The Sonic Commons: Embrace or Retreat?

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Privatisation

Contemporary western culture takes such notions as the private and the intimate very seriously, regarding them as both fundamental and natural rights. So closely linked are they to the basis of industrial capital that it is easy to overlook the historical reality, where private as opposed to public space is a relatively recent luxury commodity.

In the audio realm the communication technologies of the telephone and wireless broadcast have created and proliferated the possibility of intimate listening spaces within the public domain. Recent developments in mobile audio devices such as the cell phone and personal listening systems have amplified the transformation of the sonic commons, punctuating it with myriad imploded private soundscapes.

Such immersion in the self, such selective listening, is easily construed as a turn away from public and shared aural forms towards an individualised and commodified aural experience. This movement has strong parallels with the recent embrace of political and economic tendencies away from the collective and communal and towards a valorisation of the individual and the privatised.

The concept of aural privacy, once inextricably linked with either spatial isolation (a conversation in camera) or with furtive behaviour (whispering) now strikes us as remarkable. The internalisation of sonic narratives has an interesting precedent in the discovery of silent reading; for we forget that before the 5th century the literate were also performers of written texts. The first known citation of silent reading was recorded by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, with reference to the 5th century bishop Ambrose:

> When he read his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud (in Manguel 1997: 42).

To gauge the significance of this shift in behaviour, imagine a London Tube at peak hour with the entire carriage intoning articles from the *Times* and *Telegraph*.

Telephony: locatedness and public speech

Whilst it is common knowledge that technological forms of sound reproduction have had a dramatic effect on the manner in which we experience sound in the public realm, we are less aware of the underlying transformations in relation to the spatial location, temporal displacement and the virtual elimination of provenance that mark recorded and transmitted audio. Murray Schaefer’s ‘schizophonic’ splitting of a sound from its original source en route to being embalmed in a recorded or transmitted medium is at the very heart of both the temporal and spatial dislocations with which we are now so familiar. Schizophonic audio therefore runs counter to the powerful and fundamental psychoacoustic linkages between the eye and the ear, forming the perceptual glue that instantly identifies a sound with its source and location. This disassociation of sound and source is enshrined in the history of Electroacoustic music as Acousmatiques.

Acousmatics (from the Greek Akousma, what is heard) has its origins with Pythagoras (6th century BC) who delivered his
oral teachings (oracle-like) from behind a curtain in order to prevent his physical presence distracting his students, a technique designed to grant them a pure focus on the content of his words.

In 1955 the term “Acousmatique” was employed by the poet Jérôme Peignot, at the beginning of musique concrète, as an adjective, meaning a sound that we can hear without knowing its cause, and to designate the distance that separates a sound from its origins, by obscuring, behind the impassivity of the loudspeaker, any visual elements that may be associated with it.

Then in the early 1970s, Francois Bayle introduced the expression Acousmatic Music while director of the Groupe Recherches Musicales in Paris, employing it to denote a specific kind of music, as ‘an art of projected sounds shot and developed in the studio, projected in halls, like cinema’.

The original fixed landline (point to point) telephone represents one of the earliest experiences of schizophonic audio. Even so, the early telephone system marked the geo-spatial location of those in dialogue to the point that each correspondent associated the signal with both a personality and a physical surrounding and therefore to some extent, the telephonic act became a sonic bridge between familiar sites. At each end of the line, an imagination of the distant site, a parlour with overstuffed chairs and a mother’s dress, a formal wood paneled office and the smell of pipe tobacco and so on.

Thus, the landline partially diminished the spatial otherness implied by communication at a distance by frequently reinstating a supplementary knowledge of the distant location. Contemporary telephonic communication has however become increasingly de-territorialised and de-racinated. The mobile phone essentially promotes a dialogue between nomads, obliterating the concept of familiar location or environs. It is not without irony that the first question posed during a mobile phone conversation is not ‘How are you?’ but ‘Where are you?’ with the inevitable response ‘I’m on a bus.’

Along with mobility the cell phone has initiated forms of social evolution (or devolution). Originally phones were mounted on walls their earpieces at head height – it was, of course, impolite to talk to a stranger in a sitting position, it was also considered improper to ‘chat’ on a telephone. Early telephone companies went to considerable lengths to reserve the device as a business machine and in some cases strove to keep them out of private homes. Nineteenth century telephone aficionados would be alarmed at the prosthetic-like application of Bluetooth headsets and the spectre of the glossaliaic pedestrian (merriely talking to invisible correspondents and gesticulating wildly). Such people, once shunned as mad, are now tolerated in some countries, although such behaviour is still considered socially unacceptable in many public spaces in Europe (the train system for example frequently demarcates areas where they may and may not be used).

**Wirelessness, smallness and mobility**

With the transistor radio and the boombox the development of transistors delivered miniaturisation and true portability, the consequence being that radio and phonographic replay now could leave the home (and the power outlet) and head for the streets, the beach and the ghetto. This Sonic Assault has two phases: ‘Intrusive’ and ‘Implosive’ audio. The first of these audio modalities might be considered invasive or at least expressive and is exemplified by the ghetto blaster and its more recent incarnation, mega-bass low-rider vehicular sound systems. Whilst the sport fan with the transistor glued to one ear, listening to the cricket (or the ball-game) is not considered as noise pollution, the ghetto blaster in effect re-ritualises sound in public space and makes an unequivocal claim on cultural space.

In marked contrast to the expressive nature of the ghetto blaster we are currently witnessing an implosion of audio-worlds (as if in recoil from an overload of urban stress) into the micro-acoustic-ecologies of the Walkman, the cell phone and the iPod.

This tendency initiated by the Walkman and now conferred upon the iPod nullifies the vis-à-vis of Public Space transforming collective experience into serial withdrawal: a retreat, perhaps a respite from the press of bodies in the commuter train, an escape from the pressure of being a (social-being) within the anonymous Crowd.
The general and desired use of mobile entertainment audio is to isolate the user from anonymous public situations (crowd) and transitory geographical/spatial situations (transit), public transport being the ideal nexus. The audio-bubble effect also extends to the monotony of the gym treadmill, the boredom of air travel and ironically to the delights of jogging.

It is perhaps therefore not surprising that the popularity of mobile personal audio systems (and the concomitant desire to be sonically isolated) is less prevalent in non-urban contexts; the social fabric of smaller and rural towns generally lack the principal drivers, anonymity, crowding and their nexus, mass transit. The pressure to conform to recent audio fashion is probably also diminished by a reduced exposure to advertising hype.

To be optimistic we might embrace the greater community of consumers and indulge in the simplistic embrace of the notions of the freedom of choice within the free-market economy of music(s), especially if we adopt the view that now all music is ‘world music’, a commodity form set free from ethnic and cultural boundaries by the corporate sector. We may now assert and affirm our individuality by the esoteric nature of our playlists, sharing them even, in generous acts that freely gives that which is not legally ours.

The counterpoint to an audio world composed of myriad private mobile soundscapes is found in it’s negative envelope, that which remains as public aural space inhabited by those weak and fractured signals that escape from earbuds and headphones. Unlike the hauntingly somatic riffs of a street saxophonist, playing to no-one in particular, late at night these are transient B.P.M. signals just audible enough to attract the attention, but instantly discarded as irrelevant and redundant.

Audiotours and audio informatics in public space

Other recent technologies are however starting to reverse these paradigms of isolation and withdrawal from social and geo-spatial situations. Locative forms of media are beginning to ‘situate’ the participant in a geographic and cultural context at both the theoretical and experiential level that potentially might reinstate an electronically mediated vis-à-vis. Conventional audio-tours typically associate specific information to an object or site via a simple number tag, delivering a didactic narrative in mono (sometimes stereo). In general, tours are structured as a linear programme both in terms of narrative and physical movement.

More sophisticated systems employ infra-red (or similar) to automatically deliver the appropriate audio within a limited range of the object or environment to visitor equipped with Infra-red (I.R.) equipped headsets. As I.R. operates only in line of sight conditions this system can work well in architectural contexts where room spaces are delineated into thematic audio-spaces. Likewise Radio Frequency Identification (R.F.I.D.) tags or induction loop devices can be used to trigger files and can work well in Museum contexts that demand no more that didactic information at the correct point. This has the advantage of eliminating the user interface as well as reducing the necessity for strict adherence to the tour route.

More evolved ‘audio tours’, such as those available on Alcatraz or on the old Liberty Ship at Fort Mason in San Francisco Bay USA, begin to incorporate an awareness of the overall spatial context. Information mixed in stereo (and occasionally in binaural) situates the participant in the architectural context, often using descriptions of key features to synchronise the progress of the journey. Narrator voices both provide didactic commentary and navigational prompts with the result that participants begin to focus upon their physical position and synchronisation within the architectural context.

An engaging linear tour of this kind has the capacity to focus the participant to the degree that they become immersed, not solely in the audio as content but in a synergetic combination of audio as narrative and audio as didactic or navigational instruction. By responding to the navigation cues auditors are obliged to visually identify architectural and environmental features, meshing them with the narrative content and navigational information - if not immersed, then they are at least fully occupied.

Navigational Voices
Creative projects develop this positional awareness by the introduction of fictive narratives and/or the amplification and distortion of spatiotemporal frames, as with Janet Cardiff, who employs the technically simple means of binaural recording (i.e. environmental ambiance recorded by in-ear mikes, in-situ) to recreate a hi-fidelity spatial rendering of space. These however are subsequently ‘cut-loose’ in terms of position and orientation as the re-play devices are not location sensitive. This ‘naturalism’ is overlaid with other fictions that rapidly develop a rich layering of physical ambience and psychological space.

Other artists have pursued a more technically defined sense of location by employing GPS devices to tie audio events (compositions even) to geo-spatial position. Teri Reub and Ian Mott have both evolved systems that rely upon the coupling of laptops with hand-held GPS units to give an approximate spatial triggering for stereo files but which do not have an immersive capacity or a physical orientation. Reub’s earlier work, built around linear walking track geographies presented the participant with relatively few spatial options to deviate from a prescribed path. Stories were collected and situated along the trail, able to be activated by large GPS trigger zones; a good solution where the accuracy of the technology is limited and when a precise correspondence between the audio content and the environmental context is not essential. Ian Mott’s early GPS works operate along similar principles. Audio and tracking technology, packed into wheeled shopping bags provided a soundscape of mono audio, related to position but without orientation, distance or spatialisation properties.

**GIS worlds ~ the environment as a polyglot audio archive**

The potential to develop intelligent, interactive audio-cartographies, as outlined in the AudioNomad project, in which powerful GIS technologies serve ubiquitous mobile devices, may well see a world in which audio memories reside in every nook and cranny, attached to URLs domiciled at the nodes of a global 10cm grid.

In the vein of Pygmalion, the Edison Company turned its hand to manufacturing talking dolls, producing several thousand in the 1890’s. This uncanny embodiment of the voice in the mechanical flesh of a puppet is today transformed into a range
of (not so smart) mobile devices; but devices that will within a short period of time, become intelligent companions, potentially far more sensitive to physical location and the invisible flows of data than ourselves.

References


Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney