound with familiar compositions and performance practices. Berliner's earlier observation that the mbira dzavadzimu is not always present at bira ceremonies—with instrumentation depending on the needs of the spirits—reinforces the idea that efforts toward preserving sonic components depend on how effective they are in calling the spirits, thus reifying their reality.

As a final example, Indonesian gamelan musicians have maintained a preference for bronze instruments and colotomic rhythmic aesthetics in their music over several centuries. Henry Spiller states that a “distinctly Southeast Asian bronze tradition developed approximately 3000 years ago or so,” with bronze drums being among the earliest creations among Southeast Asian bronzesmiths (2004, 6–7). Colotomic rhythmic structures, which Spiller defines as “a specific pattern of instrumental sounds that act as a foundation for the other instruments’ parts” (77), are cyclical in nature and aestheticize Indonesian cosmological views of the universe that are associated with ideas of death and rebirth in Indonesian society (84). These views in turn are informed by “Indian philosophical ideas of the universe’s cosmic cycles,” which were introduced to the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali by Hindu missionaries during the first millennium (112).

Both Spiller (2004, 57) and Judith Becker (1988, 287) note that bronze gamelan instruments have supernatural associations, with their creation being tied to the Earth’s creative forces. Stanley O’Conner expands on this connection, explaining that metal smiths are associated with several Indonesian deities that are responsible for forging souls (1985, 54–55).⁸ Correspondingly, the process of metallurgy is connected to Indonesian views on death and rebirth:

The ores are destroyed, reduced to a bloom of wrought iron, just as cremation or putrefaction reduce the body. The bloom is gathered together and reconstituted by heating in the presence of charcoal to charge it with carbon, just as the reduced products of the body are given ritual processing during an intermediate stage of funeral ritual. Finally, a new and perfected body is forged in the smithy, joining the quasi-

⁸ “In Borneo, the Iban people have a creator figure, Selampandai, whose symbol is the bellows forge and who is described as being able to make the souls of the dead live again. The Dusun people also have a smith god, Kinorohingan, who “welds the souls of the dead” (O’Conner 1985, 54–55).

sexual, polar, but mutually attractive elements . . . into a new unity, and this stage is marked on the plane of ritual by the release of a new being constituted by an effigy (puspa) in the final rites of liberation (57).

Lisa Gold notes that the Balinese see purification rites throughout their lives as “belonging to one huge cycle of rebirth, life, death, and rebirth” (2005, 12), a perspective that lends further support to O’Conner’s observations. Colotomic structures in gamelan music sonically reify these views, with Marty Hatch stating that “musical activities, like melodies or the pitches that compose them, bloom, wither, die and bloom again when the soils and the seasons are right” (1979, 154). As death-defying expressions, the forged bronze instruments of the gamelan ensemble thus reify the notion of rebirth after death, whereas colotomic structures demonstrate the cycles that make such cosmological processes possible.

These examples illustrate that sonic components associated with sacred sound expressions demonstrate great temporal stability over time, while also implying that their unique capacity to reify death-defying beliefs about reality is at least in-part responsible for this longevity. In the following section, I explore alternate examples of how musical components within sacred sound expressions demonstrate more death-*delaying* functions, arguing that their temporal stability is also a result of their role in mitigating death anxiety within the context of their affiliated cultural worldviews.

Delaying Death

Due to powerful taboos surrounding death, some cultural worldviews either contextualize death as absolute, beyond comprehension, too dangerous to discuss, or as a presence that must be removed from society as soon as possible. At least some of these cultures lack a distinct musical tradition that aims to reify death-defying realities by calling for the deceased in some form or fashion, yet they do have musical traditions that aim to delay death and motivate communal efforts to maintain particular musical components. For example, the Mbuti of central Africa demonstrate a strong aversion to dwelling on death after it occurs in their community, seeing it as a matter best left to the forest and forgotten as quickly as possible (Turnbull 1961, 50). According to some of ethnomusicologist Colin Turnbull’s interlocutors, it was “better to forget the dead quickly,” rather than “making yourself remember them all the time” (47). It was considered offensive to name the dead (106), and Turnbull believed that for the Mbuti, there was “no explanation” for death, “not even through sorcery or witchcraft” (48–9).

However, illness or death was believed to result from the forest being asleep and “not looking after its children,” and so a *molimo* ritual would be held in response to these events to wake it up (92). A typical ritual can extend over several months and is characterized by continuous evening performances involving the playing of a large *molimo* trumpet (up to 15ft long), men singing as an accompaniment, and eating. Although there are no distinct rituals associated with burying the dead and there is no clear mention of an afterlife, the Mbuti nonetheless “sing in their memory for months on end, during the *molimo*” (198). The powerful sound of the *molimo* trumpet in this case assumes a death-delaying function in that it is directly responsible for waking up the forest and keeping it happy, which the Mbuti believe will keep them safe from further harm. Although Turnbull notes that the Mbuti are not “a ritualistically minded people” (1961, 198), they nonetheless took the singing of the *molimo* overnight very seriously. If someone was found sleeping, the Mbuti would “spear him in the stomach and kill him completely and for ever [*sic*] . . . his body would be buried under the *kumamolino* and nobody would be allowed to mention his death, even to remark on his absence” (82). At least one interlocutor also expressed some reservations about ending the *molimo* in the village rather than at the camp, explaining that “it is a thing of the forest, and it should end there” (156).

Turnbull found that the Mbuti were primarily concerned with the quality of sound produced by the trumpet itself, which is the primary means through which they awaken the forest (93). Whereas Turnbull had expected to see traditional wooden *molimo* during his time with the Mbuti, the trumpets he ultimately observed were rather unceremonious metal drainpipes, with his interlocutors noting that it did not matter what the instrument was made of so long as it made a “great sound” (76). In fact, the drainpipes were preferred by the Mbuti since they did not “rot like wood” (76), implying that some communities are open to changing music-related components—in this case, the materiality of the instrument itself—if the result was something that made other aspects of the ritual more convenient without infringing on the music-related component that arguably most mitigates death anxiety—in this case, the strength of the sound. This emphasis on sound quality over materiality aligns with the belief that misfortune happens whenever the forest is asleep, and so it needs to be reawakened through song (92). The little concern with materiality also extends to a reduced concern over the lyrical contents of the songs the Mbuti sing alongside the *molimo*, with Turnbull noting that “at no time do their songs ask for this or that to be done . . . it is not necessary. All that is needful is to awaken the forest, and everything will come right” (93).

The Diné—also known as the Navajo—see death as a disruption of daily life, as well as a source of pollution to “all who see and touch it” (Shepardson 1978, 383). Diné funerary beliefs and practices focus on burying corpses as soon as possible, and working to ensure that the spirits of the dead do not return to the world of the living. Although there is some recognition of an afterlife, there is little concern for reifying it. There are no known musical practices associated with these rituals; in fact, those burying the deceased do not even speak, as this could accidentally delay the dead’s journey to the afterworld (Shepardson 1978, 385; Griffen 1978, 367–8). Rather, as Mary Shepardson explains, “burial is as fast as possible . . . Mourning is limited to four days, time enough for the spirit to reach the afterworld . . . Graves are usually unmarked, secret, and there is no cult of visiting gravesites. The ghost of the dead is exhorted not to return” (1978, 384–5). The few rituals surrounding burial—which include killing the horse of the deceased and burying the dead with their personal property and jewelry—further reflect this concern. The horse is believed to help the dead “ride to the afterworld,” while withholding property can result in the ghost returning to seek it, bothering the living in the process (385). This aversion to the dead informs an aversion to death as well. Shepardson suggests that the idea of two afterworlds, one for good people and one for bad, is the result of Christian influence in the region, with many of her interlocutors claiming instead that “there was no punishment or reward to be expected after death” (384). Accordingly, the idea of facing eternal punishment was not as much of a concern for the Diné as the prospect of facing death in general, with people who confessed to practicing witchcraft in the past doing so in order to “save oneself from dying rather than to escape eternal punishment” (384). There was even some light skepticism expressed toward the idea of an afterlife, with one interlocutor saying “I don’t know about the afterlife. People don’t come back so I don’t know if it’s true or not” (Ibid.).

Several Diné chant ceremonies are concerned with maintaining the life of individuals and the community, in essence having power to delay death rather than deny it. The Diné also demonstrate strong efforts to maintain orthodoxy with the texts of these chants, believing that singers must repeat chants “exactly if the ritual is to have effect” (Spickard 1991, 199). These chants are primarily passed down orally through an apprenticeship system, with the Diné strictly prohibiting the preservation of chants through writing or audio recording. This is due to fears that this could result in preservation errors that would later cause “imperfect learning and subsequent incorrect performance” (Frisbie 1987, 262).

Similar to the Mbuti, the Diné “sponsor chants at times of crisis or potential disorder,” which may include illness or polluting experiences living among foreigners (Spickard 1991, 198). During a Diné healing ceremony, which could either take the form of various chantways or a Blessingway, healing is accomplished by reordering the patient’s “relationship with the powers of the creation” (198). This is accomplished by uniting the patient with the world’s creators, known as the “Holy People,” through prayer and sand paintings (202). While seated in the middle of a sand painting, the patient “becomes the pivot point around which the universe momentarily revolves, as she is healed by a sort of ritual osmosis. The aim is to seek the temporary unification of human, natural, and supernatural worlds” (Berlo 2011, 12). Notably, the Holy People are not ancestors returning from a supernatural plane; they are “the inner forms of various phenomena and forces, including animals, and are the controlling and animating powers of nature” (Witherspoon 1997, 35).

Despite the emphasis placed on maintaining the orthodoxy of chant texts through oral tradition, other aspects of chant ceremonies demonstrate great flexibility over time based on their relevance to Diné daily life. Ceremonies that no longer serve a relevant purpose may become extinct altogether, with Frisbie noting that they may even be repurposed based on the lived experiences and needs of the Diné, such as how “Huntingways became useful in responding to epidemics and in treating sick domestic animals, as the deer and antelope chases became less frequent” (1992, 464). In stronger cases, an irrelevant ceremony that is not repurposed may become extinct altogether, with decline in hunting resulting in “diminished popularity for the Corral Rite” (465). Several other chantway traditions—including Mothway, Dogway, and Ravenway—are noted as having gone extinct throughout the 20th century (477).

Among these comparatively more dynamic chantway ceremonies, the Blessingway remains strong due to its flexibility and overall role in maintaining the integrity of other death-delaying chant ceremonies. Creating a “unifying force in Navajo culture,” the Blessingway “is added to all curing ceremonies,” protecting them from diminished effectiveness due to improper performance, and also “reestablishes and maintains *hozho*, celebrates the cyclical process of renewal, and enhances continual adaptation” (Frisbie 1992, 462).⁹ Although knowledgeable singers for Diné ceremonies have declined overall during the 20th century, the Diné reservation’s

⁹ According to Frisbie, *hozho* refers to a condition wherein “individuals live in harmony with others and with nature” (1992, 500). Diné ceremonies often accomplish healing by reordering and restructuring this harmony between individuals and the world around them.

“Practitioners Directory” lists the Blessingway as having had the highest number of authenticated practitioners among Diné ceremonies during the 1972–81 period, at 333 persons out of 1029 (478).¹⁰ As a further testament to the Blessingway’s stability: whereas other ceremonies have since gone extinct, all five versions of the Blessingway observed as early as 1938 were still extant and in use as recently as 1990 (479).

Although the Diné’s efforts to preserve their chants mirror efforts from aforementioned communities to maintain death-delaying or death-defying musical components, the Diné’s insistence on oral transmission raises questions about where the perception of continuity belongs in discussions on temporal stability. It is possible that oral modes of transmission can result in variations over time, especially considering that—according to Frisbie—many of these chants existed before the Blessingway was developed around the late 19th century (462). Indeed, Frisbie notes that given “the oral transmission of ceremonial knowledge, it should be no surprise that perceptions of the components of Navajo religion are variable and diverse” across the Diné population (1992, 471–76). The rituals remain dynamic, with Frisbie discussing some more common changes over time including “redefinitions of appropriate length and timing; expansions of ideas about appropriate use [of ceremonies]; borrowing and absorptions, and revival of and periods of popularity for ceremonies related to specific kinds of stress” (471). Nonetheless, the Diné concern for maintaining the exact recitation of chants noted by Spickard was observed as early as 1964 by Alan Merriam (305), reflecting a persistent concern for maintaining at least perceived orthodoxy with this component of the ritual. This suggests a different local conceptualization of continuity and change, conceptualizations which Nettl has described as distinct from ethnomusicologists’ own perception of musical change, and of which little is known (2015, 292–293). Further study is still needed to address the role of perception in discourses regarding musical stability and change.

Conclusion and Further Directions

At this point, it is important to note that although the temporally stable components mentioned here assume central roles in either delaying death or reifying death-defying realities, they are

¹⁰ “The reservation-wide ‘Practitioners Directory’ (which is neither current nor complete) lists 1,029 practitioners for a population of about 150,000 . . . Figures derived from it indicate the following numbers of practitioners for different ceremonies: Blessingway--333; Evilway/Ghostway--288; Windways--285; Shootingways--205; Enemyway--168” (Frisbie 1992, 478).

nonetheless dependent on the presence of other contextualizing symbols and experiences so that they may have a proper effect. Berliner notes how the bira experience is intensified by the “total musical environment” characteristic of the ceremony, which results in part from “acoustic properties of the small round-house, the powerful, penetrating music of the mbira ensemble, and the communal response from all quarters of the *banya*” (1981, 195). For the Diné, although properly executed chants are critical for chant ceremonies, the chants nonetheless model and guide the essential experience of healing for a patient (Spickard 1991, 200). According to Spickard, simply reciting the prayers without this experience would not be enough for healing (202). For the Venda, the temporal stability of the tshikona’s harmonic pattern depends on its realization through maximum participation during a performance (Blacking 1974, 51); the pattern facilitates this experience and in turn, the experience reifies other worlds (1985, 68). Finally, the complex nature of triggering possession, which powerfully reifies supernatural realities, demonstrates how no symbol alone—including music or any of its individual components—can definitively trigger its onset, with Blacking pondering whether music is “powerless without the reinforcement of a special set of social circumstances?” (1974, 45). In his seminal work on music and trance, Rouget similarly states that music cannot trigger trance on its own by connecting the two through a conditioned reflex, since “the triggering of trance by music is subject to so many circumstantial restrictions” (1985, 179). Similarly, as Berliner notes with regard to the bira ceremony, efforts to trigger possession can sometimes fail even when the best musicians are involved (1981, 199). However, to reiterate, although death-defying or death-delaying sonic components often rely on contextualizing experiences in order for them to have effect, practitioners nonetheless strive to maintain these particular components more intently over others.

Many of these death-defying components may also be amplified further through other symbols occurring within the same sacred sound expression. Shona musicians often use gourd resonators for their mbiras, adding intensity to their sound (Berliner 1981, 10); some Diné chant ceremonies add visual elements to the healing modeled by chant texts through sand paintings (Berlo 2011, 12); the Mbuti prefer metal drainpipes as molimo trumpets both because the pipes can produce the necessary sound and because they are more durable than wooden materials (Turnbull 1961, 76); and the Murid who sing Bamba’s qasa’id—rather than simply recite them—do so because, to them, “singing can be a form of studying, a form of learning, a form of knowing” (Dang 2013, 84). These efforts to emphasize or embellish particular death-defying components

through the use of other musical components attest to the importance attributed to the core components being emphasized.

In summation, sacred sound expressions demonstrate different ways of resisting change, as particular sonic components within these expressions demonstrate greater temporal stability than others. These components are not always the same across cultures, as some groups may seek to maintain sacred texts, whereas others prefer certain instrumentations or sounds. Although it is possible that these temporally stable components have remained stable over time due to happenstance, there may be commonalities between these components across cultures based on the roles that they fulfill within their respective societies. The temporally stable sonic components discussed here have various death-defying functions, meaning that they either have a direct role in reifying death-defying supernatural realities, or are seen as having power to at least delay death. Both functions are essential for mitigating death anxiety within the context of an affiliated cultural worldview, which imbues the human experience with “order, predictability, meaning, and permanence” (Greenberg et al. 1986, 196). This is but one interpretation, however, hopefully one suggesting that just as there are socio-cultural mechanisms that encourage musical change, there may be similar mechanisms that encourage musical stability as well.

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Listening to Ruin: Aural Hauntings and the Phenomenology of Dereliction

JOHNATHAN RHODES

They moved through the ruined city in silence, their boots making soft sounds on broken pavement. The buildings rose around them like tombstones, each one holding a history, a ghost, a song long since sung.

–Justin Cronin, *The Passage*

Silence created an opening, an invitation to speak or to remember. In that silence, I could almost hear the building dreaming, remembering all the people who had passed through it.

–Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

Introduction: Ghosts in the Acoustic Field

Places haunt us, just as much as we haunt places. Over the past few decades, there has been considerable scholarly research into the intimate relationship between sound and place. From Steven Feld's (1996) theories on "acoustemology of place resounding" to Tim Ingold's (2007) anti-soundscape sentiment on the use of sound in placemaking, the established scholarly sentiment is that sound is an integral part of the phenomenological construction of place. However, as pointed out by Iain Foreman in "Spectral Soundscapes: Exploring Spaces of Remembrance through Sound," these approaches tend to prioritize the human *presence* in these places, often overlooking how these environments are perceived as transient places of passing; places that evolve, decay, and erode under the passage of time (2014, 1–2). Rather than existing as a static acoustic environment, such sonically-charged places are defined by the hauntings of the people and objects who used to dwell within them, an uncanny revival of memories which are both created in the present and revived from our past experiences.¹ Thus, presence in acoustic environments must also consider "the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences" that emerge when the spatial environment and its acoustic atmosphere are distanced from the humanistic presence that once

¹ I am using the term "uncanny" as outlined by Freud in his work "Das Unheimliche." In this work, Freud defines the term as a "species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and has been long familiar." The term uncanny refers to the unsettling and eerie emotional response that arises when a once familiar environment becomes alien and disconnected. This intersection of the familiar and unfamiliar creates a sense of disorientation as previous experiences conflict with present realities.

defined them (Gordon as cited in Foreman 2014, 1). Sound, an already ethereal and transitory phenomenon, haunts these abandoned environments, leaving an atmospheric aura that hangs over empty rooms and forgotten surfaces.

Just as humans experience the movement of time, places also exist in a temporal field beset by constantly changing horizons. In “The Future in Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure,” Akhil Gupta questions the traditional understanding of buildings as static objects, arguing that infrastructure is a continuously evolving process characterized by “multiple temporalities, open futures, and the constant presence of decay and ruination” (2018, 62). Regarding these buildings, spaces, and objects as independent beings with their own agency, Gupta argues that infrastructure exists in multiple overlapping constructions of time and space which extend from their planning and conception through their inevitable ruination and collapse. When viewed through the theories on atmosphere as provided by Riedel (2019), Schmitz (1998), and Bhome (1995), ruined places can be seen as vessels for aesthetic and affective environments that coincide with a network of ever-evolving temporalities. Bhome’s theories on the atmospheric imbue of objects and architecture take on new meaning when considering the process of construction and decay in shaping the atmosphere of collectively occupied places. Ruined and abandoned buildings preserve these characteristics of urban atmosphere beyond their useful lifespan, sustaining their mnemonic presence beyond the timeframe of human interaction.

Defined by the mnemonic traces of their former lives and the remnants of the material environments that dwell within them, I argue that ruined environments function as continuously evolving loci of collective memory, which is sustained through acoustic hauntings and uncanny atmospheres. Ruined soundscapes create an environment where temporality and spatiality collapse, creating a fragmented phenomenological experience of overlapping acoustic fields. These atmospheres continuously evolve through the process of ruination, creating new soundscapes superimposed on the mnemonic legacy of their past selves. Hauntings, uncanny atmospheres, and spectral geographies can occur anywhere regardless of current usage, intent, or degree of ruination. However, as Tim Edensor demonstrated, the dilapidated state of these places and their detachment from their traditional modes of use pushed these phenomenological specters to the forefront of our perceptual experience (2004, 845–846). This foregrounding of absence affords the ability to reevaluate our current modes of being and our relationship with urban places. By viewing this project from the combined perspectives of urban anthropology, sound studies, and

atmospheric studies, this paper will illuminate the multifaceted ways in which atmospheric soundscapes function as an evolving process of human and post-human interactions. While there is increasing academic interest in urban ruins, few studies focus on their sonic elements.

Hauntings of Past Selves and Present Others

In his landmark work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, French philosopher and sociologist Michel de Certeau argued that places are “haunted by many different spirits, spirits one can invoke or not, for haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (de Certeau as cited in Edensor 2004, 829). Primarily dealing with the methods used by individuals to subvert dominant systems of control, de Certeau explores how memories become inscribed upon urban places through a complex interplay between official structures of remembrance and vernacular resistances to the established historical narrative. While this work focuses on the power dynamics between people who engage with shared urban places, de Certeau outlines the multifaceted ways in which memory becomes spatialized through navigation, cultural reinforcement, and the establishment of memorials, landmarks, and signs. Beyond the material constructions of history, echoes of the past accumulate in the crevices of the present. Stone is worn down, brass becomes polished under the touch of countless hands, and dust accumulates in forgotten recesses; all invoking ghosts of past histories that are sustained, or in some cases simply overlooked, in the present time. As outlined by Casey in his article “How to Get From Space to Place in a Short Amount of Time”:

The phenomenological face of the matter is that space and time come together in place. Indeed, they arise from the experience of the place itself. Rather than being separate but equal cosmic parameters – as we believe when we say . . . that “space is the order of co-existence” and “time the order of succession” . . . - space and time are themselves coordinated and co-specified in the common matrix provided by the place (Casey 1998, 36).

More than just locations, these environments are an event which serves as a nexus of past and present (36). Enshrined in place, these mnemonic signifiers guide our being towards the possibilities of the future, as engaging with memories of the past “temporalizes as a future which makes present in the process of having been” (Heidegger 1972, 463).

Like physical representations of the past, sound also has the potential to preserve, enshrine, and sustain hauntings of past experiences. Embodying Herman Schmitz's definition of "half-things" or *habdinge*, sounds impact our lived experiences without having a material or physical presence (Riedel 2015, 89). Per Schmitz, half-things are quasi objective phenomena that have an affective effect upon the felt body despite having no material or physical characteristics. This melding of object and affect allows half-objects like sound, smell, and atmosphere to establish a unified sensory experience despite their fleeting and disparate nature. Like other half-things, sound is an inherently spectral phenomenon. As David Toop describes, sound is:

a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory. The intangibility of time is uncanny – a phenomenal presence both in the head, at its point of source and all around – so never entirely distinct from auditory hallucinations. The close listener is like a medium who draws out substance from that which is not entirely there. (Toop 2010, xv).

Just as humans dwell within places, we also dwell within sound. Not only does it surround us, but it also envelops and encapsulates our experience both internally and externally. As described by Merleau-Ponty, sound "insinuates a new dimension across visible space" which colors our interpretation of the world and, through it, our interpretation of both past and future (Merleau-Ponty as cited in Krueger 2024, 5). However, while objects and material constructs are merely situated within places, sound reinforces this spectral dimension by moving through it. As with humans and animals, sound traverses both space and time, transitioning from a point of origin towards its inevitable death and dissipation. While less hindered by physical boundaries than human movement, sound reverberates through places, bouncing off walls, permeating the fissures that exist in our constructed environment. Humans function as an antenna-body, adopting the nomenclature of Toby Heys, acting as receivers of this otherwise spectral experience (Heys 2020, 49). Like mediums sensing ghosts, we experience sound as it travels through spatial environments, haunting the world as it passes through unseen.

Just as ghosts and phantoms are commonly associated with abandoned houses and decaying places, urban ruins serve as gatherings for a multitude of sensory and acoustic hauntings. These sensory revenants invade our field of perception immediately upon entering these derelict places. The air becomes still, the smell of must



Figure 1. Abandoned interior. West Newton, MN. Tom Fisk, 2021.

and decay envelopes our olfactory perception, and our mouths are filled with the metallic taint of mist and rust. The sounds of absence fill our auditory field as the echoes of our footsteps reverberate throughout empty rooms, making these places seem much larger than their spatial boundaries indicate. As we traverse these places, the abyssal murmurs of our dilapidated environment fill the void, stirred to existence by the intrusion of the living. The creak of decaying floorboards, the crunch of gravel and broken glass underfoot, and the groan of pipes and door hinges emerge like phantoms from their slumber, filling the aural void with the discord of past and present. Wind whistles through the air, intertwining with the memories of voices long forgotten and sustaining the haunting reverberances of those who previously dwelled within these places. In these ruins, sound does not merely dwell; it lingers in empty rooms and clings to forgotten surfaces. Sustained by the sensory and tactile remnants of a forgotten era, sound haunts these places and those who dwell within them. To invoke the specter of Heidegger, ruins act as gatherings of sounds unvoiced, only to be revealed when one disturbs its veiled slumber (Heidegger 1971, 170).

Scholars in phenomenology, urban anthropology, and human geography use the term “haunting” to describe the involuntary arousal of memories that emerge through human engagement with the world (DeSilvery and Edensor 2012; Halloway 2024). While this can be considered a poetic representation of a phenomenological experience, the characterization of memories as ghosts having a presence in our world effectively articulates the ways in which memories are invoked in a lived environment. As defined by Edensor, a haunting or ghost “is a disembodied entity which provokes memories, conjuring up half recognizable worlds through the empathetic contact it makes” (2004, 835). These ghosts unveil

themselves within the discord created between our expectations and our present reality. Two complimentary discourses surrounding hauntings have emerged: one emphasizing the remnants of histories found in everyday life and the other focusing on their absence. However, the common consensus between these discourses is that mnemonic hauntings are involuntary (842). A creak in the floorboards invokes the history of a decaying house, an old song playing on the radio bringing memories of past performances or situations to life; these sensory experiences involuntarily bring specters of the past into our waking reality. Acoustic hauntings fold time and history in on themselves, bringing the past into direct contact with present experience, further influencing future realities.

Haunting exists in the discord between *presence* and *absence*, creating an unsettling and uncanny experience as our sense of place and time becomes disturbed by the conflux of past, present, and unrealized futures (Foreman 2014; Edensor 2004). This theoretical approach in human geography draws inspiration from the writings of Jacques Derrida and his work *The Specters of Marx*, which argues that historical events, processes, and cultures haunt our present experiences through a combination of historical remnants and the absences created by unrealized futures (Wylie 2017, 172). Derrida coined the term *hauntology* to articulate this ethereal experience, arguing that the traditional ideas of place, time, and being are defined by what is absent, deferred, or excluded. He directly calls into question Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* or "being-there," stating that "there is no *Dasein* of the specter but there is not *Dasein* without the uncanniness, without some strange familiarity, of some specter" (Derrida as cited in Wylie 2017, 172). Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world is fundamentally linked to the temporality of existence where one is always "being-towards-death" (Chemero 2015, 75). This forward motion privileges the future in its orientation toward the unrealized potential laid out before us. While Heidegger acknowledges that one's present experience is impacted by historical presence, characterized by the pervasiveness of cultures, habits, and traditions, these ideas do not haunt our present being in the same way that Derrida's specters haunt our world (67). Conversely, Derrida's concept of being is marred by instability, constantly influenced by the incessant echoes of those which are absent, excluded, or lost (Wylie 2017, 172). Understanding of both self and place is inherently comprised of what is absent, resulting in a state of being that is always in flux as these unrealized futures conflict with present realities. In short, our ontological being is equally constituted by what is absent and present in our current reality.

Tim Edensor uses the hauntings emanating from urban ruins to articulate the discord between presence and absence in everyday sensory experience (Edensor 2005, 7). His research primarily focuses on the remnants of material objects in derelict urban environments, using the haunting that emerges from their presence as an expression of the values of the community in which they can be found. As explored by Edensor (2015) and Gupta (2015), social constructions of waste and excess are value judgments, and these



Figure 2. Old typewriter and TV set.
Joshua Tree, CA. Allie Feeley, 2023.

urban ruins and the abandoned artifacts they contain reflect the social dynamics of the communities that used to dwell within them (Gupta 2015, 23). These relics, like the places that were forgotten, were abandoned because they were deemed no longer useful to the societies behind their construction. However, Edensor rejects the characterization of these ruins and their material inhabitants as waste, arguing that these abandoned environments produce new concepts of place that “critique ... contemporary processes of ordering urban space” (Edensor 2015, 5). These new constructions of place and identity stem from the discord between the remnants of objects left behind, and the absence of objects where they typically should be found. Abandoned workstations, desks, break rooms, and factory floors all sustain the haunted memories of the individuals who previously navigated these places, and the lingering sounds of these ruined places were abandoned because their sources were not valued enough to relocate. In ruins, material and acoustic waste find themselves nestled in a forgotten recess of the world, waiting for an unsuspecting person to haunt.

As articulated by Edensor, hauntings are not a singular or uniform event (2004, 840). Neither places nor bodies are static constructs, and memories cannot remain stable because they are afflicted by changes in habit, bodies, and the material conditions of their environment (Donohoe 2014, 6). Additionally, the interpretation of these places is in a constant state of alteration as

they are continuously defined by a combination of past experiences and social conditioning. As Lefebvre (1974), Donohoe (2014), and Trigg (2012) articulate, the correlation between memory and place is heavily impacted by social conditioning and wider cultural influences. As social beings in a constantly evolving world, our perceptions of the past are in a constant state of flux, resulting in “knotted, intertwined threads of memory” that become spatialized through repeated engagement with the physical world (Edensor 2004, 834). Casey refers to this phenomenon as a “matrix of memory,” where random recollections, or hauntings, are invoked as we traverse through places (Casey as cited in Edensor 2004, 834). However, Casey assumes the stability of place, and his theories of places as storehouses to “hold and preserve” memory conflict with the ever-changing nature of place (Donohoe 2014, 14). As Edensor and Donohoe argue, places function like palimpsests, which bear traces of different beings (Edensor 2004, 835; Donohoe 2014, 21). Neither place nor memory is stable, and these places can be overwritten, hidden, and then revealed during changes in positionality and perspective. Sound, due to its temporal and ephemeral presence, is foundational to this constantly shifting perspective. Just as sights and smells invoke specific memories, the ever-evolving sonic environment both recalls past mnemonic experiences and creates new ones. Changes in the acoustic environment, or the absence of specific sounds, can either haunt our present experience or overwrite our memories entirely.

Sound is a recurring subject in the writings of urban anthropologists, cultural geographers, and ethnographers dealing with abandoned places. Understandably, the sources of sound that would have previously characterized these places have long since departed, leaving only “the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences” in their wake (Gordan as cited in Foreman 2014, 1). Absence, rather than presence, is the realm of the acoustic in the forgotten bastions of urban places. As Edensor and Foreman have articulated, abandoned places are often characterized by the absence of the material qualities that define their existence and establish a sense of place, “announcing their presence by the hole or shape or silhouette they leave behind” (Edensor 2005, 118). However, while the absence of material constructions often leaves some residue of their spectral presence—marked by bare spots, indentions on surfaces, and the accumulation of dust and debris that marks their absence like crime scene body outlines in a detective movie—sound and silence manifest as a purely ephemeral phenomenon that rarely leaves traces in the material world. However, this does not mean that material presences have no impact on our sonic recollection of places. Paradoxically, we may not be able to hear silence *per se*, but we can see it. As described by Tonkiss:

Stumbling across silence in the city ... can be like uncovering a secret... empty space that does talk back is as evocative as the hush that falls over the crowd, the telephone that doesn't ring, the dog that doesn't bark (2016, 247).

Empty rooms can recall the sonic visages of the voices who used to embody them. Abandoned industrial environments are filled with the absence of the machines that once hummed in these places. Speaker systems, fire alarms, and computers, long since left to rust, still invoke the memories of the sounds they were originally intended to project. Not only are these sounds spectrally present, but they are also brought to the foreground of our perspective experience through their noticeable absence (Johansen 2020, 289).

Due to the lack of acoustic stimulus, the construction of hauntings is heavily dependent on the memories of those who engage with these places. Like any other form of memory, the mnemonic experience of sound stems from one's active engagement with the world. It is defined by restraints placed on the past by cultural memories and official narratives. As Steven Feld explored, the act of engaging with one's spatial environment creates "a daily lesson in listening habits, a forceful demonstration of routinized, emplaced hearing as an embodied mastery of locality" (Feld 1998, 144). As one engages with the soundscapes of urban life, the sounds that constantly bombard our experience manifest as waystones that guide and orient us in our spatial environment. These are often reduced to "keynote sounds," sounds that exist in the background of our auditory experience and are very rarely called to the forefront of our perception (Feld 2015, 14; Schafer 2012, 104). While taking a background role in our perspective experience, these soundscapes ground our bodies in three-dimensional space and assist in our navigation through "the never-ending series of horizons configured by a living spatiality" (Koukal 2015, 173). When these auditory signifiers are removed, their memory persists as haunting illusions of sound as we navigate through environments. If we walk through an abandoned kitchen, we can still hear the clatter of cutlery on long-since removed stoneware, and walking through an abandoned factory will still invoke the hum of long-dormant machines. Sustained through time by a combination of personal habitus, cultural memory, and enculturation, the silences that emerge in the absence of sound still resonate with the memories of those who currently dwell within these places.

The mnemonic relationship with sound extends beyond a passive relationship with acoustic spatiality and background noises.

As we move through places, our consciousness is intentionally directed toward the objects, places, and sounds in our spatialized environment. Merleau-Ponty argues that the ability to engage and navigate through place, and by extension our ability to engage with the tools and objects that reside within them, is possible through the skills and habits of the lived body. This “body schema” “prefigures the possible experience of the world around us,” which allows us to engage with the “infinity of possible milieus” that emerge before our constantly shifting horizons (Chemero 2015, 104). Merleau-Ponty articulates his theory regarding motor intentionality as a haunting presence that extends beyond the body’s physical restraints. In his work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he characterizes the directing of one’s perception towards objects as a form of astral projection, arguing that “the gesture of reaching one’s hand out towards an object contains a reference to the object, not as a representation, but as this highly determinate thing toward which we are thrown, next to which we are through anticipation, and which we haunt” (Merleau-Ponty as cited in Chemero, 123). As Tim Ingold argues, the visualization of technical skills is the prerequisite to completing any task (Ingold 2022, 63). Haunting sounds emerge as a form of astral projection in a similar way. If a piano lies dormant or a keyboard remains untyped, we can project the sounds into the environment due to our culturally accumulated memory and our embodied technical skill. Objects that extend beyond our physical capabilities, such as sirens and machine sounds, can still be virtualized through our technical and tactile history with these objects. In a way, this technical engagement and projective experience allows us to haunt the very places that are currently haunting us.

Despite their characterization as empty voids filled by haunted specters, ruined and derelict buildings are not necessarily empty. As Edensor and Foreman both demonstrate, abandoned, forgotten, and derelict spaces are often filled with excess that finds new life in the voids that remain (Foreman 2014, 56). The waste that accumulates in forgotten voids demonstrates the societal value that communities place on both these places and the objects that dwell within them. Per Mary Douglas (1955), waste can be defined as matter out of place, matter that does not fit into the desired or intended context of its creation, just as noise is, in certain circumstances, sound out of place. Social constructions of noise follow a similar pattern. What constitutes noise is a value judgment and sounds that disrupt the pre-established and sanitized soundscapes of urban life are often rooted out and exorcised. Noise then becomes a phantom that is exorcised through the control of auditory space. However, in the derelict environment of urban ruins, this distinction between waste/matter and noise/sound becomes hard to distinguish due to their overlapping temporalities. While the sounds of urban life are

absent, the noises that were previously overshadowed come to the surface. The creak of rotting floorboards, the crunch of footsteps on broken tiles, and the wind that whispers through gaps in the walls, all the sounds that subtly underpin our sonic world, jutting up to fill the gaps left in the silence and intermingling with the memories left in their place.

Soundscape on the Edge of Recognition

In “The Future in Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure,” Akhil Gupta argues that urban constructions of all types are a continuous process of ruination that begins with their inception and construction, continuing until their inevitable collapse (Gupta 2018, 70). Rather than existing as static constructions that are “finished” when they reach a state of usefulness, infrastructure itself is a process of continuous ruination kept at bay by refurbishment, restoration, and the suspension of construction that leaves places in a state of incompleteness (70).² Viewing urban constructions as a process, rather than static objects, allows us to recognize the possibilities of these environments as they continue to evolve beyond the constraints of their intended purpose. Like the physical environment of these places, the soundscapes of buildings, infrastructure, and urban places are also subject to the push and pull of refurbishment and ruination. While these places are continuously supported by those who dwell within them, their soundscapes remain under the primary influence of human actors. While not necessarily static, the sustained upkeep of these environments allows for a sense of auditory stability. However, when their usefulness ceases and these buildings are left to decay, the sonic environments, like the buildings in which they can be found, continue to evolve as independent agents beyond the influence of human interaction.

According to Gupta, infrastructure embodies aspiration and visions for the future, and these sites of ruination facilitate a place where our forward-looking desires come into direct conflict with our present realities (68). Buildings are built with a predetermined assumption as to how they are going to be used, and with the belief that they will continue to operate as intended. Ruin subverts these preconceptions, creating a state of temporal and spatial imbalance in which our aspirations for the future conflict with the ruined buildings we currently navigate. As argued by Dylan Trigg, “this paradox in the structure of experience establishes a disorientated atmosphere, in which things become otherworldly, fragmented, and above all,

² In this context, ruined spaces often have more in common with construction sites as they share similar states of incompleteness and ruination (72).

uncanny” (Trigg 2012). This “disjunction between reality and experience” is pushed to the forefront when one engages with ruined places as the disconnect between our expectations and reality becomes a central aspect of our experience (Trigg 2012).

The uncanny, or *unheimlich*, to adopt the Freudian terminology, is an emotional and affective experience of discomfort, namely a “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and has been long familiar” (Trigg 2012, 27). This “augmented familiarity” creates an atmosphere of unease that hangs over ruined spaces and, like dust and debris, accumulates in the forgotten recesses of urban life (27). These places are not uncanny despite their familiarity, but because of it, and this discord between our expectations and realities creates a sense of disorientation and alienation. As explored by Trigg, these uncanny feelings are a common part of everyday existence (25). As we are continuously influenced by memories, habits, and spatial movement, every engagement with a place is a new experience. Even something as simple as an object being slightly moved, or a different sound emanating from a television or a speaker, can invoke some subtle feeling of the uncanny. As Deleuze argued, memories are productions created in the present moment and are constructed through a combination of past experiences and one’s present environment (Deleuze 1988, 59). This poiesis of memory creates an ever-evolving virtual field of possibilities, and this mnemonic instability allows the uncanny to flourish. The further these places are removed from their intended state of being, the stronger these feelings of unease and uncertainty. In these urban ruins, the uncanny is “the mental space where temporality and spatiality collapse, where the arrested decay and potted, linear accounts of regulated sites of memory are confounded by ghostly imitations of an unfathomable past” (Edensor 2004, 836). In ruined places, this inconsistency between expectation and reality is pushed to the forefront of the perspective field. These fragments of past experiences elude a coherent narrative of remembrance, creating an uncanny environment where past and present collide.

Sound, an already ethereal presence, further reinforces this uncanny experience as it encapsulates our presence as we navigate through space. The absence of sounds foregrounds our perception due to their haunting presence, but the sounds that remain also serve as specters due to their unexpectedness. Footsteps still echo off walls, but the echoes are louder, longer, and encapsulate more of these spaces in their ruined states. Creaks in floorboards, the crunch of broken tiles, and the shuffling of dirt all object to our presence as we walk through decaying structures, disturbing the peace they have built over the years. In many cases, these sounds already existed amongst the soundscapes of their previous lives. Freed from their

sonic suppression, these sounds emerged to the surface of our perspective experience, allowing us to identify their sources as they embrace the voids of human absence. The sound of whiny door hinges might have already existed when humans dwelled within these spaces, but they were only brought to our attention when the absence of the wider soundscape allowed its voices to be heard. These sounds are a direct result of human activity; however, they would not be possible if the building itself had not already fallen into decay. While these sounds appear to be the lords of these forgotten spaces, hanging over abandoned ruins like an ethereal shadow, they are still subservient to the humans who enter their dilapidated domain. These sounds are the result of human presence just as much as they are of human absence, and the uncanny conflict between these two entities serves as a nexus to create new possibilities for these decaying places.

The continuously evolving nature of urban ruination throws this emplacement of cultural and embodied memories into a state of flux. As stated by Gupta, these spaces are not static sites that lay dormant after humans no longer have use for them (Gupta 2014, 73). They continue to decay and evolve regardless of human interaction. In the absence of humans, animals such as mice, birds, and insects find a home in abandoned places, and the sounds of their existence can be



Figure 3. Abandoned church entrance. Kocaeli, Turkey. Serra Eray, 2025

heard as one disturbs their ruined sanctuary. These places become homes to non-human entities, and the silence that emerged due to their abandonment affords these creatures a sense of security, as silence can often be equated to safety (Pijanowski 2024, 126–128). Again, as humans disturb their new dwelling, the scampering of claws on broken floorboards is added to the uncanny symphony of the ruined world. Plants also facilitate this uncanny disturbance of decaying spaces through their encroachment on human constructions. As Edward Casey and Michael Marder explored, plants are an inherently emplaced and unfurling presence. Rather than moving in and out of places, plants spread and dominate their

surroundings by becoming rooted in the decayed material environment of abandoned places (Casey and Marder 2024, 29–30). Vines, moss, and mold expand across these decaying structures, further dampening the echoes that reverberate in these soundscapes as they become more of a dominant presence. The rustling and crackling of leaves underfoot draw a sharp contrast with the remnants of human constructions and material culture, further influencing our ability to engage with these environments while reimagining them as a place of dwelling. Moss and leaves can muffle footsteps, while the inhabiting plants and animals can further erode the established environment, causing the acoustics of these buildings to slowly develop over time. No longer the sole dominion of humankind, these decaying soundscapes are slowly transformed by the non-human beings who currently dwell within them.³

In addition to redefining the soundscapes of decaying buildings, this intrusion of animal and plant sounds into the soundscapes of previously inhabited places erodes the divide between the constructed and natural auditory environments. As urban environments decay, the physical boundaries between the inside and outside world become increasingly porous. Windows break, doors rot and decay, and eventually walls, floors, and ceilings collapse, creating perforations that allow the external soundscape to seep into the constructed environment. Geophonic sounds such as wind and water echo throughout these auditory voids, becoming the most prominent sources of sound after these places are abandoned. Sound is triggered by movement; both wind and water are often the only major sources of movement in these places besides the wayward explorer or animal. However, these externally sourced sounds are not limited to geophonic or biophonic sources. The ubiquitous presence of human influences defines the Anthropocene, and noise pollution hangs over most urban environments like a noxious veil. Modern urban constructions are designed and built with this in mind, and buildings are constructed using specific materials and architecture to

³ The removal of objects that afford modern human existence and the intrusion of outside entities create a space that was once familiar but has become alien. Building on the theories of Husserl, Anthony Steinbock explores the dynamic interplay and tension that exists between the homeworld, the normative sphere of social and personal emplacement where one finds comfort, security, and safety, and the alienworld, the oppositional sphere that exists outside of our emplaced sense of being (Donohoe 2014, 14). A continuously evolving field, this distinction between the home and the otherworldly is a paradoxical relationship in which the stability of the homeworld is reinforced and scaffolded in its opposition to the alien. In urban ruins, this interplay between home and alienworlds becomes increasingly volatile as the soundscapes of the homeworld are slowly overtaken by what was once considered an outside entity, threatening the safety and security of a previously secure place.

contain the internal soundscape and repel outside acoustic sources (Tompson 2002, 331–332). However, due to their specialized materials and construction, this acoustic infrastructure depends on continued maintenance and specialized upkeep. When this support is removed, anthroponic sources of sound meld with the internal soundscapes of ruined places. Sounds of highways and airplanes coalesce with that of wind and rain, creating an uncanny environment where the distinction between interior/exterior and natural/urban collapses.

Despite their constant state of ruination, buildings and infrastructure are expected to be static objects that endure the decay of time. Like any other tools or objects, we place our faith in these buildings, expecting them to work as intended and, in this case, maintain the boundaries between home and alien, here and there. Buildings are expected to provide a place of shelter and safety, which affords people the ability to dwell within them. As Heidegger argues in his aptly titled work “Building, Dwelling, and Thinking,” “to be human means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell . . . It also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine” (Heidegger as cited in Donohoe 2014, 12). Soundscapes are an integral part of this homemaking mentality, as the familiar sounds of hearth and home facilitate a loci of memory that establishes lived dwellings as an inhabited place in opposition to outside influences. In ruined places, the clash between home and alien soundscapes creates an uncanny discord where one’s desire to dwell in places is confronted by the alien acoustic stimulus.

Ruins are places where human habitation is no longer the central focus. In short, the tools and objects that we use for shelter have broken as they no longer serve their intended purpose of keeping us safe and separating us from the outside world. Sounds are one of the most prominent indicators that something is wrong. The appearance or absence of a sound that is not expected indicates that something is broken. The crack in a floorboard indicating an unstable surface or the gush of water from a broken pipe serve as signifiers of these places’ decapitated state. Sounds stemming from broken pipes further this uncanny acoustic intrusion as they originate from intentionally hidden sources. Pipes, wiring, and sewage afford modern utilities without which urban living would not be possible. The process of ruination exposes the underlying structural and material properties of our urban environment which are intended to remain hidden, exposed by the emergence of sounds that are not supposed to be there. It is only through their derelict state that we can recognize their absence.

While in their dilapidated state, ruins give us the opportunity to explore these places through a detached lens, allowing us to break down their material and social characteristics to understand the ways in which they impact our society. Adopting the Heideggerian terminology, their broken state reveals the object's *being*, allowing us to analyze its material and social properties. Heidegger uses the terms ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*) and present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) to differentiate between objects that serve their intended usefulness and the broken



Figure 4. Abandoned cathedral.
Chicago. Nachele Nocom, 2019.

ones existing as a detached entity (Chemero 2015, 59). When dwellings function normally, we hardly notice their presence and their soundscapes devolve into the keynote sounds that underpin our background experience. However, when objects break, their impact on our state of being is unconcealed as their broken state is broadcast across the ruined soundscape. Because of the slow state of ruination, these buildings blur the distinction between the *zuhandenheit* and *vorhandenheit* as their derelict state reveals their presence and impact on our state of being while also affording the emergence of new horizons.

This discord between expectation and reality, embodied memory and new experiences, results in this feeling of uncanniness as we engage with ruined places. Uncanniness is understood as an “effect,” a “felt experience that disturbs the body, resulting in a departure from the everyday” (Trigg 2012, 27).⁴ Dylan Trigg argues this feeling is:

Based in the disjunction of opposed twins – familiar/unfamiliar, near/far, homely/unhomely – the uncanny circumvents laws of logic, yet at the same time frees itself from the need to be resolved of its paradoxical status. At its genesis, the uncanny takes up

⁴ Trigg specifically uses the term “effect” not “affect” in this description to emphasize its physical impact on the lived body.

residence in the manifold space between experience and thought, perfectly at ease with its ability to invoke repulsion and allure in the subject experiencing the uncanny (27).

Heidegger argues that this feeling of anxiety is foundational to our being-in-the-world as it demonstrates the limit of our understanding of the world that exists beyond human construction. This anxiety is a state where our assumptions of the world are suspended, and “we fail to be drawn into the world” (Chemero 2015, 63). This uncanniness is not limited to ruined places but is a common effect of our daily experience with the lived world. Something as simple as sound out of place or an empty room can trigger these feelings of detachment and anxiety, dissolving the familiarity of everyday life. Like Gupta’s theories on ruination, the uncanny emerges as a continuum of being where one’s past connection to place is slowly dissipated while new horizons are opened. Sound, an already ethereal and metaphysical experience, reinforces this uncanny presence as it both facilitates this disconnect while simultaneously grounding and orienting us within its new reality (Edensor 2007, 224).

Echoes in the Shape of Air

As explored by Riedel, sound is foundational to the construction of atmospheres due to their already ephemeral nature. This “non-dimensional, location-less, expansive” nature of sound not only hangs on surfaces of our environment but permeates into the material conditions of the world, imbuing them with symbolic and affective meaning (Riedel 2019, 21). Not only does sound exist in places, but it also lingers in the environment through a combination of personal and collective memory. Through sound, memories can be offloaded onto our material environment, effectively serving as depositories and gathering places for meaning, ideals, and belief, effectively holding together ideals in environments while simultaneously establishing boundaries between distinct places. This “spatially poured out atmosphere” intertwines and melds our perceptions of place (Schmitz as cited in Riedel 2019, 17). Merleau-Ponty describes this process as the “sedimentation of lived experience,” arguing that the memories imbued in these spaces eventually serve as scaffolding for future manifestations of emplaced memory (Rump 2013, 146–147). As articulated by Edward Casey:

Moving in or through a given place, the body imports its own emplaced past into its present experience: its local history is a history of locals. This very

importation of past places occurs simultaneously with the body's ongoing establishment of directionality, level, and distance, and indeed influences these latter in myriad ways. Orientation in place (which is what is established by these three factors) cannot be continuously affected *de novo* but arises with the ever-lengthening shadow of our bodily past. (Casey 1987, 22).

Adopting the nomenclature of Deleuze, Riedel uses the term territorialization to describe how these places are imbued with atmospheric meaning through repetition and consistency (Riedel 2015, 82). Consistent sonic practices,



Figure 5. Abandoned warehouse. Koln, Germany. Timo Scheiler, 2023.

specifically those that are already imbued with emotional characteristics, act as acoustic scaffolding that reinforces atmospheric presence. In ruined places, the atmosphere of these past lives is preserved as the buildings begin to decay. The hauntings of past sonic environments, despite their absence in the ruins, sustain the atmosphere of these places as a haunting relic of their past selves.

However, these haunting atmospheric presences continue to dominate these ruined places, further shaping our spatial perception and encouraging specific movements and behaviors for those who enter their domain. Riedel argues that atmospheres stimulate unity and homogeneity within places as they continue to guide our actions, emotions, and affective experiences (Riedel 2019, 19). The homogenizing atmosphere attempts to unify the collective experience of all those dwelling within these places regardless of their personal emotions. However, this atmospheric dominance is defined by the collective actions of those who previously dwelled within them. As Merleau-Ponty (1945), Heidegger (1972), and Casey (1987) have all argued, this world is one that we are “thrown” into. It exists as an external entity, shaping our perceptions, beliefs, and mannerisms as we engage with it. This “atmosphere of humanity” lords over our actions and behaviors, orienting our perspective in space and time,

guiding our culturally defined habitus (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 405).⁵ Suonpera, taking a post-phenomenological and spatial-morphological perspective, argues that pedestrian flows and collective movement create and maintain urban atmospheres (Suonpera 2012, 3). This movement creates a rhythmic structure of lived experience which further entrenches lived behaviors in the atmospheres of our environment. In ruined places, this dominating atmosphere continues to guide our movements and behaviors through its haunting presence. While the visual and acoustic waystones may have previously been absent, their atmospheric legacy continues to guide our engagement with abandoned places.

According to Riedel, this ability to govern those who dwell within them demonstrates their existence as an entity separate from the felt-body. Like place, environment, and the social-cultural aspects of humanity, atmosphere functions as a being “out there” in the world rather than an inward, subjective construction of our perspectives (Riedel 2019, 24). Trigg takes this physical detachment one step further, arguing that beings in our environment not only guide and influence our lives but ultimately imbue themselves in our minds and bodies, transforming us and establishing our very identity. Referring to this intrusion as “alien flesh,” and adopting the late works of Marleau-Ponty, Trigg argues that we are touched and manipulated by the environments in which we live, stating that:

The involuntary absorption of liminal and transitional places saturates the self with the otherness of place. As a result, the memory of having been in a leveled-out zone disrupts the radical duality between place and non-place through bringing both realms into a third space; namely the strange space of the body, the receiver of both foreign and native places simultaneously, and thus, fundamentally, a mutation (Trigg 2012, 155).

This transformative experience, described by Trigg as an “un-place,” coincides with our built habitus and creates new experiences as we engage places and atmospheres repeatedly over time (155–156). We

⁵ These constructs of habitual and cultural memory are further refined by the constructed nature of urban places. Due to the homogenization of urban life in western neoliberal capitalist societies, these places become sanitized of undesired influences which standardizes the orientation and perspectives of all of those who engage with constructed place. Adopting the nomenclature of Appadurai, Edensor uses the term “memoryscape” to describe the ways in which memories are regulated in lived places, where the “authoritative meanings about the past” are regulated by preestablished constructions of place.

serve as a host for this invading presence, which in turn allows us to influence the world around us, contributing to the atmospheres in which we dwell. Atmosphere and place, both spatialized concepts, facilitate this complex interplay between being and environment. As we constantly evolve, grow, and learn through our engagement with places and atmospheres, our identity and sense of self remain in a state of flux as we expand through our constantly shifting horizons. Sound, as the mediator between atmosphere, self, and others, serves as the nexus for this evolution to take place, acting as a catalyst for “social coherence and spheres of belonging” through collective engagement with place (155).

Ruined places reinforce this detached nature as their atmosphere continues to evolve beyond the presence of those who previously inhabited them. Animals, plants, graffiti artists, and the slow decay of time slowly reimagine these atmospheres into individually unique experiences. Sound, the once-dominant mediator between self, atmosphere, and environment, becomes a new ethereal presence as the ghosts of past soundscapes overlap with the new, modulating our experience and creating an uncanny relationship with the world. As Riedel points out, these auditory atmospheres “do not simply manifest as objects in the world . . . but are modes of the world” (Riedel 2019, 5). Atmospheres, like the places they can be found, are not static environments. Rather, they constantly shift and change through both human and post-human processes. These atmospheres hold affective experiences that augment our perceptions of the world around us and, while they are primarily linked to human experience, continue to evolve beyond human interaction, creating a continuum of experience when we reenter these decaying atmospheres.

These decayed atmospheres, due to their prominence in urban locations and the prevalence of these environments in popular culture and media, have resulted in the auditory aesthetic of derelict places becoming a commonly known soundscape. Post-apocalyptic movies, television series, and video games like *The Walking Dead*, *The Last of Us*, *Fallout*, and *Metro 2033* use sound as a substitute for physical stimulus to orient those watching or playing within virtual abandoned environments. The reverberances of distant echoes, dripping sounds of water, and the whistling of wind are sounds commonly used to provide a sense of emptiness in places devoid of human interaction. This interest in abandoned places has fostered the rise of ruin tourism and urban exploration, and there are many YouTube and social media channels dedicated to the exploration of abandoned environments. Ironically, once hidden and reviled due to their lack of value, these abandoned places have once again become commodified through their representation in the populist media genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. This capitalization of ruin exorcises

the haunting presence of these ruined places as their sounds are slowly reincorporated into the modern mediascape.

Conclusion: When Time Falls Apart

As previously stated, the soundscapes of urban ruins create an uncanny environment that throws our sense of time and space into flux. Edward Casey argues that “space and time come together in place,” becoming an “event” that intersects the spatial and temporal dimensions of lived experience (Casey 1996, 36–37). Defined by our memories and future aspirations, places bracket our realities and ground us in a geographic state of being. However, in these ruined and dilapidated constructions,

our perceptions of time and place are thrown into an uncanny state of flux due to the constant presence of haunting echoes, uncanny atmospheres, and the non-human actors who currently dwell within them. Ruined places are environments where our concepts of time and place collapse. Invoking the specter of *Hamlet*, Dylan Trigg describes ruins as places where time itself is “out of joint” (Trigg 2012). Ruins are a continuum of change, places where the past, present, and unwritten futures intermingle as Casey’s “matrix of memory” overlaps with our ever-changing horizons as we navigate through derelict places. Riedel uses the term *mode*, adopting the nomenclature of music theory, to describe how atmosphere augments our reality by filtering our perceptual experience of the world (Riedel 2019, 5). Just as the music of Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky evoke ambiguity and instability through their polymodal characteristics, the discordant harmonies of ruined places build new acoustic worlds that tantalize the ear with their uncanny discords. The sounds of decay and ruination intermingle with the haunting presence of past urban soundscapes, creating new melodies that guide us through these derelict places. Sound is foundational to our ability to



Figure 6. Abandoned hospital.
Beelitz, Germany. Laura
Meinhardt, 2024.

orient ourselves in spatial environments, and these overlapping harmonies of past and present simultaneously ground and uproot us from the temporal field in which we find ourselves.

By viewing urban soundscapes through the lens of ruination and decay, we can begin to understand how these auditory environments function as a process, rather than merely a location where sounds and silences are collected. This continuum of overlapping horizons and temporal discord is recognized in a wide variety of urban settings. Construction sites, back alleys, ruined buildings, and marginalized neighborhoods are places that are overlooked and forgotten by dominant political and social constructs. Recognizing the similarity between the soundscapes of these marginalized and ignored places can reveal what is both valued by society and what is relegated to the forgotten corners of the world. However, as explored above, these places are all subject to a continual ruination that slowly transforms their physical and acoustic properties. The process of ruination functions as a form of "*aletheia*," or unconcealment, in which the hidden truth of the world is revealed (Heidegger 1954, 318). These dwellings were constructed around those who used to dwell within them, building a world where one can dwell in safety and security. But after these gods have fled, the ruined remnants they leave behind continue this process of unconcealment, reflecting the hidden, forgotten, and abandoned traces of humanity in the voids that they leave behind (Heidegger 2006, 27). As the walls decay and the boundaries between places are dissolved, the underlying structure of the built environment is revealed as the hidden crevices of our world meld with the remnants of past places of dwelling. Like a sculpture revealing the statue trapped within the stone, the inevitable weight of time reveals the hidden structures of our lived reality (15). The "thingness" of these places is the process of ruination itself, as it discloses the unassailable truth of our constructed environment. Everything leads to ruin.

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