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Value of silence: mediating aural environments in Estonian rural tourism

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This paper concentrates on the creation of value(s) by rural tourism entrepreneurs via intangible and atmospheric natural resources, the aural environment. The creation of value is analysed with regard to how the rural tourism entrepreneurs facilitate and mediate the aural environment of their farms to their guests and how by doing so the notions of rurality and rural environment are constantly (re)created and (re)negotiated. The paper concentrates on the notion of ‘silence’ which the tourism farmers regard as one of the most valuable qualities of their environments and shows how the personal experience of the host is one of the most important aspects when creating and mediating the experience for the visitors. The paper begins with a theoretic discussion of the idea of rural idyll, after which the research background is described with a brief overview of the Estonian rural context and the description of the methodology and empirical data of the article. This is followed by the analysis of the gathered data which is divided into two main topics: the creation of value by the tourism entrepreneurs when constructing the rural sound idyll and the question of competing values in the rural tourism context.

Keywords: rurality; aural environments; rural tourism; rural idyll; sound anthropology

Introduction

Tourism is a phenomenon that encompasses a complicated mixture of human emotions, fears and desires, backgrounds, inclinations, choices and values. It is fashioned by politics, power, current consumer styles, the travel industry and the tourist herself (Edensor, 2006). Travel involves some kind of physical movement from one place to another and, when we mentally (re)construct our environments and the meanings we give to travel, we often rely on our personal (or collective) values in order to choose the (next) destination. Similarly, hosts also rely on their sets of values when welcoming tourists, offering their visitors what they feel the visitors consider important and creating environments that they hope will be enjoyed and appreciated.

‘Rural tourism is tourism that takes place in the countryside’ as put rather straightforwardly by Lane (2012, p. 355). Of course, defining ‘rural’ and ‘countryside’ is a challenge; it has been noted (Hoggart, 1990, p. 245) that stressing the rural–urban dichotomy is not a very fruitful approach and that the similarities of rural and urban have not received enough attention. Generally speaking, the rural is rather a social construct, ‘an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and

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contested’ by very different stakeholders (Woods, 2011, p. 9) and some views of rurality as exemplified on the issue of aural environments will be discussed in this paper. Modifying activities by the humans, such as clearing woodlands to plant crops, etc. have created a rural landscape, a countryside, that is neither wild nor urban, and that is quite often appreciated for its picturesque scenery in public discourses (Farrell & Russell, 2011, p. 100). Rural tourism can be viewed as a phenomenon resulting partly from the wish to escape the urban environment and the need to reaffirm personal identities in the face of growing urbanisation. However, we should not necessarily see it only as a ‘kind of retreat from complexity, into the half-remembered vistas of familiarity and simplicity associated with the past’ (Dicks, 2003, p. 130), as rural tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon where very different actors and stakeholders, needs, interests and desires form complex webs of meanings and regimes of value.

Drawing on my fieldwork on Estonian rural tourism establishments, I will explore some notions of how contemporary rural entrepreneurs see and interpret their environments, what they consider important and how they understand their guests’ wishes and visions of the rural. I will concentrate on the notion and value of ‘silence’ or ‘peace and quiet’: the specific rural aural environment that tourism farmers regard as one of the most important qualities of their surroundings. I will discuss how tourism farmers facilitate and mediate this aural environment (the rural sound idyll) to their guests and how, by doing so, they constantly (re)create and (re)negotiate the notion of rurality. I will look at the construction and creation of value by tourism farmers through intangible and atmospheric natural resources, such as the auditory environment and the sense of peace found – or at least offered – in the studied farms.

The rural idyll: Arcadia for the hosts and guests

A modified rural environment, with traditional-style farmhouses, domesticated animals, fields, lakes, ponds, etc. (‘the rural idyll’), can be viewed as a certain ‘trope’, a symbol of rurality and the (peasant) past, just as Urry (2002 [1990], p. 128) describes an aspect of the tourist gaze, where one learns that ‘a thatched cottage with roses round the door represents “ye olde England”’. Following from this, a wooden country house surrounded by a forest and fields, with a garden of apple trees in a relatively secluded area, preferably near a pond or lake and definitely with a sauna, is a marker of ‘real’ rural southern Estonia, an image harnessed by tourism farm owners in a variety of manners. Nugin (2014, pp. 57–58) identifies the rural idyll constructed in Estonian public media discourse as depicting rural inhabitants as ‘courageous, durable, hard-working, shrewd and clever’ people who do not complain about the hardships of rural life (such as demanding farm work, extreme weather conditions, etc.) and live in harmonious communities helping each other out and working towards common goals. The creation and interpretation of rural environments is very individual. These ‘tropes’ are formed in the interaction of each individual’s values and personal reading of certain signs and markers, the questions of authority that lie in the gazes of both hosts and the guests upon particular sites, as well as the power dynamics of managing those representations and experiences.

Abram (2003) expands on Urry’s concept of the tourist gaze in rural settings, introducing the idea of the rural gaze and, in line with Veijola and Jokinen (1994), stresses the need ‘to reconnect the seeing-eye to the rest of the body’ (Abram, 2003, p. 34). Visual perception is definitely not the only way to consume the (rural) environment, as has been noted by Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen in their above-mentioned seminal article ‘The Body in Tourism’ (1994), where they show that all human senses are engaged when ‘doing
tourism’ (an expression used by Crouch (1999), who stresses the proactive, participatory and processual nature of leisure) and, depending on the particular experience and occasion, different senses may be engaged. The surrounding environment is comprehensive visual and experiential phenomenon which is created in the people’s minds via sensory observations (Tuohino & Pitkänen, 2004, p. 79) and the rural gaze is experienced in an embodied way though a complex maze of senses – sounds, smells, vision, taste and touch – as well as through social organisation and experience. It directs and manages the ways different phenomena are seen, and also ‘what is deemed appropriate to be seen, and motivates people to change the appearance of the land to conform with their ideals’ (Abram, 2003, p. 40). Therefore, the rural gaze is political and value-laden and can be seen as resulting from negotiations between different parties.

The rural can be perceived, created and consumed as something nostalgic, although this nostalgia does not mean seeking the ‘actual past’, but rather

a sanitised, picturesque vision, where old houses are renovated to contain modern conveniences, and are spruced up well beyond the state they would have been in when new. This gaze, in other words, is not referential only to the past, but seeks an improved, idealised (and some would say suburban or modern) vision’ (Abram, 2003, p. 44).

This is an imagined rural space that van Koppen (2000, pp. 303–307) calls Arcadia, where people live in harmony with nature, appreciating its beauty and placing high value on it in emotional, moral and aesthetic ways. In the case of Estonian rural tourism, this is usually ‘backed up’ by modern amenities (such as wireless internet), should the guest wish to revert to their urbanite ways. A modern idyllic countryside, where one can indulge in various forms of nostalgia (longing for paradise, the simple life, past times, and the return to childhood, as typified by Dann (1994)), is thus not a retreat from the present to the past but rather an ongoing process stimulated by it (Dicks, 2003, p. 131).

**Researching Estonian tourism farms**

Family farming had been an important source of livelihood in Estonia, with its mainly agricultural economy, up until the 1940s. In 1944, most of the land was collectivised and previous farms became small households, ‘plot farms’, where people could grow vegetables and raise farm animals for their personal needs. After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the agricultural system was reorganised by closing the collective farms and through the privatisation process, where the owners of property in 1940 or their heirs could apply for restitution of the land that had belonged to them before its appropriation by the state during the Soviet period. In principle, this gave these landowners an opportunity to take up small-scale farming, but in reality this was extremely hard to do due to Estonia’s agricultural policies. Most of the farm owners quit farming quickly, since it was unprofitable (Grubbström & Sooväli-Sepping, 2012, pp. 330–331). Several of the interviewed tourism farmers had tried farming at some point in the early 1990s, but all except for one farm had given up due to changed conditions: when the big meat and dairy manufacturers stopped buying meat and milk from small producers (for a brief overview of the transition period of the 1990s in rural areas and the contemporary rural situation in Estonia, see Nugin, 2014, pp. 53–54).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was also an important factor that allowed for the development of Estonian rural tourism on a larger and more international scale. Before that, tourism was regulated by the state and therefore there were no small-scale rural tourism
entrepreneurs. It has to be noted, however, that many entrepreneurs did start their activities as early as the 1970s and 1980s (even though it was not supported by the state legislation). In 1992, the Department of Tourism was created at the Estonian Farmers’ Central Union in order to help its members find additional sources of income besides their agricultural production (Ardel, 2004, p. 44) and one of the alternatives to the traditional production farm was to become a farm for the tourists. This transition, in a wider European context, has been described by Busby and Rendle (2000), who showed how the emphasis changed from ‘tourism on a farm’ to ‘farm tourism’, where the component relating to tourism became the main activity of many farm businesses, replacing ‘traditional’ farm life.

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in Võru County, in south-east Estonia. Southern Estonia is one of the most popular rural tourism destinations in Estonia, along with western Estonia and the islands. The area mostly advertises its nature tourism (hiking, canoeing, wild berry and mushroom picking and fishing) and culture tourism (the local Võro dialect, the tradition of playing the local variety of the concertina, the Teppo lõõts, food, and the culture of the Setos, the latter being under the protection of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage and has therefore gathered quite a lot of media attention in recent years).

During the first field trip in 2008, I mainly studied issues related to local identity but, after my attention was shifted to the general topic of tourism by my colleague Ester Bardone (then Võsu), we undertook a second field trip to study issues mainly related to rural tourism (Võsu & Kaaristo, 2009). Although initially our questionnaire did not include questions about the aural environment, I began to focus on the issue while analysing the responses to the interviews conducted in 2008, in which the farmers quite often talked about the acoustic elements of their surroundings and the importance they placed on them in their lives. The preliminary discussion of what the farmers perceived as ‘silence’ and its close connection to rural temporalities can be found in Kaaristo and Järv (2012, pp. 125–128).

I visited 11 different tourism farms in short ‘back-and-forth’ field trips and conducted altogether 13 in-depth interviews between 2008 and 2013. All the interviews except for two were conducted at the entrepreneurs’ respective farms. Two couples were interviewed together; ten interviews were conducted by me and Ester Bardone, and three by me. All the interviews (except for one unstructured interview in 2013) were semi-structured lasting from an hour to two and a half hours. The questionnaire concentrated on the following topics: the farmers’ general opinions about tourism in Võru County and in Estonia, the farm owners’ motivation for going into the hospitality business, their guests and different services provided at the farms, local life in general, also local culture and environment with regard to the tourism and hospitality services. The interviews (conducted in Estonian, all fully transcribed and then thematically analysed), the field diaries (sound diary, and the fieldwork diaries describing the (participant) observation and the interview situations), photos, informal conversations with both the entrepreneurs and local people, and, to a smaller extent, the web pages of tourism farms, comprise the empirical source material of this paper.

In 2013, I specifically paid attention to the aural, sound and acoustic elements in tourism farmers’ narrations during interviews when in the field and I started keeping a sound diary in addition to my regular fieldwork diary. It was not easy to study sound, which ‘inhabits its own time and dissipates quickly’ and is ‘too brief and ephemeral to attract much attention, let alone occupy the tangible duration favoured by methods of research’ (Kahn, 1999, p. 5). I engaged in ‘deep listening’ (Bull & Back, 2003, p. 4) of my surroundings when in the field, an alert, thoughtful and critical type of auditory attention, with the intention of
comprehending how the world surrounding us becomes present through the variety of its sounds.

Creating value: the rural sound idyll

Values (as opinions and principles belonging to people) are ‘ends, goals, interests, beliefs, ethics, biases, attitudes, traditions, morals and objectives that change with human perception and with time’ (Henning, 1974, p. 15). People lean on their values when making choices and decisions in the course of their lives that make actions meaningful. The social psychologists Bilsky and Schwartz (1994) see these personal values as cognitive representations of people’s needs, which comprise beliefs or behaviours, and which guide our choices and the ways we assess different situations and experiences. The phenomenon of tourism is simultaneously an expression and experience of such values, its practices emerging from the normative cultural environment surrounding us (Jamal & Robinson, 2012, p. 3).

However, the idea of value can also be looked at as a property belonging to various commodities; according to Arjun Appadurai

value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, constructed broadly. (1986, p. 3, original italics)

Therefore, various material and immaterial objects and phenomena obtain value (be it emotional, aesthetic or spiritual) in the eyes of individuals and social groups – and the value as a belief about something can thus be transformed into value as property. The hosts’ and guests’ values that are reverberated in the appreciation of certain rural environments can at some point be transformed into the economic, monetary value attached to an overnight stay at rural tourism enterprise for example. But value is also embodied in the intangible ‘commodities’ traded between rural tourism hosts and guests – intangible natural or atmospheric phenomena, just like people and commodities, also have social lives. So, rural tourism can be seen as an arena where different values meet and have to be negotiated between different agents and where the value-as-belief is transformed into value-as-property and back again, creating various ‘regimes of value’ (Appadurai, 1986).

The rural environments themselves do not have an ‘intrinsic value or meaning: these are established and re-established continually’ (Tacchi, 2012 [1998], p. 26) in each specific environment.

In tourism research, values as cognitive representations have mostly been studied in understanding that people’s beliefs and end goals are important keys to understanding tourist motivation. According to Weeden (2011), who used Schwartz’s value survey to determine the values underpinning the choices of responsible tourists, the tourists claimed to have found a sense of ‘inner peace’ by being close to nature, giving up modern consumption demands and achieving a sense of renewal from experiencing the surrounding nature. Indeed, as Kaplan (1984, p. 190) has suggested, natural surroundings are often ‘proclaimed for their capacity to instil a sense of peace and serenity. … Somehow, tranquillity is more readily achieved in the natural context’. The tourism farmers of Võru County recognise the potential commercial and economical values of their environment that lie in these types of beliefs and needs. Thus, the ‘tourist efforts to consume culture are incorporated into local cultural systems of meaning and transformed according to local values’ (Annist, 2013, p. 253) when hosts and guests interact.
Sensory perception in general and auditory experience in particular are simultaneously social, cultural and physical commodities; in addition to reacting to or perceiving physical phenomena, our senses also channel our personal values. In rural tourism, as evident from my fieldwork, the values-as-beliefs of the hosts are very important and can shape and influence the tourism establishment in significant ways. It is often the case that tourism farmers share these values with their guests or at least that is what is hoped for; the tourism farmers expect that the perceived tranquility of their surroundings is appreciated by their guests. The personal values that guide both hosts and guests are determining factors that help to shape an aural environment that is suitable for both the giving and the receiving ends of these tourism situations and, in this interaction, a specific kind of aural place is born, a place that is ‘generated by the temporality of the auditory’ (Labelle, 2010, p. xvii) – the rural sound idyll.

The rural idyll, although mostly represented in visual ways, inherently also implies an aural environment, which is often constructed in negations to urban sounds: the absence of traffic noise, human and non-human sounds of the busy streets, occasional planes flying by, loud music, construction sounds, etc. In its idealised form, it consists of sounds associated with nature (birdsong, wind, etc.) and other sounds that belong to the sanitised version of countryside discussed above. This ideal environment can be described by the words ‘peace’, ‘quiet’, and ‘serene’, and ‘summed up by the concept of tranquillity, which refers to a soothing, calming environment’ (Woods, 2011, p. 111). The idea that there is no visual or auditory ‘contamination’, combined with unspoilt nature is very important to the success of tourism establishments, especially in rural areas, and this is exactly what prospective guests are promised:

Life in the city is full of stress and noises. That is why we need to escape, to find peace. There is nothing better than to enjoy the beauty of the nature.6

Paul Rodaway, too, points out, that for various reasons the natural sound of the ‘crashing falls fascinates [people] in a way that the air conditioning motors, for instance, appear not to’ (1994, p. 108). The rural sound idyll comprises manifold of sounds: the sounds of animals (birdsong, different insects, domesticated and wild animals), streams and waterfalls, farmyard sounds and weather: wind, rain, thunder, etc. These are what Rodaway (1994, pp. 87–88) calls soundmarks, sounds that are recognised and shared by a certain social group. Rodaway also stresses the relatively unique or specific nature of soundmarks to a particular community (i.e. they can encompass the sounds of certain familiar church bells or factory horns). However, I would argue that although this sort of special characteristics might be absent in the sound environments of some particular farms, their respective individual soundmarks are what make the sound environment of each studied farm both unique and familiar to the owners of each farm. For example, here are some soundmarks of the aural environment of a tourism farm at around 11 pm in July, as experienced by me:

The silence consists of birdsong, trees swishing in the wind, insects chirring (crickets? grasshoppers?). … Jennifer the dog barking now and then. And of course the mosquitoes. The overwhelming twang of mosquitoes that doesn’t stop for a moment, stressing the fact that I’m being totally eaten by them and my whole body aches and is covered with red spots. … A cuckoo is calling, some frogs are croaking. (Kaaristo, sound diary, 2013)

This auditory environment, as characterised by the example above, changes as you move closer to the village, when other sounds join in. When walking from the farm to the
village, other sounds emerge, such as cars passing by, the shouts and talk of the people camping at a nearby lake, the rather loud music they are playing and the music from some cars passing by. Reaching the central village of Haanja, there are more cars and more people passing by. The birdsong is still prevalent, except during the weekend, when the sounds of lawnmowers and trimmers can be heard from many directions, making the sounds of different actors all blend into one auditory environment that is not necessarily always characterised by its quietness.

In her article ‘The Meaning of Peace and Quiet in Norway’, Gullestad (1990, p. 41) discusses the notions of ‘peace’ and ‘quiet’ in Norwegian everyday contexts, stating that ‘together they constitute a cultural category, intrinsic to social identity and action in the world’. This rings true for Estonians as well, or at least for the tourism farmers I have spoken with, as at one point in my fieldwork I noticed the topic (or trope) of rahu ja vaikus (‘peace and quiet’) being repeated many times during our discussions. Just as Gullestad distinguishes several areas of peace and quiet where these notions are applied – describing personal qualities or people, emotional states, social actions and relations, and objects – similar ideas play an important role in the Estonian tourism farmers’ everyday life. A farmer (M, 38) explained that he likes to live in his village ‘because of this sense of peace’, which is mainly connected to him placing a lot of value on privacy. Another research participant (M, 50) stated very clearly that he has a type of ‘ideal guest’, as he put it, and that is someone who ‘loves nature, quiet and peace’. Analogous ideas were vocalised by many interviewed farmers and, especially after the economic recession, often concern was expressed about how, due to the changed economy and the continuous decrease in the number of guests, they could not ‘hand-pick’ the guests any more, as they had been able to do only a couple of years earlier.

The perceived ‘peace’ of the rural environment is something that I discovered and I had noted down in my fieldwork diary too, well before my research focus turned to aural environments. As it turns out, I too must have been somewhat an ‘ideal guest’ for my hosts, as I seem to have had exactly the experience that was expected of me, so carefully laid out by the hosts:

You’re sitting on the doorstep in front of the house, there’s peace and quiet around you (the trees rustle in the wind, and somewhere a bird or two tweets), and you have a cup of coffee with you. … There is happiness in those moments where you want to be exactly where you are, because you just know: this is perfect and everything is exactly as it’s supposed to be. (Kaaristo, field notes 2010)

The feeling described above in my field diary, the sense of perfect belongingness, has very strong auditory aspects. Kaplan (1984, p. 192) suggests the importance of fascination when perceiving the natural environment, and how in some natural settings the elements that hold fascination create the sense of tranquillity via being ‘calming and quieting: the rustle of leaves, a sunlit raindrop, the view of the woods or of a flowering meadow’. This is complemented by a second major factor that provides restorative experience, coherence, which according to Kaplan and Talbot (1983, as cited in Kaplan, 1984, p. 192) is ‘the result of organization, of finding a way to put pieces together into a meaningful whole’. While the fascination seems more of a multisensory experience with strong auditory aspects to it, the sense of coherence is more visual, relying heavily on what meets the eye: the trimmed lawn at a (tourism) farm, wheat fields, forests, etc. According to Kaplan, fascination and coherence have to occur together in order to achieve a true restorative experience, a sense of ‘being in a whole other world’ and the rural sound idyll is one possible environment for such experiences.
Competing values: power over sound

To achieve the desired auditory environment, the rural sound idyll, the surrounding space and the ways it is perceived have to be somewhat arranged by the tourism farmer; some aspects or elements of it need to be downplayed and others reinforced. Tim Edensor argues that, in some tourism situations, activities are supervised in ways that are considered appropriate by the hosts and where ‘undesirable elements’ and practices, for example loud music playing, ‘are likely to be deterred by guards, guides and managers’ (Edensor, 2000, p. 328). But this does not necessarily ensure that the guests experience it exactly as intended by the host (Leite & Graburn, 2012, pp. 46–47), which also brings forth the issue of who has the power to control the (aural) environment.

To avoid clashes between hosts’ and guests’ expectations, hosts use various strategies, such as selecting guests who will appreciate what is offered on their farms. In one of the visited farms, for example, the use of pyrotechnics by the guests is strongly discouraged by the owner of the farm and instead, big bonfires are lit during the night so that the guests can still enjoy a visual spectacle. This is without the loud sounds of fireworks that were disturbing the neighbours, thus ‘educating’ the guests to appreciate a different kind of aural environment. The owner of that farm (M, 50) commented on this by saying that ‘for city people, the silence and the birdsong kill them’, and he went on to explain how some guests deal with this discomfort by listening to very loud music or shooting fireworks. According to him, the guests often had to be coaxed into communicating with their surroundings in the ‘right’ way from his point of view, a position which comprises different elements such as his personal values but also the fact that he has to take into consideration the complaints of his neighbours (both people living nearby but also other tourism farmers who want to secure the ‘appropriate’ aural environment for their respective guests).

This brings us to the issues of power with regard to the aural environment. In order to ensure their guests the necessary rural sound idyll, hosts also might, for example, avoid doing certain farm chores (especially those involving machinery) before noon because the tourists might be sleeping and the farmers do not want to fill their environment with sounds that are not ‘suitable’ for this environment, recognising that the rural sound idyll is not only threatened by distinctively urban noises but also by modern everyday rural farming activities, such as tractors ploughing or chainsaws cutting firewood. Tension can arise between the two necessities for the farmers as well; some farmers have shown signs of mild amusement or even irritation with guests who sleep until noon because they are on holiday, a daily routine that presents a contrast to that of the host for whom this is a regular workday. This tension is especially evident on tourism farms where agricultural production is an important source of income for the farm owners, necessitating a reconciliation of their dual roles as farmer and host.

 Guests also ‘domesticate’ the encountered new sound environment, so that it corresponds to their needs and notions of what it is to have a good time. The most common feature of this domestication comes via playing loud music and hence dominating space with sound through the use of (often excessive, from the viewpoint of the host and/or other village dwellers) amplification of a single source of sound. This submerges the pre-existing environment under the blanket of this new dominant sound (Rodaway, 1994, p. 108).

This is especially the case with guests whom the tourism farmers call ‘partiers’ (pidut-sejad): people who rent farmhouses for the sole purpose of ‘partying’, which usually involves taking a sauna and consuming alcoholic drinks. These partiers have different motivations, according to the interviewed farmers, and are seldom interested in the
recreational activities offered to them by farm owners (hiking, walking, etc.) and definitely do not fit into their category of the ‘ideal guest’, who loves peace and quiet. The parties of students graduating from high school were especially mentioned in this regard, and many farmers expressed their reluctance to accommodate such events for fear of excessive alcohol consumption by the young people and potential problems caused by it; the neighbours and they themselves being disturbed by the noise, significant property damage during such parties and occasionally the need to involve the police. Some farmers said that when it was time for graduation parties (usually June) and young people called to book the houses, they regularly said they were booked. However, for economic reasons, not all tourism farmers can do this, and they accommodate the parties whose look on the appropriate sound environment differs significantly from their own.

In cases like this, different frameworks of cultural and social preferences and values come into play. For the interviewed farmers, their aural environment is something to be enjoyed and also respected—a perspective that clashes with some of their guests who do not share the same values. The reasons for this can vary; for example, Tacchi (2012 [1998]) has demonstrated how the perceived silence can be both positive and negative, depending on the context and timing. In certain circumstances, silence can be undesired; for some people an aural environment without distinctive familiar sounds, for example radio or a TV, can signify isolation, loneliness or boredom. Various sound acts can create an environment of homeliness and the sound from, for example, radio ‘can be seen to fill “empty” space and “empty” time with a familiar routine’ (Tacchi 2012 [1998]). Thus, by adding their own sounds (i.e. music or the radio) to the rural aural environment, the guests might just be attempting to make their environments more familiar, home-like. But the very same sound act can be seen as ‘music’ or ‘noise’ by different people. The individual sound zones (of hosts and guests) that emerge in the particular sound environment can thus be not only overlapping, but also conflicting. The aural environments, comprising various sound acts, some ‘natural’ and others artificial (or perceived as such), some downplayed, others enhanced, sometimes have to be negotiated between the host and the guest. A farm owner (M, 50) noted, in a somewhat ironic manner, that the guests ‘just have to listen to radio or music albums that they have brought with them, “something that would make as much noise as possible so that they wouldn’t hear the [natural] sounds that surround them”. Another farm owner (F, 50 s) is more relaxed; the music, however loud, does not exactly bother her (though she mostly maintains control over it); her notion of ‘peace and quiet’ is having no TVs in the house.

According to other tourism farmers the search for a different environment, for ‘peace and quiet’, can sometimes involve negative elements, in that the encountered environment is something strange and so out of the ordinary that people do not necessarily have the tools to deal with it. The guests may encounter a wide variety of incentives which can evoke a range of emotions, so that ‘often, tourists feel that such sites exert power over them and destabilize their identity’ (Picard, 2012). One of the tourism farm owners described what, according to her claim, happened to many of her guests on quite a regular basis, in the following way:

Our guests can go hiking near the Piusa [River]; my husband takes them. There’s no special trail there and the nature is truly terrific. You really feel that you’re alone. Actually, people are so estranged from themselves; they get scared, and they’re afraid of themselves. They get nervous, and feel that something is not right. And then we have to calm them down, with tea for example. And when they get nervous they need to switch on some noise. Because they don’t understand what’s happening to them. They wake up in the middle of the night quite often and don’t understand what’s going on. This happens in the winter, not the summer. And then they understand—it’s the complete silence. Because we have complete
silence here in the wintertime. It’s the same as in the forest: you meet yourself. It scares them.

(F, 55)

This compares well to the ‘tourist moment’, an epiphanic experience, ‘spontaneous instance of self-discovery as well as a feeling of communal belonging elicited by serendipity’ (Cary, 2004, p. 64). Via such narratives the tourism farmers create a specific kind of rurality, the rural idyll, with its different aural quality they perceive on their farms. The farmers dwell in their soundscapes, perceiving them through different modes of practice that add a different quality to their life-worlds. Therefore, the personal experience of the host is one of the most important aspects when creating and mediating experiences for visitors. By doing this, they construct both ideal rurality – the rural sound idyll – and a notion of the ideal guest. Thus some guests and some ruralities are excluded and others included. The authors of these aural environments are not solely hosts or guests; it is not necessarily the tourist triggering local responses but the host in conversation with their guests ‘recreating’ the rural sound idyll.

Conclusion

The tourism farmers lean on their values when they make choices and decisions regarding their auditory environments and these choices make their actions and decisions meaningful. The interviewed tourism farmers value the sense of silence, the ‘peace and quiet’ – the atmospheric value that can be converted into a commercial one – the perceived peaceful countryside that is offered to potential guests. This does not mean that the outside demand for rural tranquillity is the sole reason for the farmers to modify their aural environments. The farm owners’ own personal values and ideas about rurality and what it means to live in the countryside play a role here too and both the hosts’ and guests’ systems of meaning are interconnected when the rural sound idyll is created. The sound idyll is of course also a disputed ground, for there are many different stakeholders there with their own interests in mind and the guests’ ideas of the suitable aural environment does not always match with the one of the hosts’. When arranging and (re)creating this environment, some elements are brought into the foreground while others are downplayed and when the values of hosts, guests and other locals living nearby clash, different regimes of value emerge.

Contemporary rural entrepreneurs interpret their environments, constructing both the notions and ideas of rurality and the ideal tourist. The notion of ‘peace and quiet’, which tourism farmers regard as an important quality of their aural surroundings, is of key importance here. This idea plays a major role when the rural sound idyll is created. The value produced through the intangible and atmospheric natural resources is the result of the interchange of various constructions of rurality by the tourism farmers, who create and recreate their respective sound idylls and mediate them to their guests. These constructions of rurality, which have been developing through the interaction of each individual’s values, influence the lived experiences of the tourism farmers and thus, by extension, their guests and their general (rural) environment. The cultural, social and economic values that are embodied in the intangible ‘commodities’ are traded between the hosts and guests and, as a result, the auditory environment is changed in the process.

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Notes
1. This is illustrated on a homepage of one of the visited tourism farms, where old farmhouses from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth century are very visibly arranged and refurnished in such way as to meet the needs and standards of the contemporary tourist, together with the slogan: ‘If old Estonians had had motels, the best of them would have been like this’. Retrieved January 20, 2014, from http://www.haanjamehetalu.ee/est/tut

2. Arcadia is a Greek province in Peloponnesse region. Already in early history, it was depicted in poetry as idyllic rural land. The start of the Arcadian tradition in the West starts with the Renaissance when court nobility, clergy and other members of the elite started to idealise rural life. The tradition of appreciating nature, which reflects in the landscape painting and ideas of rural idyll in literature, reached new heights in Romanticism (van Koppen, 2000, p. 304).

3. According to the Estonian Tourism Law (§23(3)), in the name of a guest house, hostel, camp or bread and breakfast located in a rural area, the word ‘tourism farm’ (turismitalu) can be used.

4. I will use Võro as the English equivalent for the endonym võrokõnõ. On Võro linguistic identities, see Brown (2008).

5. Setomaa (Setoland), with its distinctive culture, and heavily promoted in Estonian tourism, covers a part of the studied Võru County, but I have interviewed only the tourism farmers who identify themselves as Võros. On some aspects of Seto identity, see Leete (2010), and for a discussion of the commodification of Seto culture in tourism, see Annist (2013). There is some tension sometimes between the two neighbouring regions when competing for tourists in conditions of economic recession. Those Setos, they have the [folk] clothes and the religion so they’re visually very distinguishable’, a research participant once told me with half-joking and half-serious bitterness. ‘We the Võros don’t have anything like that; we only have the language [Võro dialect], so we have to try extra hard [to succeed in tourism].


References

