



**Alberto de la Rocha**

## **Paisajes de Tiempo: Ventanas al Mundo**

### **Landscapes of Time: Windows to the World**

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#### **Resumen**

##### **Paisajes de Tiempo: Ventanas al Mundo**

Este artículo explora la dialéctica entre lugar, espacio y tiempo a través de la percepción auditiva experimentada desde una ventana. Durante la pandemia del Covid-19, muchos de nosotros pasamos semanas de encierro durante el estado de alarma. Las ventanas de nuestros hogares han sido la única forma de contacto con el mundo exterior. Hace unos años, Katherine Norman creó el proyecto intermedial *Window (para John Cage)* (2012), inspirado en John Cage, un músico interesado en explorar el potencial del sonido ambiental, cuyo centenario se celebró ese mismo año. El proyecto recibió el Premio New Media Writing 2012. Este artículo examina la fundamentación semiótica del sonido y sus estructuras afectivas.

**Palabras clave:** nostalgia, paisaje urbano, pérdida, Katherine Norman, semiótica, ventanas.

#### **Abstract**

##### **Landscapes of Time: Windows to the World**

This paper explores the dialogue between location, place, space and time through aural perception experienced from a window. During the Covid-19 pandemic, most of us have spent many weeks in lockdown. Our home windows have been the only form of contact with the external world. Some years ago Katherine Norman created the intermedial project *Window (for John Cage)* (2012), inspired by John Cage, a musician interested in the potential of ambient sound, on the year of the centenary of his birth. It was awarded the

2012 New Media Writing Prize. This paper examines the semiotic grounding of sound and its affective structures.

**Key words:** cityscape, nostalgia, Katherine Norman, semiotics, windows.

The term nostalgia comes from Greek *nostos* "homecoming," and *algos/algia* "pain, grief, distress", and signals a severe homesickness for the past that can apply to many contexts. It is interesting that it carries significant spatial connotations even when it also refers to a perception of temporality. This paper discusses these duplicities in the context of a volume entitled *Landscapes of Loss*, whose title also captures the ambiguity of spatiotemporal absences. If the etymology of the term 'nostalgia' points to spatial aspects even though it refers to temporal occurrences it is because time is an abstract concept that can only be represented as a quasi-spatial dimension, as the ground-breaking study on cognitive metaphor, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, demonstrated.

Let's start this paper with the reminder that every aspect of human life is fundamentally temporal. From the moment of birth to that of death, human experience changes in and through time. The preposition 'in' refers to the fact that physiologically, humans, like all biological beings, function in relation to circadian clocks that regulate all biological functions. Sleep patterns, metabolic rhythms, breathing, heartbeat and other motor functions, desires (hunger, mating etc.) are all time-dependent. Human chemistry is tuned to internal rhythms. The term 'through' indicates that there is an orientation, duration and succession, to time. Human cognitive operations, including our levels of attention and concentration, conscious and unconscious memory and, of course, speech, are also temporally dependent (Wittman, 2016: 80ff). The measuring of time in linear patterns seems to be a ubiquitous feature of consciousness, speech and writing; involving the location of events and actions in a temporal semiotic scheme, a signifying chain. This dynamism is inherent to the flow of conscious experiences; a time that is always 'tensed', relative to the perspective of a given subject, situated in the flow.

The unconscious brain, and its emotional content, seems to have non-linear, more episodic patterns, and experiences of temporality that adjust to the intensity of feelings. The order of time, its linear succession, is a particularly salient feature of conscious states and of discourse. Humans love orderly routines and their actions are oriented to the future, since it is not possible to change the past. The emotional brain can alter all these states and modify the experience of temporality, causing time to be felt differently when we are

enjoying ourselves or if we are bored. As we grow older, time seems to move faster, and this appears to be directly related to the amount of past experience in our brains. In any case, time is experienced looking back from the present (direct experience) to the past (memory), and from the present (direct experience) forward to the future (expectation).

Svetlana Boym, author of *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), explained that nostalgia, unlike melancholia, is a product of both individual and collective memory, but that it can have past and future orientations. According to Boym, there are two types of nostalgia: “Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately.” (“Nostalgia and Its Discontents” 13) Boym sees nostalgia as co-dependent on technology and as a defence mechanism against the accelerated rhythms of modern life.

It seems to me that this understanding of nostalgia can also explain the distancing that instrumentalizes the use of the prefix ‘post’ in order to modify the ‘modern’ so that the movement of progress, seem ‘other’. Linda Hutcheon has argued that “our contemporary culture is indeed nostalgic. Some parts of it—postmodern parts—are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony.” (206). These positions seem to defend a linear and irreversible construction of time, related to our instruments of consciousness. But we know that time does not always move forward. Time is more akin to music, in this sense. It can acquire depth and resonate in one position following recursive and replicable forms of organization; amplifying and growing, without advancing, as in techniques of mindfulness or in dreams. This is the kind of time experience and nostalgic encounter that many of us have experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the kind also suggested by Katherine Norman in her project *Window (for John Cage)*.

My aim in this paper is to show that, beyond the experiences of longing and belonging, nostalgia is very much grounded in human neurophysiology. In this sense, I would like to explore the organicity of the concept; not necessarily related to a linear schema of return to the loss of some divine paradise and primal time, within a prospective and progressive ordering of events. I will argue that nostalgia can be explored as a non-intentional re-appearance, a ghost or re-visitation of the future; a symptom of human unconscious awareness of the simultaneity of all temporal experience, past, present and future. Since narrative is a form of telling that takes place in time, following our more or less conscious intentionality, I want to explore how postmodern avant-garde art opens narrative frameworks in order to reflect on the impact of sound and everyday noise as temporal

experiences. Thus, by focusing on aural aspects of hypertextual telling, the paper seeks to outline how quotidian sounds may contribute to our sense of place and memory, developing some insights on the theme of 'landscapes of loss'.

As indicated, *Window* was inspired by John Cage (1912 -1992) on the year of the centenary of his birth. Cage was an American composer, music theorist, and thinker, interested in the potential of ambient sound. He was also a pioneer in exploring indeterminacy in music and electro-acoustics, and one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde. Katherine Norman's project explores the dialogue between location and time through aural perception experienced from a window. In her 2018 essay on the project, Norman explained that the project was an experiment in listening to everyday sounds and writing about sound environment. She spent a few minutes each day filming from her bedroom window, particularly interested in a tree which reminded her of a painting by Claude. She does not mention the surname. Perhaps she refers to Claude Monet and his poplar series. After all, Monet painted sequences of tree images at different times of the day and in different seasons, in a similar way to what Norman had in mind with respect to sound. The option Claude Lorrain, who inspired Théophile Gautier in defining ekphrasis or art-transposition is also very attractive because of Cage's relationship with the Flux movement, as we shall see below.

Norman's main aim in devising this project was to catch the presence of ordinary sensorial life experience and contextualize how the aural and the sonic are important in our lives. In the days of Covid-19 pandemic, we have all experienced sonic manifestations, such as evening applauses in gratitude to coronavirus health workers, or singing and playing music from our windows as a sign of encouragement and mutual connection. In a 1957 lecture, "Experimental Music," collected in his volume *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961), Cage described music as "an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living." (12) In post-pandemic days, such an assertion is more valid than ever.

In collaboration with students from his classes on "Experimental Composition," Cage also created a number of short pieces called *Variations* that he described as life "happenings". Strongly influenced by Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*, and by James Joyce's novel, *Finnegans Wake*, Cage had been inspired to produce these happenings, short musical and theatrical events with no plot, and without a definite script, where everything was left to chance. Like in Katherine Norman's project, the pieces tried to capture the feeling of the passing of time, subverting any sense of direction and conclusion. Norman

writes that her “only conscious decision was not to choose.” (n.p.) She wanted “to recreate that immersive experience of quotidian experience without drawing attention to it. Because attending to the ordinary makes it extraordinary.” (n.p.) This also meant subverting any form of linear plot in the narrative. Norman explains that she wanted to do “an allegory of the ordinary.” (n.p.) According to Paul de Man, who in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” sought to deconstruct the privileged claims to wholeness inherent in Romantic symbol, allegory is precisely an organic form, not limited in meaning like the symbol. Allegory has an open form of temporality, and it seems appropriate for an interactive intermedial project such as Norman’s. Indeed, Cage’s happenings became the forerunners for activities developed within the Fluxus group under the direction of Dick Higgins, one of Cage’s disciples and the first person to define ‘intermediality’ after the Romantic poet Coleridge had spoken of ‘intermedium’.

One of John Cage’s most important inspirations for his musical compositions had been the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, an ancient sacred book in Zen Buddhism and Taoism. It is read as a microcosm that captures complex correspondences to the macrocosm of the universe. The volume was translated to English in 1950 by Jewish-German publisher Kurt Wolff. His son Christian Wolff, a renowned avant-garde musician, was one of Cage’s collaborators. This classic Chinese text describes a system of divination based on mathematical algorithms and the circular temporality of nature, and it is used to identify hidden forms of order in apparently chance events. The *I Ching* is not the only divination manual that insists on the existence of a kind of secret cryptic proportion, a sort of symmetry and harmony present in the universe. The idea of an occult and divine code underlying all living matter is present in the notion of the golden mean, a ratio used in architecture and appearing in a number of ancient cosmologies across the world (one of Cage’s sheets of music features Fibonacci’s sequence, closely related to the golden ratio). Even today there is scientific speculation about the hidden coded nature of the universe (Barss, BBC 20th January 2020).

Cage began to use the *I Ching* in his random compositions after he met Gita Sarabhai, a young Indian singer and musician who received music lessons from Cage while she taught him Indian music and Zen philosophy. She explained to Cage that the purpose of music was not to convey emotional content, as Western musicians believed. But “to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences.” (Cage 158) In other words, to reach the divinity by means of sounds and music one had to free the mind from any personal content, including not just rational aspects but also emotional ones.

The idea that art in general, and music in particular, should express the feelings of the author in order to recreate similar feelings in the audience arose in the Romantic period in Europe. Before the Enlightenment, European music was functional, accompanying poetry, song and dance. One of the most famous discussions between musicians Giovanni Bononcini (1670-1747) and Georg Friedrich Händel (1685-1759) had to do with the prominence in opera of music or of words. The composers appeared in a British nursery rhyme from 1725 as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and were the inspiration for Lewis Carroll's characters in his sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*. Cage was convinced that this discussion made no sense because music, unlike words, was not about communication but about arbitrary sounds, noise and physiological rhythms. In his *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)* Cage also mentions that he was inspired by Henry David Thoreau who, after his solitary experience at Walden Pond, had written that "The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears as the rarest music does. It depends on your appetite for sound." (*True Harvest*: 16 Feb. 1857) Some years later, in an interview with Miroslav Sebestik, 1991, Cage explained his idea of music as performance: "when I hear traffic, the sound of traffic—here on Sixth Avenue, for instance—I don't have the feeling that anyone is talking. I have the feeling that sound is acting. And I love the activity of sound." (n.p)

Katherine Norman's project includes a static video recording, but it is mostly made up of sound recordings taken from a window over the course of one year. There are twelve thumbnail photographs on the bottom of the page that the reader can click on to bring up a large sized image corresponding to each one of the twelve months. A horizontal slider on the right allows the reader to move within four different points of entry, visible in the first interface, with the names "dark", "text", "words" and "day". Seven little stars appear on the lower end of the screen; the author calls them "handles", which can be dragged individually to increase/decrease volume, intensity and balance. It is interesting that, in the case of *Cheap Imitation*, a piece for solo piano that Cage composed in 1969, he had asked the *I Ching* the following questions: Which of the seven modes, if we take as modes the seven scales beginning on white notes and remaining on white notes, which of those am I using? And also which of the twelve possible chromatic transpositions am I using? So that Katherine Norman's piece also revolves around the same numbers: twelve months or chromatic transpositions, and seven stars or modes, which resemble white notes on an imaginary pentagram on the screen.

The "dark" and "day" points of entry situate the window scene at dusk or early morning, with the corresponding ambient sounds: "the shower's hollow rainfall', 'in another room,

his chair creaks', 'the spoon against the bowl', 'a drawer opened and closed, in haste', 'the rattle of curtain rings, light', 'floorboards complain in that familiar way', 'the hum of the boiler signals time', 'vacackling', 'pigeons', 'hedgehog making tracks on the paving stones', 'small birds chatter for berries', 'the glorious sunset', 'once, a helicopter', 'two dogs pass, the white one barks'." As the day moves along and the seasons pass, the sounds change: "radiators gurgle pleasantly', 'fence panels fight the wind', 'leaves shiver paper rain', 'a ball thuds in a childish rhythm', 'the TV turned down', 'fog, hanging still', 'Mozart and tea clatter downstairs', 'Sunday bells that come and go'." Norman insists on the vision of the tree: "this tree means home', 'remembering a hand against bark', 'sound enters, light reveals', 'listening makes dimension', 'catching the periphery', 'rain on the window ledge, inside'." The allusion to Thoreau is also there: "my small Walden', 'place is a gathering', 'geometric shadows suddenly'." (n.p)

"Text" brings in a whole new level of narrative, with brief anecdotes on John Cage's life and Norman's own reflections. For instance, she remembers a film with Cage slapping dough in bread making. Cage's compositions are also mentioned; in particular, a piece in which he recited a series of stories and observations, each related to a one-minute experience window. Norman also includes her ideas for the project: "As I looked and listened each day, and re-looked and re-listened to my recordings (feeling possessive, as if they were part of me), I was conscious of how familiarity arises from the accumulation of small, ordinary experiences, repeated innumerable times—this is how it feels to know a place." She discusses the nameless tree again: "I see the tree in context, and grab the camera when I observe a change in the sky, or hear that the wind is up, or notice some other shift in our co-existence." Against linearity, she defines her attempt to create a series of superimposed spatiotemporal layers of experience, mapping her acoustic landscape through repetitions. She says that it was like trying to catch the sight of her back on a mirror because everyday experience is gone before you know it; impossible to grasp. However, her project examines just that: how unremarkable quotidian experience, the slightest things and sounds, contribute to "the dynamic construction of place and the human experience of place through the accumulation of sensory perception, repetition, memory and emotion." (n.p.)

The point of entry called "Words" interprets some of the ambient sounds, randomly voicing them in short poet-like lines, with the help of the reader. This part becomes more interactive, as the poetic lines only appear when the reader moves the cursor around the visual landscape. According to Norman, the short poetic bits reflect on "how sensory perceptions in a familiar place are inextricably bound up with ingrained memories,

emotions, and previous experience,” not just of the place but of those sharing the same location.

Indeed, in his review of the piece for *I-love-E-poetry* blog, Leonardo Flores writes while “texts” extend the work conceptually, “words” do so experientially— extending perception beyond the limits of the photographic frames and the sounds attached to them; they function deictically, as pointers to the particular sound and its location, and relationally, as if grammaticalizing the temporal location of noise. Sounds are related to certain actions and events and have natural end points. But it is their resonances, a ritual that extends these sounds-actions in a replicative echo. Immensity results from these concrete repetitive moments. Experiences are concentrated at the window, that functions as a threshold to other spatiotemporal dimensions. As Norman mentions, her domestic landscape was composed of sounds “at the edges”; what Gaston Bachelard called “intimate immensities”, constituting the soundtrack to place and questioning boundaries. After she moved house, Norman remained attached to her previous home because of “the experience of spending a sustained time engaged in this particular small ritual.” (n.p)

At the start of this paper I mentioned that I wanted to explore nostalgia in a hypermedia experimental project that focuses mostly on sound. I thought that this might contribute to the debate initiated by Svetlana Boym on the conceptualization of nostalgia as a teleological form. Many postmodern artistic forms have tried to capture the instant temporality of fragmentation. The temporal dynamics of sound and music allow a simultaneity that the avant-garde works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, for instance, struggled to capture in narrative fiction. The definition of nostalgia in terms of teleology might not allow for its appearance in less linear forms of art. So the question remains if Katherine Norman’s project, like John Cage’s sound experimentation, allow for the setting and mapping of any feelings of nostalgia, that is, the location of a landscape of loss. If so, does this landscape of longing belong to the author or to the audience, since both authors, Cage and Norman, tried to expel emotional content from their works?

As we have seen, both Norman and Cage attempt to capture specific aspects of temporal experience related to quotidian sounds and noises, often occurring in simultaneity. The consciousness behind these projects establishes a dialogue with the reader/audience even if the authors refused to create a cause-effect storyline, basing their projects on chance and random occurrences without a purpose in mind. Yet, the reader, like the commentator (in this case myself), struggles to enact the motives behind their rituals of noise and sound. The temporal frames of reference interconnect. First the frame that relates to the act of listening itself (temporal deixis or time of discourse) and those relating to what is being

told (time of event, even when there is no plot). Listening time involves the ability to position and coordinate one's own time experience with these different orders of temporality, the time of the teller and that of the telling, in this case calling to mind the succession of sound events and the passing of time day after night, phase after phase, season after season. These accounts unfold in an asynchronic temporality that turns synchronic. As I describe Norman's project based on Cage's memory, I write my own storyline, perhaps giving order to experiences that were supposed to remain disorderly, random and chaotic. In giving sense to these experiences, I discover resonances that perhaps were not meant to be. I impose connections to support my argument. I enact my own sense-making from their interactions, in an inter-subjective dialogue that incorporates forms of affective tuning and emotional contagion. Their rituals become mine, and I serve as vehicle for their amplification.

So, does the flow of events influence the emotional experience of a reader? Is there a way to explain if more instantaneous artistic forms, such as concrete poetry, Cage's happenings, or Norman's experimental project carry less emotional and cognitive weight, in comparison to narrative accounts that portray the flow of events? This paper has tried to answer some of these questions and argue that our neurophysiology contains the seeds of nostalgia. Reading-listening to Norman's project posits an affective immersion. The reader's agency within the text is modulated by the interactions allowed. The static scenes during which the reader listens create a desire to learn more about the project. Interactive parts such as "texts" first amplify the reader's background knowledge to the project. Even more immersive is the section "words" which increases the reader's experience of the workings of the project. In this case, touch functions as a synesthetic category that gives the reader agency to accelerate or decelerate the pacing of the poetic lines that appear on the screen. The reader is never "in-sync" with the temporal flow of events, but this interactive agency can become more or less explicit. The shifts in temporal flow introduced by the different parts modify the participant's agency and her level of immersion, and the iterative voids that the participant experiences enhance her feeling of loss and nostalgia, as she attempts to tune in to the assumed agency of another. (Popova 84)

Perhaps, as Hutcheon argued, some of the projects of the postmodern condition "are aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seek to expose those through irony," (206) but their effort of fragmentation exposure struggles against the neurophysiology of our brains, which always fills the gaps. Consecutive events, at different times, elicit the illusion of connection, and participatory sense-making in many of these interactive projects

reveals other forms of temporal patterns, always dialogic and always complex and cumulative. The empirical challenge remains, as Yanna Popova argues, of identifying the inter-subjective and non-linear processes that afford this kind of distributed attentional effort. For we shall always find meanings in mere noise, and these will always be tinted with emotional colouring. Applauses addressed to health workers, casserole protests for the government, or the choral balcony singing will remain part of our memories, connected to the landscape of loss that the Covid-19 pandemic brought.

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