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# “Qualia”: the subjective qualities of sound as experience of the self

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# “Qualia”: the subjective qualities of sound as experience of the self

## **Abstract**

How do we construct the perception of the world and Others through sounds? How are we able to express the myriad of feelings inside ourselves into an intelligible structure in order to be understood? What is the amount of interference in the way we express those [translated] feelings? These are some of the subtle questions raised by “Qualia”, a five-episode radio feature by Spanish artist and performer Charo Calvo, aired in 2016 by ABC Radio National’s Soundproof show in Australia.

The name “Qualia” evokes the philosophical theory of an internal and subjective component of sense and mental perceptions, which are considered incommunicable. Calvo’s feature is somehow an endeavour to materialise it through sound. It is an experimental-storytelling-audio-performance that links the plasticity of the vibrations of sound, emotions, identities, by sharing the experiences of four migrant women, living in Belgium, who are also artists, plus Charo Calvo herself. It is a patchwork that intricately weaves sound as an experience of translating the inner world we experience. The author sculpts sound based in transformative moments of qualia for those five women, based on oral storytelling (“she says”). As they speak several languages, according to their backgrounds (French, Hebrew, Italian, Turkish, English), translation is being made by other two women. Moreover, the audio script is also translated into English, and the author of this essay is a Portuguese woman, a fact that amplifies the “interferences” as the qualia of “noise”. Therefore, this is a personal reflexive exercise on Charo Calvo’s radio feature. It is an extraordinary piece of audio art but it requires high audio literacy, as it demands of audiences the mature exercise of listening more than once in order to understand. So it might not be engaging the first time, but it indeed disturbs us, inviting us to dive into the subjective qualities of ourselves.

## **Keywords**

qualia, Charo Calvo, radio, sound experiences, storytelling, audio feature

# “Qualia”: the subjective qualities of sound as experience of the self

*by Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues*

## “QUALIA” by Charo Calvo.

**Sound Engineer:** Bastien Hidalgo Ruiz. **Reader:** Kitty Crowther / Zahava Seebald / Meryam Bayram / Caroline Daish / Charo Calvo. **Supervising Producer:** Miyuki Jokiranta / Carmelo Iannuzzo. **Production by** ABC (Australia) Radio National Soundproof, with the support of ACSR Belgium and FACR (Funds For Radio From French Community Belgium) from Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles

**Duration:** 5 episodes, 45 minutes. ABC Radio National, “SoundProof”, 2016.

*Winner, Prix Art Sonore aux Phonurgia Nova awards 2017; First Prize in Radio Art at Phonurgia*

**LISTEN TO THE ORIGINAL AUDIO:** [https://abcmedia.akamaized.net/rn/podcast/](https://abcmedia.akamaized.net/rn/podcast/2016/09/sof_20160930_2105.mp3)

[2016/09/sof\\_20160930\\_2105.mp3](https://abcmedia.akamaized.net/rn/podcast/2016/09/sof_20160930_2105.mp3)

[https://soundcloud.com/acsr\\_bxl/qualia-de-charo-calvo](https://soundcloud.com/acsr_bxl/qualia-de-charo-calvo)

### **1. THE SIMPLE COMPLEXITY OF “QUALIA”**

*“In short, he wanted to know them because he understood that to know ourselves we have to know Others, who act as the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected; he knew that to understand ourselves better we have to understand Others, to compare ourselves with them, to measure ourselves against them” (Kapuscinski, 2004)*

What is the nature of sound? What's its speed? How does it speak to us? How do we construct the perception of the world and Others through sounds? How do we grieve or translate the pain and feelings of loss? How are we able to express the myriad of feelings inside ourselves into an intelligible structure in order to be understood? How do we sense the experience of fear differently even though it seems to be the same word? What is the universality of it? What is the plasticity of different voices in different languages? What is the anatomy and the body of a voice? What are the deep feelings of someone who cannot hear or speak? What is the silence of the silence? How can qualia be meta-language, and therefore *meta-storytelling*?

Close your eyes. Imagine you're immersing yourself into an oniric experience, where feminine voices, languages (Spanish, Italian, French, English, Turkish and Hebrew), soundscapes and daily urban noises co-exist and happen faster than the speed of your perception. Do you see what we mean? Well, maybe not, because we're not even close to what "Qualia", the radiophonic creation by Spanish artist Charo Calvo, is. She loves to sculpt sound, objectifying it. Therefore, from this idea and her intentions we can start approaching "Qualia". For the Spanish artist, sound is

Vibration, energy in movement. Interaction of sounds is always about transmission exchange, reaction or energetic conflict. These interactions trigger in us auxiliary sensations other than the aural – tactile and mental images are induced by particular sounds. Thanks to the technical possibility of recording sounds, keeping them fixed and stored in a medium, my computer, enjoy treating them as objects.

“Qualia” is this complex infinite mosaic in layers ("objects"), mixed in several synesthetic experiences that try to open a way to reach the

subconscious. In philosophy, Qualia is the term to refer to the internal and subjective component of sense and mental perceptions, which are considered impossible to communicate. According to David Dennett (1988) they are ineffable, intrinsic, private and immediately apprehensible, meaning that they are a blurry area of the properties of an experience that cannot be expressed and communicated in fullness.

Moreover, no language is universal, there are constraints, so there is always something lost in translation. And that's part of what Charo Calvo - who has been living in Belgium for the past 30 years, and has to speak daily in more or less five languages - wants to share with the listeners. Accordingly, "Qualia" is a kind of sound cartography for several Qualia (the incommunication of a feeling, colour, etcetera). For instance, in this radio feature: memories, fear, tenderness, childhood, grief.

## ***2. SOUND AS STORYTELLING-PERFORMANCE***

"Qualia" (44'21'') is an experimental-storytelling-audio-performance. It links the plasticity of the vibrations of sound, emotions, identities: the melange of migration and the anatomy of the Feminine(s) Voice(s), creating oniric mental images by playing with it. Furthermore, it seems to rescue the idea/format of oral storytelling, but instead of "Once upon a time", we have a woman saying, originally in French "Elle dit" ("She says"), every time there is a translation of the discourse. Speech and translations are intrinsically attached to the soundscapes, imposing an overdose of sounds: we have to dance with them along the way not to feel dizzy with the speed at which they come and go.

Even though Belgium is the common ground for seven women (five characters plus the translators), the geography of this audio feature is sound (speech and its variations, tone, noise, vocal utterance, musical tone, an audible vibrational disturbance, whispers, mechanical vibrations, voices and distorted voices, murmuring, etc.). Notwithstanding, the country has three national languages, Flemish, German and French, and its capital Brussels is also the seat of the European Parliament, providing a diversity of backgrounds and languages. So, on any given day in Brussels we can hear several languages swirl around us. And, if you live there, you have to think daily about which language to use and where. This also means: in which language should people think, dream, feel? In this context, Charo presents us with the speed of thought, feelings and memories of each character. Sound is the language, the raw material to be moulded.

### **3. FIVE EPISODES, SEVEN VOICES**

"Qualia" is divided into five chapters: five women artists, performers, coming from distinct cultural backgrounds, share a strong and transformative physical experience, which was a fracturable moment in their life. And they all live in Belgium.

1. Kitty Crowther; 2) Zahava Seewald; 3) Sonia Pastecchia; 4) Meryem Bayram; 5) Calvo Charo;

In this radio feature they are translated by two other women:

a) Caroline Daish, performer, dancer and director; born in Australia, has lived in Belgium for twenty years.

b) Laurence Vielle, poet and performer, born in Belgium to a Flemish mother and French father;

So, "Qualia" is an intense sensorial experience, with layers of "objects", identities and an overdose of "translations". The raw material for the five women is the experience. Their tool to tell and sense is sound, transforming it into an energetic conflict. Each of the audio features starts with what seems to be first an establishing presentation in the format of an subjective "this is me", "this is my world" and "these are the sounds that transmit my qualia". After this "context", the story flows like a puzzle, and the listeners have to unite the pieces in order to construct the story: the perception of a narrative.

Thus, individually, these women share their intimate stories, which are translated from their main language of expression into French.

I've listened to all the five chapters all together, by order, and also had access to the audio scripts translated into English. Moreover, I am Portuguese. So, not only the audio experience had to be more immersive - and therefore inevitably intricate and comparative - but also I had the translation of the translation, which got me into a net, a game of mental effort and a sound maze of feelings and mental images .

#### ***4. THE QUALIA OF SOUND IN FIVE EPISODES***

Sound is one of the Qualia for the five women: i.e. what is the sound of sound? Each story has indeed several layers (the implicit and the explicit discourses), but we can highlight what seems to be the leading threads of each. Furthermore, we are able to identify a common (direct or indirectly) theme: the relation of sound with that transformative physical experience they lived. The richness and complexity of the audio features makes it unfair

and inaccurate to limit it to a frame of analysis. So, this is a possible free path of sensing and interpreting.

***In the first episode*** (10'21'') ([Kitty and the Qualia](#)) we listen to the experience of [Kitty Crowther](#), author and illustrator, born in Belgium to a British father and Swedish mother, raised in English and French. The experience of Kitty is marked by the idea of not listening too well and therefore she had to learn to construct her world. Then as we, listeners, go along in the narrative with her: we dive into the experience of being on a boat and not listening very well. It is a struggle between the noisy world to be perceived and being born in silence, the true nature of Kitty's self.

Starts like this: A distorted voice speaking. Echo of a boat hitting the deck, a liquid sound: water. It is the epilogue of the entrance door of Kitty and Qualia, and remains as a soundscape. Then Kitty speaks originally in English - the translation is in French - and she shares the story that she doesn't "hear very clearly" since she was born.

**Kitty says it over her filtered and disturbing voice.**

*(0'34'') I don't hear very clearly since I was born. I was six when I started to wear hearing aids"*

**Next we are presented with what seems to be the qualia of fear for her: water.**

Kitty: *(0'34'') "Like all machines, it does not get along with water. Better not to have them on the boat"*

**Then she invites us to emphasise the idea that without sound (without listening) we can get lost in the expectations Others have of our perception of the world.**

*(0'54'') "I had seven years of speech therapy, it took me a while to get all the world straight.*

*I watch lips, like a ballet dance"*

**Along the feature, description and sensations are also described to recall the moment:**

*(02'30'') "I am wearing an orange life jacket. I am sucking the tightwoven night blue strap*

*A lovely taste of salt and tears. An echo of sobbing. A backwards comfort."*

**And also the mix of colours as sounds.**

*(04'10'') Each colour becomes a sound, a frequency, a tune.*

*Playing with the low and the high notes. Subtle light which reacts to the tunes,*

*just like a drum. It vibrates in return.*

*(...)*

*(07'06'') Water acts as a healing balm for me.*

**The same life jacket saved her from drowning.**

*(07'35'') And then, I drift off the boat and fall into the water*

**She dives into a new world**

*(07'53'') A world almost without a sound. Huge arms takes me, surround me with the green. Everything is pure.*

*Everything is so quiet, so still. Inside. Outside. Eyes wide open.*

*I am aware and i am unaware. I am and i am not. I know everything and i know nothing.*

We listen to the rewind of sounds (08'36''). It seems to be the rewind of her body falling into the water. A new "born" emerging of a liquid sound. The sea. And a possible qualia of silence.

**She is rescued by her protective *pre-self***

*(08'46'')* My mother's face is tense with fear and, her eyes are cold, reflecting intense concentration.

*(...)*

**And the sea is like the amniotic liquid inside her mother before she was born**

*(09'36'')* Ocean sea who loves and accepts all in silence

At the end: the sound of electric interference, a whisper, and onomatopoeic sounds. Did we, listeners, get everything from this experience? It requires, indeed, a second moment of listening, in order to perceive all that is conveyed, such is the richness and the entanglement of the symbolic elements presented.

**The second episode** (09'06'') ([Zahava and the Qualia](#)) is dedicated to the testimony of [Zahava Seewald](#), singer and curator, born in Belgium to a Jewish family, of Polish and Moroccan background. She shares, in Hebrew (translated into French), what seems to be a childhood experience when a boy, who lived near her, stroked her on her forehead with a "small sharp stone". She was raised in French, Hebrew, Flemish, Yiddish and sings

Sephardic and Ashkenaze songs. She is a mosaic of cultural diversity. She speaks in Hebrew and is translated into French.

The radio feature is divided into three actions: **1) the present** on public transport, which triggers **2) the reminiscence of childhood** evoked by the melodic word "GAAGOUIM " - an unknown word said to her by an unknown woman who asked if she felt "GAAGOUIM " for her village. The memory brings her again to the **3) present**. And then she understands what the unknown word might be: pain.

So at the beginning we listen to her singing. Then a disturbing siren. Afterwards it introduces to us the preliminary idea of how others look at us and invade our private space in public - like the woman in the public transport- hurting somehow our freedom to preserve an intimate identity.

*"ZAHAVA: (in French) Well I am in the bus and all those people talking... they think they have to know everything about me, that they can ask whatever they want; are you Jewish, or not, languages you are able to speak, are you married, divorced, how many kids?..."*

*TRANSLATOR:*

*Where do you come from?"*

A stranger, a woman asks her for her homeland and if she feels GAAGOUIM for it. But she does not know what that word means. And here starts the reminiscence. The soundscapes are: flies, bugs, stones, wind, voices, birds. She says someone cuts her hair at a rudimentary barber. The she goes home, but something happens.

(15'04")

*The little boy who lives next door is in his front garden. He wants to play, I want to hide. He scares me.*

*I feel something strike my forehead. Hard and violent.*

*A small sharp stone. A few drops of blood fall.*

Then the present. She has a scar. She sings, then a bird, several bugs. The scar is a reminder of her village, of her feeling for it.

(16'29")

**GAAGOUIM.**

*That word that i did not know.*

*To sing is a little like that. It is a bright light, a pain.*

*Heat and loneliness. To fill a void. An expecting presence.*

GAAGOUIM is time and pain in a word. It is the qualia of the childhood memory. It a continuous presence. GAAGOUIM is the scar.

At the end, a strange sound of a train is heard. It seems like a flute. Time is passing, it is that train. Memories are oniric trains.

**The third part (8'50")** presents to us Sonia Pastecchia, (19'23") actress and film director, who also works as a voice coach and teacher. She was born in Belgium of Italian parents and therefore she was raised in Italian and French. She speaks in Italian (translated into French) and in the beginning of the chapter we hear her barking, introducing the metaphor of the audio feature. From this starting point, she also translates herself into French and

English, mixing both languages. She then shares the story of her “little white dog”, who died tragically, hit by a “white van” and its relation with the death of her mother, whose hair “was all white” (26’36’’) when she died. And white seems to be the qualia of grief and pain for Sonia.

We continuously listen to what seems to be to a dog weeping as a soundscape, mixed with several metallic sounds and a xylophone. From this tragic moment starts then the crescendo to the conflict. She can’t stop crying and her mother says to her that she has to stop it. (23’37’’) “It was only a dog! I am sure you won’t cry like that for me when I die”. At the end

*(26’44’’) I cried, yelled, wept without restraint before her dead body, the same way I wept before Lira’s.*

*But she could not hear me...*

She ends the story weeping like a dog. The barking is disturbing because we can visualise her pain.

**Meryem Bayram** ([Meryem and the Qualia](#), 28’19’’), audiovisual artist and scenographer, is the main character of the **Fourth Episode** (10’). Born in Belgium of Turkish parents, raised in Turkish and Flemish languages.

At the beginning of the radio feature we listen to the sound of stones hitting one another. At the same time Meryem sings while small stones are thrown (it is the five stones game, originally from Asia). Afterwards she speaks in Turkish, explaining the game. Beneath her voice we have a percussion. After a while another woman translates her words into French. (“*Elle dit*”). Then a gunshot, the translation, then Meryem sings again. Next, we listen to dogs

barking, nervously, then a gunshot again. Then Meryem and beneath her voice we have music: what seems to be a rhythm made by stones (30'25"), as if they were also percussion. Her voice then fades out. Fade in: birds, insects and a car passing by. Here we fully understand what is the *leitmotiv* of the narrative. The five stones game introduced in the beginning of the radio feature are the pretext of a moment in Meryem's childhood to engage a little boy who refuses to speak. She was on holidays. We listen to clappers, sheep, someone digging the soil. Therefore: we are in a rural place. In this environment a kid was hit by a stone in the head.

**(30'24") "One day something fell on his head and since then he refused to speak."**

Accordingly, the stones seem also to be the qualia of silence. A symbolic metaphor for it, even though seemingly it may be a noisy confrontation. Who will be changed by the lapidation of stone-against-stone? Meryem or the boy? We give thought to this dialectic wondering. Meryem had to learn to "speak" with the silence. Her world of verbal communication is crossing the border to the world of non-verbal communication. It starts here:

**(31'32") *MERYEM SINGS* TIK taki kaki tak tak , Five Stone Game"**

She tries to emulate the sound of stones hitting one another, so she does the above sound herself for more or less 30 seconds (from 31'32" until 32'04"). It seems like a manifesto for the moment:

**(32'19") "I wanted to be part of his silence so I invited him to play the 5 stone game"**

He accepted to play, so they created a bond based in the power of silence. And silence has the soundscapes of the "visible" world: kids playing, the stones "dancing" on the floor, someone digging, birds, an engine working. Nonetheless, it seems as if the qualia of silence is the sound of the stones in the game, like dice of a game. But then there is the sound of a gunshot again. Together they search for good stones for the game. Symbolically, they are searching for what is left of the "verbal communication" world, to construct their own world in a meaning of "good" stones that are being gathered like pieces of a missing puzzle.

Then we have the percussion again and Meryem's voice, explaining the five stone game, but now there is a mixture of two overlapping voices, like an echo.

She gave the boy a stone. He painted it in "red". It is the rotation stone in the game. Here stones are making music. Their bond becomes stronger. *Qualia-silence-stone* becomes touch and tactile sensations.

*(34'22") After playing a while, I offered him the stones: he then slid all the stones back into my palm.*

*Later I put the stones in his hand as I did before.*

*His palm, at the touch, felt like soft dried leaves.*

And then, when the boy throws the stone in the air, she realises he has a birth scar on the palm of his hand. The Qualia of silence gets emotional and strong feelings and this passage is indeed the significant element that gives a vivid description of it.

*(35'20'') Everything around me was moving in slow motion.*

*From between the ground until the sky a fine line was composing in a rhythmic flow.*

*His hand moved between the ground and the air and cut horizontally, as it turned, like a dynamo.*

*As his palm flipped, back and forth, the birth mark appeared each time like a shadow of the falling stone.*

*I was seeing geometric shapes traced on the air by the stone and the birthmark.*

*I could feel the effective power of geometry and figurative sense.*

It is time to say goodbye. Holidays are over. So, in the end, she gave him a notebook where she drew where they caught each stones and how.

*(37'45'') "we made a 'mind map' and how we made our archive together"*

He gave her back the red stone. The memory of the qualia of silence. She has lost it: maybe because she has never had the feeling of this qualia again.

**The fifth and final episode - Charo and the Qualia (05'17'')** - is about Charo Calvo, herself, composer and sound designer. Born in Spain, she has lived in Belgium for 30 years. She is a mother and, her biography notes, has raised her kids in Spanish and Flemish. In this radio feature she speaks in Spanish. Here Charo constructs what seems to be an oniric narrative. Even though she does not talk about who she is, there is a lot of her in this "construction", once it was directed, composed, edited and mixed by her. Are we in her head? How is it? In the beginning we listen to a big interference. There is bass tone. Noise. Sound is harsh: is it the waves being distorted on purpose? It seems as if the sound becomes dust, grains.

Grains of sound? Are they in her head? Her dream? Is it a metaphor to express herself, her qualia? The noisy interference is being interspersed with someone screaming - maybe a child? Voices are calling Charo in the distance. There is then a mysterious sound. Very uncomfortable continuous soundscape. Suspense. We sense discomfort. She knows someone is calling her, but she won't answer. She won't move from where she is ("*no me voy a mover de aqui*") It resembles those woeful dreams: we want to move from one place to another, but there is something that paralyses us. There is something that is grounding us to the place where we are. It seems she is contemplating, feeling and experience the time passing by. The momentum as a *carpe diem*: here and now. She lives the present, sensing the movement of the Earth, experience the grain of the dialogue between these elements [by order or appearance]: touch-sound-sight-sound. E.g.

*(40'58") Occasionally, very cold drops wet my legs.*

*(41'09") I breathe the smell of seaweed, jellyfish...*

*Sardines, shells*

*the smell of old rocks smashed to dust by these waves never ceasing*

*(41'54") pulling along this huge amount of green trembling water.*

*with the clinging clouds*

*the noisy wind, noisy as a puppy,*

*dangerous jittering wasps*

*that small sailboat*

*(42'47") Keep on calling me girls, you screaming and enraged instructors. I am not going to move from here.*

Then electronic sounds, electronic bubbling, interference, the sea, waves with interference. Like translation: it might be always an interference. Is the qualia of translation an interference? A disturbing sound?

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

“Qualia” is a complex radio feature, combining artistic elements and storytelling, and therefore composed by several layers to be interpreted. One interesting aspect of "Qualia" is that it raises more questions of the self, "translated" by audio language, and the consciousness of the unconscious than it gives answers. It has a constant paradox that haunts us: is it performance or not performance? Fiction or nonfiction? The border is not clear, combining a hybrid artistic body of work, where storytelling is the *leitmotiv*. Accordingly, the five stories highlight an interior journey to the inner experience of each character, expressing them as moments of qualia. This is: raw experiences and their sensations, such as the redness of red, the painfulness of pain, the temperature of a stone, the smell of the sea air, the absence of sound as sound, the scream of silence, the self of identity, the Tower of Babel of a translation(s).

Occasionally we, listeners, can immerse into them - and the experience goes better if we listen continuously to the five stories - but at other moments we are so overwhelmed by sounds that we cannot breathe. That is, once in a while we get lost with the overdose of audio stimulus and information, and lose the leading thread.

It's indeed an extraordinary piece of audio art but it demands high audio literacy, as it not easy to get the message at first. “Qualia” demands of audiences the mature exercise of listening more than once to the same

story in order for it to be understood. So it might not be engaging the first time, but it indeed disturbs us somehow, in order to make us want to go through it again. This is because, it is not only the experience of "Qualia" as an experience itself: it needs a deep dive, so that listeners can be fully acquainted with what the audio features are all about. And, therefore, perceive that it is more than a conceptual sound immersion, it is a physical and psychological synaesthetic enthrallment of the self.

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**Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues** is a documentarian and producer of documentary film, journalist, writer, photographer and university professor in Porto, Portugal. She has lived in Brazil, Jordan and has been working and researching in Mozambique. She contributes to several production houses and media outlets in Portugal, such as Radio TSF. Her audio documentary "*Palestine, diaries of an uncertain place*" won an Honourable Mention at the Journalism & Integration Human Rights Award by UNESCO Portugal

(2015). This year, she was an invited speaker at RadioDays Europe in Vienna, Austria ("Emotions and Stories"). She was a member of the jury at the Gabriel Garcia Marquez Journalism Award (2018) from Fundación de Nuevo Periodismo (Colombia); jury of Fest Film Luso-Afro-Brazilian Audiovisual Festival, and jury of the African poetry prize Tchicaya U Tam'si, Assilah, Morocco.

As a film maker, for instance, she directed the feature-length documentary "Baptismo de Terra" (92', 2017) and for it was awarded Best Woman Director at European Cinematography Awards (2018), Best Portuguese Documentary Film at Art & Tur – Tourism Cinema Festival; TV special at Avanca Film Festival and best original soundtrack at Festival Terres, Catalonia. As a radio journalist she produced several audio documentaries for Radio TSF, including: "Rio de Janeiro, the b-side", "Amazonia, the infinite maze", "Olympic Arrhythmias", "The stage is a world", "The American dream".

She is a PhD Candidate in Communication Studies for Development: Cinema and Social Change, holds a Master in Journalism Studies and was a scholar in Washington D.C for the Elements of Journalism at the Committee of Concerned Journalists. She specialised in Documentary Cinema (directing) at the International Academy of Cinema, in São Paulo, and at EICTV - School of Cinema and TV of San Antonio de Los Baños, Cuba. She has published two books *O Barulho do Tempo - The Noise of Time* - (Bairro dos Livros, 2013) and *Ala Feminina* (Edições Desassossego, 2018). She has also contributed to several literary editions (Revista Pessoal Brazil; Desassossego, Mabuko; As crónicas do bairro, Bairro dos Livros).