

Sound and Image -- A Brief Consideration in a Non Place

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I'm sitting here on a British Rail train returning to London. I'm trying to consider the relationship of image and sound, as the countryside forms a soft blur beside me and the rush of the creaking train carriage, the squeaking of the automatic doors, the rustle of newspapers, the unintelligible public announcements soundtrack this thought process. It's virtually impossible to separate these intertwined worlds. In some unaccountable way, we read the two simultaneously as a single language. My mind randomly picks up glimmers of ideas, tiny incidents that may potentially offer food for thought towards a debate of this liaison.

Sound has been ever present in my work, from my earliest fumbling with tape recorders in my teenage years through to the digital explorations I search within today. As a shy 14 year old playing with machines in my bedroom, I would try to imagine if I could create a particular shape, for example, a diamond, through manipulating sound. Could a listener, having heard the piece of music, immediately picture what I was projecting in sound? Of course, girls, music, fashion and acne distracted me in this venture and I was never entirely successful, but it began an intriguing adventure for me that still lingers at the back of my mind. Still now I think and speak of shape and colour in the works that I create, texture and tone, light and darkness.

At heart, my work is concerned with capturing sound from many inaccessible spaces and bringing it out, whether it's the private phone conversations I found in an airspace that proved more public than anyone thought, or location recordings from the restricted access sites that my art projects take me to. It explores the relationship between sound and architectural space and the spaces in between information, places, history and relationships, where one has to fill in the missing parts to complete the picture. Most often this is represented in sound, at others a blend of the visual and the aural.

Art for me has never been a "thing," an object-oriented discipline, but more of a process and as such any frames that people tend to put work in immediately produce limitations, as the labeling of works has taught us. We still talk about "seeing" a film when the sound is equally responsible for engaging us. Arguably, the history of cinema is more significantly a history of sound itself. Indeed, an old-fashioned term we still use in the UK is to speak of going to "The Pictures", which I still find a beautifully antiquated concept. Following this, on extended transatlantic plane journeys I've

found it appealing to close my eyes and listen exclusively to the film soundtrack playing out on the micro screen, allowing the action to unravel in my mind.

In the modern recording studio, digital technology has allowed us to search beneath the surface of sound and its image through the application of software that visualizes a vibration, a note. We now have the technology to peel open virtually any zone of information and consume the contents -- personal video documents, sound recordings, phone scans, modem and net intercepts -- highly personalized and voyeuristic forms of grazing for info foods. My recordings zoom in on the spaces between -- between language and understanding, between the digital fall-out of binaries and zeros, between the redundant and undesired flotsam and jetsam of environmental acoustic space. Using machines that allow us to replicate and duplicate familiar sounds by "sampling" them, we can experience notions of time and memory displaced from their reality. When hearing a sound sample, can one know whether it is of the present or of the past? How might its future use alter its status? How "real" is it? How much is dependent upon one's recollection of its source?

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It's here for me that sound can offer a unique voice, devoid of assimilation through image. It's here that radio resonates as the perfect carrier for sound work, where your imagination can paint the image of the nar-

rator, the location, the colour of the sky, the texture of the clothes, the wind slipping past the building. Hence, a large percentage of my work is designed, if not directly for broadcast, but for an almost exclusively aural experience.

Having said that, my projects have occasionally attempted to embrace the visual, if only as an attempt to overcome the lack of a tactile relationship between the musician and their instrument in contemporary digital performance, a lamentable tendency symptomatic of times in which technology is disconnecting us, rather than connecting us to the world. At times, projections can almost mislead an audience, drawing them into a narrative that fails to mirror what I would prefer them to experience. I fear we remember images for longer than what we hear and our judgement can ride on this delicate imbalance.

Back in 1999, I created *Sound Polaroids*, an installation and performance-based project at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, that attempted to meld image with sound on screen, using software that reacted to any physical movement in the gallery or theater space. The work endeavoured to extend the new digital language of the city into a visual display allowing the audience to experience the diction of the city image through sound in a unified sensuous encounter. Though ultimately it failed for me personally, offering a distraction to the sound more than anything and displacing its value with an image, it began a process that I'm still closely exploring today.

A more successful approach has been *52 Spaces* (2002), commissioned by The British School at Rome for film director Michelangelo Antonioni's 90th birthday. *52 Spaces* uses sounds of the city of Rome and elements of *The Eclipse* (1962) to create a soundtrack of an image of a city suspended in time, anonymous and surreal. This performance and recording explores the hidden resonances and meanings of sound within the filmic image. Taking the original film as the inspirational focal point, this work attempts to re-assemble the movie through both the memory of sound in the film itself and the locations it was filmed in as well my own very personal experiences within the city of Rome where the work is located.

Capturing the sound from the movie and processing one tiny fragment of its original soundtrack, the lilting melancholic piano lines at the very opening and close, the music acts as both prologue and epilogue to an invisible narrative. Echoing the final shots of the movie -- a collaged symbolic cruise through visual mementoes of the film -- the work features all the sound elements that occur as incidentals in the film: footsteps in the apartment, an electric fan, a car engine, dawn bird-song in the park, telephones ringing, lost dogs barking, flagpoles moving in the wind, and so on. Visually, I chose to focus on the closing moments of the film, a

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collage of 52 framed images from around Rome, and by slowing them down to a pace of almost photographic static and into a kind of memorial slide show, one can find a space for contemplation and reflection as the soundtrack weaves an imaginary narrative. In fact, the visual pace is so very reduced that it's almost impossible to become engaged with the image, to the extent that it overpowers the sound.

I hear countless conversations around me. I know none of these people and am unlikely to ever share a space with them again. I listen to their voices and make judgements about their physicality, their clothing, their history, their relationships. All I can see are the backs of heads, a hint of hair colour peeking above the seat, and yet the sound of their voice, the colour, the resonant tone is carelessly painting a picture for me.

Soon my train will be in London. I will navigate my journey home, partly through sound, partly through image. I wish I could offer some answer to this question but for the moment all I can maintain is to keep listening, keep looking.

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