

AURAL IMAGERY: A BRIEF SURVEY OF AMBIGUITY THEORY IN TIME-BASED MEDIA

Rob Bridgett © 2004

Abstract

The recognition that time-based media, particularly sound-art and sound-film, are open to multiple meanings or interpretability is one that often seems lacking in analytical texts. The preferred analytical climate, both in journalistic and academic realms, is one of *imposed* meanings. The main theme of this piece is an exploration of the built-in absenteeism of meaning in such works. The piece explores a broad survey of writing about ambiguity in time-based media via Walter Murch, Umberto Eco, Christian Metz, and the flux of meaning caused between Michel Chion's notions of 'Reduced' and 'Causal' listening. This work establishes the concepts of the 'Objective Aural Image' and the 'Ambiguous Aural Image' as two new categories of unconscious acousmatic sound.

1) Built-in Ambiguity

The recognition that works of art are open to multiple meanings or interpretability is one that seems often lacking in analytical texts. The preferred analytical route is one of *imposed* meanings, be they Marxist, Feminist, or post-modern – the overall goal seems to be the fixing of a reading onto a work. While these readings are of cultural interest, they are by no means a way of accurately exploring the true nature of how such a work functions.

There is a notion that the essential element of art is that it leaves, to some degree, cognitive ‘space’ within which meaning occurs inside the individual audience member, in whom personal meaning is rendered. It is this ‘space’, or unspoken meaning, that offers a key to all art, be it sonic, visual or otherwise.

Of course, that is not to say that there is no intention or meaning on the part of the artist, quite the contrary, it is that the artist has chosen the degree to which he or she employs vague references, rather than exact language, to communicate his or her ideas. In sound works, as in film, artists are attempting to communicate ideas and emotions, usually of story, character and narrative. Narrative cinema in particular concerns emotional immersion within a linear narrative. In order to communicate these emotions there needs to be present a disciplined abrasiveness between the deliberate, clear meanings imparted and the ambiguous open space into which the viewer or listener can *imagine*.

“Aesthetic theorists... often have recourse to the notions of ‘completeness’ and ‘openness’ in connection with a given work of art. These two expressions refer to a standard situation of which we are all aware in our reception of a work of art: we see it as the end product of an author’s effort to arrange a sequence of communicative effects in such a way that each individual addressee is bound to enter into an interplay of stimulus and response which depends on his unique capacity for sensitive reception of the piece. In this sense the author presents a finished product with the intention that this particular composition should be appreciated and received in the same form as he devised it. As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations and prejudices. Thus his comprehension of the original artefact is always modified by his particular and individual perspective. In fact, the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. These give it a wealth of different resonances and echoes without impairing its original essence...” (Eco, 2004: 169)

Nowhere are these notions more evident than in sound, be it cinematic, in association with an image, or pure sound work, in the case of radio or musique concrete. Indeed, sound and music have been often described as the most ‘abstract’ of art forms. In the age of digital reproduction, sound can no longer be accurately physically embodied, it is purely non-objective; even extreme strains of non-objective visual art have never been able to shake off some semblance of physicality.

2) Sound Concepts

All art works have ambiguity to a greater or lesser extent. Often it is intended, yet also it is unintended through a loss of context. Everything in the universe passes through the filter of human interpretation. Even the clearest message is open to distortion and misreading, whether deliberate or otherwise.

The existence of any ambiguous situation will create an environment of internal scrutiny equally well, it is not exclusive to art or music, in any situation where one of our senses is impaired, the imagination has to fill in the blanks with the most likely (based on past experience or fear) explanations. These interpretations can sometimes be very abstract and disturbing ‘images’ emanating from the unconscious. The surrealist tradition recognised the potency of using disturbing juxtapositions in order to bring the subconscious mind into the foreground of meaning.

Many art works, films, music, build-in this mechanism deliberately. To a great degree, a work’s success can be gauged by what is only hinted at by the explicit elements of the work, the ambiguous.

3) Sound-film, Image, Poem

Walter Murch, presents the relationship with Sound-film and ambiguity very clearly:

"The danger of present day cinema is that it can suffocate its subjects by its very ability to represent them: it doesn't possess the built in escape valves of ambiguity that painting, music, literature, radio drama and black and white silent film automatically have simply by virtue of their sensory incompleteness - an incompleteness that engages the imagination of the viewer as compensation for what is only evoked by the artist. By comparison, film seems to be 'all there' (it isn't, but it seems to be), and thus the responsibility of film makers is to find ways within that completeness to refrain from achieving it. To that end, the metaphoric use of sound is one of the most fruitful, flexible and inexpensive means: by

choosing carefully what to eliminate, and then adding sounds that at first hearing seem to be somewhat at odds with the accompanying image, the film maker can open up a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush. As a result the film becomes more 'dimensional'. The more dimensional it is, the more impact it has on the viewer, the more it seems to speak to each viewer individually, and the more the sound can become a representation of states of mind of the central character, approaching the pre-verbal 'song' that Stephen Spender called the bass ground of poetry: " a rhythm, a dance, a fury, a passion which is not yet filled with words" (Murch, 1995)

4) Music Concrete

The development of musique concrete was one of the first times that sound was consciously removed from its cause and (re-)presented as sound without a cause, as a result, meaning, or *causality* was in flux. Sound had moved from being causal (a symptomatic index of a physical object) to the carrier of ambiguous artistic meaning.

If we glance back to the development of musique concrete by pioneers Pierre Schaeffer and Michel Chion there was realised a 'music' composed exclusively from *sounds* captured on magnetic tape or shellac discs. Schaeffer's work, as is often documented, was a realisation of the ideas proposed at the beginning of the century by Italian Futurist Luigi Russulo proposed in his seminal manifesto 'The Art of Noise'.

Schaeffer's initial works were done using archived sounds from the French radio station RTF (Radio Television Français). He posited through his works that sounds as concrete events could be separated from the physical acts which created them, thus giving them a new significance within the entirely new structure of a composition.

5) Reduced Listening

Pierre Schaeffer (Schaeffer, 1966), and Michel Chion (Chion, 1983: 33) gave the name '*Reduced Listening*' to that mode of listening which regards the intrinsic elements of the sound itself, independent of its cause or meaning. In a practical application of this technique it is usually necessary to deconstruct the sound from a film and to listen to it over and over again, so that the auditor will stop attending to its cause (causal listening).

"When we listen to acoustically to sounds it takes repeated hearings of a single sound to allow us gradually to stop attending to its cause and more accurately to perceive its inherent traits" (Chion, 1983: 33)

The audience of these kinds of sound pieces clearly experience a very different way of listening. They may, as Chion and Schaeffer suggest, listen exclusively to the timbral qualities of the sound without attending to its cause. However, it is against any instinct for survival for the brain to *unconsciously* stop attending to the causes of sounds. Subconsciously then, the brain continues in its attempt to find an answer to the causal aspects of these sounds. This is where the Aural image is born.

6) The Aural Image

When one cannot identify the source of a sound, one is overcome with the need to imagine causes or physical and visual explanations for that sound. This is an attempt to re-unite the disembodied sound with an objective physicality that created it. Chion and Schaeffer's notions of reduced listening and causal listening are fascinating, indeed they state the mental functions are constantly in flux between these two modes, the *causal* and the *reduced*.

Somewhere in-between these two modes is where 'Aural Imagery' appears, as one's own interpretation on a non-linguistic, but sensual aural level of what these sounds may represent, is in flux between the sound itself and an index of possible causal images based on the unique 'experience map' of each individual.

Non-diegetic sounds are inherently open to ambiguity by not having their sources revealed. Many film makers have used these notions, particularly Robert Bresson, and Andrei Tarkovsky. In the case of film, having introduced an off-screen sound, its meaning is questioned in the mind of the auditor, poetic and floating, until its cause is revealed and fixed.

It is the floating nature of the meaning in non-diegetic sounds that makes them such highly charged poetic elements. When they fuse with the images to which they appear disparate to, they function in a montage-like sense, on a vertical level across the senses of both vision and audition.

Aural Imagery then, is the subconscious search for a sound's causal elements, despite any efforts of the listener to attend only to timbre. It is inherently time-based, as the image is constantly being updated by new nuances in the sound. This ensures that the Aural image changes, like the images in a film, over time. It was by no mistake that Chion called his music 'cinéma pour l'oreille' - *cinema for the ears*.

7) Objective and Ambiguous Aural Imagery

Several categories of off-screen sounds exist, as Chion describes (Chion, 1994: 26-27). Most common are the sounds which form part of a readily recognisable semiotic fabric, those with which an audience, seeped in relevant cultural reference points, will have no problem identifying. A typewriter, a dog barking, passing cars, gun shots, a thunder storm.

Objective Aural Imagery is that which approximates a vague notion of a real-world causal object. A dog barking for example, may not reveal the breed of dog, the size of the dog, it implies the idea of a dog without exactitude, it leaves a degree of deliberate space. This is rather similar to Christian Metz' notion of an 'Aural Object', similar to that of 'reduced listening': of a sound which is off-screen and is seen as *exactly only that*, and not an *image* of the sound which is off-screen.

Metz relies on the notion that off-screen sounds semiotically refer to pre-conceived cultural notions of what they represent in order for them to have relevant meaning. This is, of course, true in the case of readily recognisable objective sounds. However, what does an audience make of sounds and timbres that have no real-world cause, when such film makers as Bresson or Tarkovsky make use of the ambiguous and strange sound that populates their films? These sounds short-circuit the very notion of culturally dependent sounds and the objects they represent. The signifier does not relate to a fixed signified, but operates as a deliberate disorientation device, the 'Ambiguous Aural Image'.

The fascinating thing about many of Tarkovsky's Aural Images is that they consistently employ the category of 'Ambiguous Aural Imagery'. When an audience is not given any suitable image with which to provide answers to a possible cause, the image stays ungrounded, and the audience may provide any number of interpretations to the causes of the sound over time. Not only does this 'internal cinema' occur for each member of the audience individually, but for each viewing by the same auditor the sound can be wilfully or unconsciously re-interpreted.

8) Phantom Audiovision

Chion also describes this particularly visual phenomenon, in his chapter 'Phantom Audiovision' (Chion, 1994: 26-27). He describes:

"[the] transensorial perception, sounds which leave us with a memory that is more visual than auditory [...] concrete music in its conscious refusal of the visual, carries with it visions that are more beautiful than images could ever be" (Chion, 1994: 137)

Aural Imagery then, represents an inter-sensorial montage phenomenon. It represents the deliberate use of an ambiguous sound in order to create an infinite number of interpretations in the mind of the viewer. Objective Aural Imagery is the use of a culturally recognisable sound, that is never revealed visually. Ambiguous Aural Imagery is the use of deliberately unrecognisable sounds that are never revealed.

Sounds which are never causally revealed represent a 'phantom-image track' in the brain which runs along simultaneously with the *real* visual images an audience sees. Auditors are simultaneously drawn to imagine the visual causes of the sounds heard, while drinking in imagery through the eye. The additional interpretative readings that the audience, as individuals, bring to this montage ensures that the space in which interpretation occurs is filled, temporarily, with personal pictures, emotions and sensations.

References:

Eco, Umberto, , 2004, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York, Continuum)

Chion, Michel, 1994, *Audio Vision: sound on screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press)

Chion, Michel, 1983, *Guide des objets sonores : Pierre Schaeffer et la recherche musicale* (Paris: Buchet/ Chastel: Institut national de la communication audiovisuelle).

Murch, Walter, 1995, 'Sound Design: The Dancing Shadow', in *Projections: Film-makers on Film-making No. 4*, ed. by John Boorman and others (London : Faber).

Schaeffer, Pierre, 1966, *Traite des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).