

On *Dissonant Landscapes*: Tore Størvold and Susan O'Shea, in conversation

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In late September 2023, Tore Størvold kindly agreed to a video call to discuss his recently published book, *Dissonant Landscapes: Music, Nature and The Performance of Iceland*. I was introduced by a mutual colleague, based in Oslo, because of my developing interest in exploring the communicative power of music and sound to confront the challenges of climate change and to grapple with creative ways to inspire action. Størvold's book came along at the right time. There is something reassuring about reading a book that appeals to a sense of familiarity, if only superficially, as the country of Iceland does, having once visited and being enchanted. But also, being able to engage on a deeper level with the magnificent musical output of such a small island. However, "Dissonant Landscapes", whilst being academically minded, manages to appeal to a wider readership with ease, providing historical, cross-genre, cultural and environmental nuggets that inspire further questions. There is plenty to discover on this journey through the music, nature and performance of Iceland as our conversation attests. Despite having never met in-person, our paths almost crossed only a week prior to this. My colleague told me about this band that slept on his floor, a familiar trope, for Manchester at least. He said, "oh, I met this person who studies Icelandic music and the environment", and I thought, "surely this is too much of a coincidence". It would have been even more serendipitous had I managed to attend that *Podcasts* gig as well.

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Susan O'Shea: *"Dissonant Landscapes" deals with Iceland as a perceived creative nation with a strong contemporary popular music history. This history tends to explore the intersections of nature, nationality and myths through performance. You focus a lot on the idea of the 'performance' of Iceland. Could you tell us a bit more about what you mean when you discuss the nationalising of nature? And perhaps a little bit about the response of musicians to the industrial landscape which exists juxtaposed against the 'natural' in Iceland?*

Tore Størvold: That's a great question. I believe the controversy and debate about the recent industrial transformation of the landscape stem from the history of nationalising nature. By this, I mean the process of investing senses of identity and national community into the landscape, anchoring what it means to be Icelandic to the geographic features of the land itself. There's a strong link where nation is equated with nature through a long cultural history. It really goes back to the independence movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Icelanders felt that the time was ripe for an independent Icelandic nation and were looking for ways to distinguish themselves from the Danish. The leading intellectuals of the time looked to the ancient medieval sagas as a golden age of Icelandic independence because Iceland had been an independent nation before being colonised by Denmark, so there was an historic precedence for this. The continuity was secured by the landscape. The landscape was the thing that connected this idea of a modern, independent Icelandic nation to this Golden Age saga of the Vikings. The landscape itself became incredibly important for securing that historical continuity and precedence for a modern nation. It also became important because it clearly set Iceland apart from Denmark. The unique landscape was something that distinguished Iceland from the Danish.

In my book, I explore this cultural history through analysing two songs that are separated by 100 years. This is in the first chapter of the book, where I look at one classical song from the era of the independence movement at the beginning of the 20th century¹. This song really celebrates the close relationship between the Icelander and his or her landscape. I also explore a much more recent song from 2011². I see some forms of continuity there in the ways that the landscape is perceived as a national space, so that the national community is secured by the aesthetics of the landscape itself. All of this is performed in music. Music, and of course other cultural forms of expression, such as poetry and literature, is what links nature with nation. I found that music is very good at stitching together the two cultural formations of nation and nature. Music is the glue that creates this nation-nature narrative. That's what I mean by nationalising nature. It's an ongoing process of performing a national interpretation of what a landscape is. The landscape is always co-created by cultural practices that invest the physical terrain with a set of cultural meanings. In Iceland, those cultural meanings have tended to be a political struggle for independence and a political struggle for defining an Icelandic national community, and projecting that into the physical terrain. There's a long cultural history of constructing nature as a nation which has resulted in this very close link between them. That can explain why people became so upset about some of these recent industrial developments in hydropower and geothermal power, and especially the construction of hydropower plants to feed these aluminium smelters. Because, you know, hydropower is of course a renewable energy source. So, it

shouldn't be that controversial. But I think it's because of this cultural history. When you get these big physical changes to the land, it's interpreted as a threat to the national community and to your sense of identity, and to your sense of what Iceland is and what it should be.

This is a complex layering of environmental politics and aesthetics of landscape, because how Iceland looks is very much equated to what it is. The fact that it looks pristine is such a big part of that cultural history of arguing for the independence of the nation and so forth. So, when the landscape suddenly looks different, that is very upsetting, and it goes to the heart of what it means to be Icelandic. People were also very upset about these huge industrial developments happening not to serve the Icelandic public but to provide cheap power to multinational corporations involved in the aluminium smelting industry. Hiring very often cheap migrant labour, so it doesn't really result in jobs or anything for the local Icelandic community as much as just contributing to this global aluminium industry. There are many reasons why people reacted to that.

Susan: *I think that's really interesting. As nations move away from their colonial pasts and try to establish their own post-colonial identities, music and culture really play a significant role. You can see that across lots of different nations, where this reinvention of traditional myths in a new contemporary context can be strongly seen in your book, especially around those conflict issues as we move more towards awareness about the environment and the environmental consequences of the industries around us. As I said, there's a stark contrast between the almost mythologised version of what Iceland should look like versus the kind of industrialised version of it as a capitalist economy succeeding in the world where music really plays a big role. That brings me on to the next idea. What are you talking about exactly when you discuss musical geography in digital media?*

Tore: What I try to address is the performance of locality to a very global audience, so inviting a global audience to do a kind of virtual tourism through digital screen-based media. In that context, I explore this transmedia project by the artist Ólafur Arnalds that he called "Island Songs", where he travelled around Iceland, spending one week in each town and composing and recording a track. He did this as a kind of journey, as a digital traveller. He was very interested in exploring what Iceland is, exploring all these small towns outside the capital, but at the same time, it was done as a performance for his global fan community. Always aware of expectations and international perceptions of what Iceland is, so kind of playing with and against that, trying to navigate established structures of exoticism and trying to insert his own local report, inserting his own music into the ongoing invention or performance of Iceland and using these new ways of transmedia, digital storytelling. Online platforms bring the audience into that exploration, through audio-visual materials, music videos, but also multi-modal engagements through posting, commenting, sharing things on various social media channels, taking part in the labour of exploring and performing and defining Iceland. So, it's a kind of tourism that's happening, but it's also a kind of reinscription of Iceland in new digital spaces. I guess what I'm calling a 'musical geography in digital media' is looking at how music and related audio-visual forms like music videos can shape our

understandings of place and space in new digital contexts. And there's a lot of potential there for redefining what it means to travel, what mobility is and what distance is. But what I found is that old images of Iceland as a very distant, remote, exotic, mysterious place have proven to be very tenacious, even in these new digital forms of musical geography. These same ideas of Iceland still become the dominant ways of perceiving and defining Iceland, even though in these new digital spaces, Iceland is still constructed as remote and half mythical, a half fictitious place beyond modern civilisation. These older ways of perceiving Iceland are mapped onto new digital media.

Susan: *I think that's fascinating. It's difficult to move away from the more traditional tropes that we are used to seeing, not just about Iceland, but about other kinds of rarefied or stereotyped country situations. Those images tend to come through and even though it's digital technology, and different ways of engaging with audiences, you'd think there would be scope for radical transformation. It's difficult to punch through that, isn't it?*

Tore: Exactly. Ólafur Arnalds relied on some older spatial technologies like maps, building his new digital aesthetics on those older templates. So, the visuals of this project are all based around cartography, you know all old hand printed, hand drawn maps. I'm kind of slotting into a much older tradition of mapping Iceland, which is also something I explore in that chapter. There's a problematic history of trying to include Iceland in maps of Europe, which for some reason is always at the very edge of the map, or even beyond the edges of the map. And for some reason, these older visual and cartographic modes of representing Iceland still creep in and impinge on these newer digital geographies of Iceland.

Susan: *There's this idea of Iceland still being this very remote place. But what you then discuss is Iceland in the context of, what you refer to as, the new Arctic tourist destination. That brings in this idea around Arcticness or Nordness, which can be sounded out in different popular cultural forms, with things like crime drama and northern noir soundtracks.*

Tore: Hmm, hmm.

Susan: *What is it about the work of composers then, like Jóhann Jóhannsson and others, that helped create such a sonic association with place in this new Arctic destination?*

Tore Størvold: Yeah, the more I think about this, there are certain musical parameters that very readily soak up ideas about distance and remoteness. So, for example, the music of Jóhann Jóhannsson is, first of all, it's very slow. It's a very slow tempo. It's built up by drones, static textures. The music is not really going anywhere. It gives an impression of standing still. But there are of course very slow-moving forms of musical development, and I think this musical spaciousness tends to provide a space for imaginations of geography. So, these common ideas of Iceland as a very distant, remote place, seems to live very well in slow tempos and spacious musical design. I think that's part of it. Also, he and others work with an

aesthetics of coldness where they intentionally configure high frequency metallic textures that are associated with snow, winter, ice. Throughout Western musical history, you have these twinkly percussive sounds, glockenspiels and other forms of metallic sounds in the very high frequency register, overwhelmingly associated with something cold in many forms of music. This is something you find in the music for the crime drama that I discuss in one of the chapters. But you can also find it in lots of other examples of Icelandic music. Sometimes in the work of Sigur Rós, in the work of Björk, even in the orchestral music of Anna Þorvaldsdóttir. At times there is this creation of a musical sense of space by opening up the music using slow tempos, static textures, drones, and so forth. And also, this sense of coldness, by using the very high register. Whether this is just cultural associations, or if there's actually something physiological about high frequency sounds and bodily responses that gives us a thermal experience of coldness, I'm not sure. I haven't done the proper research, so for now just to be sure it's just a cultural association, as far as I know.

Susan: *Yeah, I can get that, but it sounds like an area that would be worth trying to test some of those ideas in a more systematic way, to see if there are really elements that you can describe independently that create this sense of an atmosphere in relation to a particular country space.*

Tore: Yeah.

Susan: *It's really difficult to talk about Iceland without mentioning the ecological aesthetics of it and the dominance of the volcanic landscape especially. We all know that years ago, the whole of Europe was disrupted with travel after one of the volcanoes erupted. I know I was at a conference locally, but lots of people were stuck and couldn't get back to the States. So, it has a dominating impact, not just locally, but globally, particularly in the European context.*

Tore: Hmm. Yeah.

Susan: *When reading the book then as well, I was drawn back to early Sigur Rós, which I had neglected for some time. When I started listening to the album that you talk about quite a lot, "Kveikur", I'm not sure if I pronounced that right, the opening track, I forgot how abrasive and sonically intense it is. As an album, it's much heavier than many of the other more ethereal works of Sigur Rós. Maybe you could you say a little bit in relation to that, and particularly about the ecological aesthetics of Icelandic music, especially in relation to Sigur Rós.*

Tore: You're absolutely correct that this album, "Kveikur", which was released in 2013, it is very much a stylistic departure for the band. It sounds immediately very different. There are much more higher tempos, more rhythmic activity. And it's heavy with elements of industrial rock, goth music, even black metal with these very sharp, dissonant textures, with lots of guitar feedback that just hits very hard. This album was composed and recorded in the time following this volcanic eruption that you talk about, Eyjafjallajökull in 2011, which was the most significant

volcanic activity in Iceland in many decades. Public discourse, and international discourse, was dominated by this event for quite some time. The volcanic and seismic agency of the Earth was on people's minds during this period when this album was composed. In this chapter of the book, I read the album as an exploration of geosociality, the intermingling of the geological and the social. Which is really a concept coming from an Icelandic anthropologist, Gísli Pálsson, who actually has experienced several volcanic eruptions himself. He experienced a very destructive eruption in the 1970s when his house was buried in ash. He uses these experiences to explore what it means to live and configure our societies in ways that are responsive to the agency of the Earth, to tremors to seismicity, to earthquakes and to eruptions. The Earth is very unruly, difficult, and dangerous in Iceland. So, giving space and allowing for that and accounting for that in the ways that we put together our societies is an incredibly important lesson to learn for the future moving forward into the Anthropocene.

Everyone is living in, more or less, unruly environments with a lot more forest fires, droughts, and so forth. Volcanic eruptions are quite unique to certain places. So, I think there are lessons to be learned from Iceland when it comes to living with the Earth and realising that there are forces below our feet that are alive. We were all reminded of that in 2011 when international air travel was shut down because of volcanic ash. This event served as my starting point for exploring the musical style on the album, which is full of musical translations of seismicity and eruptions. The whole album begins with an eruptive gesture where the guitars, drums, the bass, everything enters all at once at a very high volume. The frequency spectrum is completely filled, just like a wall of sound.

Susan: *Yeah.*

Tore: So, it's very abrasive and it's very sharp, and it's very unruly. There's a lot of dissonance, there's a lot of feedback. It's almost like the band members can barely control the sounds they are making. I read this as an expression of the geological forces of Iceland. And like you say, it's a very interesting departure from the more classic albums from the early 2000s, which were much slower in tempo with softer dynamics.

Susan: *Hmm.*

Tore: Also, there are new vocal styles on this album. Where on previous albums, Jónsi is very much associated with his falsetto style of singing. But on this album, he also uses his chest voice. It's a different style that I associate more with gothic rock. The band on this tour, they dressed in black. It was a different visual aesthetic as well. So, it's really exploring the more ominous facets of life in the Anthropocene, where there are forces bigger than ourselves that are now making themselves felt. I think this is important. It leads to some productive thinking, turning to Iceland and listening to this volcanic, seismic music can make us reflect on the relationship between humans and the very unruly environment in the Anthropocene.

Susan: *Yes, to me it sounds very much like the embodiment of the volcanic. As you're talking about dark, dissonant industrial sounds, it feels to me as well like the*

industrial or the more developed side of Iceland is in tension with that. It's quite an aggressive album, but I really like it and I'd forgotten how much I liked it until I came back to listen to it again. That's not to say that I don't still engage with the more ephemeral, slow-moving music like that, but it's a little bit more unusual. I think it's quite fascinating that those elements of nature can come through in musical sounds. Obviously, that's part of our own interpretation of that as well, but it has a visual resonance as well as a sonic one.

Tore: Absolutely, yes.

Susan: *In relation to your teaching, because you teach subjects on music, nature, and the climate crisis, could you tell us a little bit about the practical ways that you engage students with such challenging topics? How do you help them understand and communicate environmental issues better? What do you do to get them thinking through music and sonic engagements?*

Tore: Yeah. In that course, we go through a range of musical examples that try to say something about nature and our relationship to it, either historically or right now. This gives students an insight into the varied concepts of nature that can result from musical performances and how differently people have thought about nature and engaged with nature through music. Lots of different examples from various genres, eras, and geographical locations. Part of that is about making students realise the cultural and historical contingency of patterns of thinking about nature and how music reflects and engages with this. We then come to a turning point in the course where we address the current situation of living in the Anthropocene, making music and being musicians in the Anthropocene. This also requires us to think about, for example, the material ecological costs of music production, musical instruments, and all the electricity and energy that goes into powering musical culture and our listening devices. So, I also go into the political ecology of music.

The final part of the course is about searching for new musical and sonic strategies for communicating about all of this and maybe inspiring and moving towards more solutions. That will also involve not just music, but also listening exercises, sound walks, and field recordings. Students record a soundscape and then work with that to create something. They might design a musical intervention or musical exercise that will inspire or prompt reflection on nature and the climate crisis. There are many interesting things to do. I've assessed this course through having students work on a group project that results in some sort of audio production, whether it's a podcast or something more experimental. It can be a sonic event in a public place. But the aim is to use music and sound, using their skills as musicians, to intervene somehow and cause reflection on whatever is happening.

Susan: *That sounds great. There are lots of parallels between the themes that come up in your book, so there's obviously synergy between what you research and teach. I think it's important for students, to have that sense of space to engage in deep listening, but also to do practical things. I really like the sound of that course.*

Tore: Thank you.

Susan: *In relation to your music, whether it is through [your] band [Podcasts], or*

whether you engage in other kinds of compositional practices, I'm just wondering if your experience of writing "Dissonant Landscapes" and engaging with the ecological issues as you do with a sonic lens, whether this has made a difference to how you approach your own creative practice, or how you engage with your own musical work.

Tore: Yes, I think so. With that band, we've been thinking of ways of reducing the ecological footprint of touring, for example. But really, it is difficult. This is something I explore with students as well because they are very quick to take all of this in and it becomes almost paralysing. But then we have to discuss, are we accountable as individuals in systemic issues?

Susan: *Yeah.*

Tore: And it's also very important to me to make sure that the students understand that we are not equally accountable, or we are not equally culpable in relation to the climate crisis. Blame is not equally distributed. This is something I've tried to work through for myself as well. And I've landed on for now, I try to enjoy making music and not get too paralysed by the realities of the ecological crisis. I just really believe in the power of music to create some sort of social space where, at least for one evening or something, we can exist as something other than consumers. It can model a different kind of social and ecological community. So I just try to remind myself of that, that even though my music making of course can't properly address the climate crisis in any meaningful way, but it can be meaningful for me and for the people around me by insisting that this is something we do that gives us joy and something that is socially and ecologically meaningful because we exist for something other than consuming, for a while.

Susan: *Exactly. I completely agree with you on that as somebody who also plays music. I don't tour outside of the country, so my carbon footprint is fairly small that way. But it is something that on an individual basis we can sometimes get a little bit paralysed and hung up on, what more we can do, to the detriment of our engagement with others in a social and cultural context. So, like you, I would agree that music spaces, the spaces of creating and making music together, is something that we need to hold on to. As technology improves and as our more widespread engagement with how we create and use energy improves, I'm sure aspects from an international touring perspective will improve too. But for now, I would like to think that having those spaces to create, to think, and to challenge some of these ideas (in those spaces) are just as important.*

Tore: Absolutely, that's well put.

Susan: *I was going to ask you a final question, which you've actually already answered, so I'll let you off, rather than asking you to tell everybody else in the world what they should be doing.*

Tore: Ha [laughs]

Susan: *I really like the way you summarised your own engagement with music. Thanks a million for having a chat with me. I've really enjoyed it.*

End Notes

1. This refers to the poem “Draumalandið” (“Dreamland”) written by Magnússon and set to music by Einarsson in 1904.
2. The second song discussed is “Stingum Af” (“Let’s Slip Away”) by Mugison.

References

Størvold, T. 2023. *Dissonant Landscapes: Music, Nature, and the Performance of Iceland*. Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, Connecticut.