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**Like It Was a Movie:
Cinematic Listening as Public Art**

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Abstract

The widespread use of personal stereos has created large numbers of listeners navigating the city in reverie, enjoying a synaesthetic relationship between what they see and the music they hear. Such sonic mediation to the body's experience has been described, and analyzed, as a form of 'physical cinema.' But how does this cinema work? And how might sound artists use these kinds of auditory interventions as sites for their own work? This current situation offers rich opportunities for artists to take advantage of the nonchalance with which the public now synthesizes disparate sonic and visual sources into complete, and very individual, filmic experiences. By analyzing the relationships among mediated sound, ambient sound and visual environment in a number of sound works situated in the public sphere (among them works by Janet Cardiff and Christina Kubisch), this paper aims to discover how sound artists might use the idea of "physical cinema" to broaden the audience's sensory spectrum and seduce them into creative engagement with their environment.

1. Introduction

The Aesthetic Prosthetic and the City-Screen

Wherever you look in modern culture, you will see people listening to mobile music, often using headphones. They might be looking wistfully out the rain-soaked window of a train, or purposefully bopping their head in time to music as they strut down the street, or singing at the top of their lungs as they cruise down the highway. It's impossible to ignore this phenomenon: since the 1930s (and most intensively, since the 1970s) mobile audio has prioritized the auditory in a way that revolutionizes the relationship many people have with their surroundings.

On the surface, it seems that mobile audio serves to disconnect listeners from their surroundings. And indeed, this is often the case. Sociologist Fran Tonkiss has described the iPod as a technological extension of social deafness. "Social deafness," she writes, "offers one kind of urban freedom - the lonely liberty of knowing that nobody is listening, no one likely to speak. In rendering technical what otherwise is simply learned, the mobile technologies of the personal stereo or telephone realize this logic of separation and of indifference perfectly. They reverse the modern intent of the concert hall or public address system as means of organizing a collective 'culture of listening.' [Thompson 2002]. Immersed in a private soundscape, engaged in another interactive scene, you do not have to be in the city as a shared perceptual or social space."¹ There's no doubt that many if not most people turn to mobile audio to

¹ Fran Tonkiss, "Aural Postcards: Sound, Memory and the City" in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 304-305

tune out their surroundings and engage in a more controllable and potentially pleasurable sonic realm.

At the same time, many listeners report intense aesthetic experiences that come about as a result of their sonic travels – experiences which actually leave them feeling more connected than ever to their physical, if not their social, surroundings. Whether listening to melancholy, slow music while driving through the rain, or bouncy techno during a vigorous run through the city, many people are apt to choose music at least partially based on its relationship to their physical surroundings. We might think of the mobile audio device, then, as a sort of emotional and aesthetic prosthetic capable of extending and transforming the listener’s surroundings into a kind of movie,² what Jean-Paul Thibaud has dubbed the “city-screen.”³

Physical Cinema and the Cinematic Lull

‘Physical cinema’ is a common term for this aestheticization; the material world becomes a quasi-cinematic image to the mobile soundtrack. How does this work? [Why does the visual world submit so easily to the power of the soundtrack?](#)

Although largely ignored by our conscious selves, sound holds a great deal of power over us, for many reasons. The first is that we lack the ability to block out sounds; we have no earlids. The second is that sound is literally physical, vibrating our bodies; we are powerless in its wake. Not only can we not block our ears; we can’t

² Iain Chambers, “The Aural Walk,” in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 100.

³ Jean-Paul Thibaud, “The Sonic Composition of the City,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 336-337.

stop our bodies from vibrating. To obey is to listen. To listen is to submit.⁴ In fact, the word *obey* comes from the Latin root *oboedire*, from *ob-* (toward) + *-oedire* (akin to *audire*, to hear).⁵ Mobile listening provides a way for listeners to resist submission, to create their own space, their own sonic agenda, to empower themselves against a city flexing its sonic power against their wishes.

A city drained of sound is a city drained of power. Tonkiss writes about this eloquently: “As in the cinema when the sound tape doesn’t come in and the reel unwinds silently, there is a thinness, a lightness, a kind of estrangement about seeing without sound. It offers surface without depth, appearance without resonance.”⁶ This quality makes the sound-drained city particularly susceptible to taking on the qualities of whatever sound might mediate it – not unlike the way so-called silent film was malleable to its background music.

Early filmmakers knew all about this. Sergei Eisenstein mourned the passing of silent film, lamenting that images beefed up with sound were harder to push around in the editing room, less aesthetic.⁷ Alberto Cavalcanti, Rudolf Arnheim and Bela Balasz lamented the loss of the homogeneity of images in silent film (which was, in fact, primarily film with a musical background).

According to Balasz:

⁴ Bill Viola, “The Sound of One Line Scanning,” in *Sound By Artists*, ed. Dan Lander and Micah Lexier (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990), 39.

⁵ “obey.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2008. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obey>> (2 Feb 2008).

⁶ Tonkiss, 304.

⁷ Sergei Eisenstein, V.I. Pudovkin and G.V. Alexandrov. “A Statement,” in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 83-85.

Sound differentiates visible things, silence brings them closer to each other and makes them less dissimilar. Every painting shows this happy harmony, the hidden common language of mute things conversing with each other, recognizing each others' shapes, and entering into relations with each other in a composition common to them all. This was a great advantage the silent film had over the sound film. For its silence was not mute; it was given a voice in the background music, and the landscapes and men and the objects surrounding them were shown on the screen against this common musical background. This made them speak a common silent language and we could feel their irrational conversation in the music which was common to them all.

Mobile soundtracks dictate the mood and aesthetics of our visual surroundings no less than music dominates the mood and aesthetics of silent film or MTV. This transformation of our surroundings into one big music video can be read as narcissistic, an amplification of the listener's identity, a colonization of the outside world around the listener's desires. In some ways, it fulfills Guy Debord's worst nightmare, in which, as he explains in his seminal text, *The Society of The Spectacle*: "life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." In other words, technological mediation blocks all direct communication between people. Certainly, living life mediated by a self-chosen soundtrack reeks of this kind of spectacle.

However, we can also understand this aestheticization as transcendent, allowing the listener to explore the city as a flâneur, reveling in sonic, visual and narrative synchronicity, and reframing the city as a repository of wonder. Listeners may use the 'aesthetic prosthetic' to engage with their surroundings more than they ever did without it – going out of their way to wander the streets looking for

adventure as they listen to their walkmans, ipods and car stereos. In such cases, the ethereality of such experiences makes them all the more precious. You can't rewind life – these aesthetic experiences are one of a kind.

In any case, whether looked at as narcissistic spectacle or imaginative adventure, this sonic aestheticization is an essentially individual process in which the listener becomes lost in the experience; the intimacy of headphones and the sealed-off bubble of the automobile ensure that this is primarily a personal, not a communal experience. I refer to it as 'the cinematic lull,' evoking the idea of a lullaby, a hypnotic sonic experience that puts the listener into a kind of solitary dream state. This state was prized by early filmmakers; In 1929, René Clair wrote:

The screen has conquered the world of voices, but it has lost the world of dreams. I have observed people leaving the cinema after seeing a talking film. They might have been leaving a music hall, for they showed no sign of the delightful numbness which used to overcome us after a passage through the silent land of pure images. They talked and laughed, and hummed the tunes they had just heard. *They had not lost their sense of reality.*

Artists and composers might play with this idea of cinematic lull, as filmmakers always have, either engaging it wholeheartedly or subverting it to capture the listener's attention.

The Possibilities

It is somewhat astonishing to find ourselves living in a culture in which this sort of sonic dislocation is so common. Many people are as comfortable switching

between different auditory states as they are changing in and out of clothes. The familiarity of cinematic listening offers unparalleled opportunities for artists and composers to engage listeners in creative, participatory experiences through public sound art practice. Not only are ordinary people comfortable slipping in and out of mediated auditory environments, they often own their own equipment and can simply download a particular sound work over the internet. Artists and composers might stage site-specific sonic interventions anywhere they'd like – the Egyptian pyramids? the listener's bedroom? MoMA? – without need for permission or validation – and what's more, the pieces are hypothetically permanent, albeit permanently in flux with the changing world. This liberates artist politically (no need to work within the gallery/museum context), economically (creating the work can cost practically nothing) and creatively (the possibilities are essentially endless).

Although a handful of artists, particularly Max Neuhaus, Janet Cardiff and Christina Kubisch, pioneered site-specific audio and continue to be innovative and important voices, I believe there is room for artists of all aesthetic persuasions to work in this genre; that site-specific audio work might become a locus of interesting audio art in the coming years. By looking at film sound theory, by analyzing a few works, and by thinking about my own artistic process, I hope to develop a framework for thinking about how and why artists and composers might extend public sound art practice by exploring these ideas of cinematic listening and physical cinema.

2. Why, What and How: The Mechanics of Physical Cinema

The Resonance of Memory

Working with sound allows us to work closely with memory; the emotional and associational responses to music and sound seem to be hardwired into our brains.⁸ Since hearing is never as literal as vision, noises work better than visuals to suggest atmosphere; we need hear only a tiny bit of a sound and suddenly we are again lost in a summer thunderstorm, or listening to a long-ago lover's unintelligible whispers. As Cavalcanti wrote, "Pictures are clear and specific, noises are vague... that is why noise is so useful. It speaks directly to the emotions."

Sound resonates our memories, activating seemingly unrelated fragments of association and emotion like so many sympathetic strings forming a complex neural web. The juxtaposition of sounds can set off a Proustian explosion inside our minds, scattering narrative fragments that demand reconciliation, which emerges from our brains, Rashoman-like, in the form of narrative.⁹ This narrative need not be linear – indeed, it may well be a general feeling, a mood, a premonition. Although each of these memory-catalyzed narratives is necessarily unique, commonalities will almost always exist between listeners' experiences. These commonalities are related to shared memories – cultural, national, or even archetypal – and contribute to a sense of connection among listeners. And of course the artist, too, communicates through her aesthetic choices: not only the significant meaning of the sounds, themselves (the

⁸ Oliver Sacks, letter to author, 12 December 2007.

⁹ Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashoman* explores the individuality and subjectivity of truth through the attempts of four witness to a crime to explain, from their viewpoint, what happened.

content), but also their juxtaposition (context) and composition (form). In following an individual path generally laid out by the artist's own associational thread, the listener forms a kind of emotional bond with the artist as well as with other listeners. In this way, an artist creating this kind of sound work can at least partially escape the narcissistic alienation of the mobile auditory experience.

Gerald Edelman, a Nobel Prize-winning neurobiologist, has written that “every act of perception is an act of creation, every act of memory is an act of imagination.”¹⁰ By sonically stirring perception and memory through sounds, artists and composers can catalyze narrative and call listeners into personal but collaborative creative experiences.

The Dreaming-Waking Push-Pull

Although the traditional use of the ‘aesthetic prosthetic’ tempts listeners into a cinematic lull by replacing the environment’s soundtrack with another, artists might instead consider collaborating or improvising with environmental sound instead of overpowering it. Siting one’s work in the ‘real world’ provides a whole palette of meaningful sounds, images, smells, and so on for artists to interact with. By working with existing sensory fields rather than blotting them out, we can access a new realm of interesting relationships.

One effective strategy is to shift the listener’s experience between the cinematic lull and a kind of hyper-sensory awareness, in order to sonically ‘frame’ her immediate surroundings and seduce her into engaging with it directly. We might think

¹⁰ Quoted in Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 148.

of this as a push-pull between the dreaming and waking states, in which the listener occasionally ‘wakes up’ and remembers who she is: a person with her own identity and history, inside a human body, listening to a mobile audio device in a particular place. By blurring the lines between past, present and future, mediated and real, internal and external and so on, the artist leads the listener into a hyper-awareness of her sensory environment. Anytime the listener is not on auto-pilot, she is creatively engaged. Oftentimes, this hyper-awareness and sense of engagement with the environment is maintained even after the listener has finished listening. George Bures Miller, Janet Cardiff’s artistic collaborator and husband, refers to her sound walks as “MSG for the senses.”¹¹

How, specifically, can artists manipulate this push-pull between the dreaming and waking states, between the cinematic lull and a hyper-sensory awareness? A look at some of the core concepts of film sound theory sheds some light on the relationships among sound, image and narrative in cinema, and provides a good bouncing off point for some tactics artists might use when creating cinematic site-specific sound art.

Directing Perception

Sounds dictate how we look at the world; they shape our perceptions.

Filmmakers have long known this and used it effectively with their soundtracks. Early

¹¹ Mirjam Schaub, *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book*, ed. Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, in collaboration with Public Art Fund, New York (Vienna: Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, 2006), 24.

Soviet filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin wrote convincingly about the use of asynchronous sound to mirror human perception:

For example, in actual life you, the reader, may suddenly hear a cry for help; you see only the window; then you look out and at first see nothing but the moving traffic. But you do not hear the sound natural to those cars and buses; instead you hear still only the cry that first startled you. At last you find with your eyes the point from which the sound came; there is a crowd, and someone is lifting the injured man, who is now quiet. But, now watching the man, you become aware of the din of traffic passing, and in the midst of this noise there gradually grows the piercing signal of the ambulance. At this your attention is caught by the clothes of the injured man: his suit is like that of your brother, who, you now recall, was due to visit you at two o'clock. In the tremendous tension that follows, the anxiety and uncertainty whether this possibly dying man may not indeed be your brother himself, all sound ceases and there exists for your perceptions total silence. Can it be two o'clock? You look at the clock and at the same time you hear its ticking. This is the first synchronized moment of an image and its caused sound since first you heard the cry.¹²

It's not difficult to imagine all of the above existing as a sound collage over a static shot of a busy street – or even a sketch. The sounds tell us what to pay attention to, mirroring the main character's perceptions.

One of the most exciting possibilities of site-specific sound art involves extending this idea of using sound to mirror perceptions to the idea of using sound to actually direct people's perceptions of the world around them, defining what part of their reality becomes the 'city-screen.' I attempt this in the first minute of my

¹² V.I. Pudovkin, "Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film," written in 1934, reprinted in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 87.

sound walk, *Almost Grand* (2007)¹³ As I was mapping the piece, I became intrigued by an abandoned construction site with a small triangular hole cut out of its fence. I resolved to direct the listener's attention to this hole, to tempt them into looking in, to pique their curiosity – and so, just after listeners round a corner and approach the site, they hear an unexpected sound: a rooster crowing from within the site (I attempted to position the sound at an accurate part of the stereo field in order to simulate this). At the first staging of this piece, about thirty people turned up to experience the walk together. I was gratified to see that almost all of them immediately turned to the cut-out hole on cue. The film had come to life.

The Palimpsest

A film theorist might characterize the unmediated sounds of the environment as *diegetic* (sound that has a source in the 'film's' story world), *onscreen* (sound with a source we can see), *external* (sound that people in the story world can hear), and *simultaneous* (sound that is happening in the present moment). The highly aestheticized 'music video' soundtrack might be characterized simply as *nondiegetic* (sound without a source in the story world) – and by that definition *offscreen*, neither external nor internal (since no one but the listener can hear it), and timeless (since it's not diegetic). Nondiegetic sound and music privilege the listener, impose mood on the scene, and transform his surroundings into a spectacle. Instead of integrating with the environment they comment upon it, pulling the listener into the story world, into

¹³ Betsey Biggs, *Park Bench Cinema: Almost Grand*, 2007. Conflux Festival, Brooklyn, NY. <<http://www.betseybiggs.org/work/almostgrand.html>>

spectacle, into a state of cinematic lull. These are only two out of many diegetic possibilities; filmmakers spend a great deal of time editing sound and picture to play with diegesis.

Artists wishing to create cinematic soundtracks obviously cannot edit ‘picture’; the surrounding visual world already exists and is completely unpredictable.¹⁴

Likewise, although most movies craft soundtracks almost completely artificially synchronized (or *fused*) with sounds recorded asynchronously, it would be almost impossible to synchronize pre-recorded sound to match the real world (although I will present two workarounds below). Practically the only tool at our disposal, in fact, is asynchronous offscreen sound. Offscreen sound – that is, sound with no visible source – may seem humble, but in fact it is a uniquely powerful device. It offers what Janet Cardiff describes as a “porthole through time and space”¹⁵ which allows the listener to effortlessly and immediately transcend the limits of time and space by creating an entirely new diegetic world in the listener’s imagination. I’d like to extend this metaphor; rather than a porthole, which implies a single location in time and space, I prefer to think of asynchronous sound editing as allowing the listener to wander through a palimpsest composed of multiple layers of space and time.

These time warps (for example, listening to sounds from long ago, flashing forward to an even that hasn’t happened yet, reenacting the artist’s experience as she stood in the very same spot a year ago) and spatial fractures (for example, hearing sounds that are clearly from another place, or that are being replayed from a different

¹⁴ This might be provocatively addressed through site-specific theatrical intervention, but clearly the real world will always provide its own surprises.

¹⁵ Schaub, 5.

place in which the listener stood a few minutes ago) are rarely straightforward, even if they're meant to be; more often, the listener is left wondering whether the sounds and stories come from the past, the present, the future, or some kind of parallel universe. This ambiguity sets up a state of confusion which pushes the listener out of the cinematic lull and towards hyper-awareness. Perhaps, as Mirjam Schaub points out in *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book*, the act of synchronizing multiple layers of time and space also leads the listener to pay attention to his 'real' surroundings in an effort to reassure himself that his body, his reality, still exists.¹⁶ At any rate, the act of listening puts us squarely in the present moment, neurologically speaking.¹⁷ Music and ecstasy are both experienced in the now. And so the listener finds himself constantly oscillating between the dreaming and waking states, between then and now, between there and here. When during this oscillation layers of the spatiotemporal palimpsest line up with here and now like moiré patterns, the listener experiences transformative moments of synchronicity.

Artist Janet Cardiff is a master of this technique. In her sound walks you feel as though the stars are aligning themselves. Cardiff's 2004 sound walk *Her Long Black Hair*,¹⁸ commissioned by New York's Public Art Fund and set in Central Park, begins with a description of her surroundings ("It's just after a rain. The streets are still wet but I think it's stopped for a while. It's loud here, isn't it? When you're in a city like New York you have to think about all the sounds as if they're a symphony. Otherwise

¹⁶ Schaub, 25.

¹⁷ Sacks, 208-213.

¹⁸ Janet Cardiff, *Her Long Black Hair*, 2004. Public Art Fund, New York, NY.

you go a bit crazy.”) Sirens and street sounds from her soundtrack mingle with the sirens and street sounds from outside; the sound of an organ grinder briefly passes. “I have some photographs I want to show you,” she confides, and asks the listener to take out a 1965 photograph taken from the listener’s current vantage point, as a slightly out-of-tune band plays “New York, New York.” Then, as though this world is fading out of reach, the band fades out and she says abruptly: “Put the picture away. I hope it doesn’t rain again because I want you to walk with me. I want to show you some other photos. Get up. Go to the right. Walk past the statue. Try to walk to the sound of my footsteps so that we can stay together. And then go down the stairs, all the way to the bottom.” As we walk, we hear the sounds of people passing; we’re not sure whether they are the people actually passing us or the people who passed Cardiff several years ago when she recorded this. “There’s a woman below talking on a cell phone. A woman’s taking a picture. It’s like we drop below the city here. Right into nature. Turn to the right. There’s a man on the bench reading a paper.”

We are three minutes into a work which lasts almost an hour, and already we have experienced several layers of the spatiotemporal palimpsest. We are, of course, listening to the sounds of our external environment: sirens, traffic, horses clip-clopping by. Did the organ grinder really walk by, or is that an element from the past/future she is throwing our way? We don’t know. As we pull out the black and white photograph and line it up with what we see now, we hear the band playing; it is as if we are inhabiting this space at two times simultaneously. Is this what geographical memory feels like? No sooner have we become comfortable with this juxtaposition than the rug is pulled out from under us. It abruptly fades out, and Cardiff’s

authoritative voice puts us squarely in the here and now, following the directions she lays out for us. Again, we hear the casual chatter of passersby as well as someone whistling. And Cardiff tells us what she is seeing (or, rather, what she saw in the past): a woman on a cell phone. A woman taking a picture. A man on the bench reading a paper. It's likely that in Central Park, we too will see one of these things before our very eyes. And the layers of the palimpsest will line up. And yes, it does feel like we drop below the city into nature here, and yes, it feels like a conversation. Right here. In the now.

Fusion and the Physical

As mentioned above, it is very difficult to create a synchronous sonic relationship with the city-screen. But there are cases in which it has been done, and done well. The two ways in which artists have overcome this challenge are (a) the use of altered natural sound, and (b) the use of unknown sound to fill in for ambient sound.

Artist Christina Kubisch, long known for her pioneering sound works inviting the audience to explore sonic situations through the use of electromagnet induction and headphones, has in recent years created a series of walks called *Electrical Walks*¹⁹ based on the ubiquity of electromagnetic frequencies. By walking through the city wearing special headphones which amplify these frequencies, the listener is invited to explore a sonic topography of drones, buzzes and whirs. The experience is one of wonder and exploration, of discovering a layer of magic hiding just beneath the

¹⁹ Christina Kubisch, *New York Electrical Walk*, 2006. The Kitchen, New York, NY.

surface of the everyday. The listener becomes explorer and composer at once. And Kubisch is not alone: a spate of recent projects, such as Lalya Gaye's *Sonic City*, allow listeners to use the city as a topographical musical interface through real-time mediation of the city's sounds.

Another possibility the artist might consider is the use of unknown sounds to lend physical texture to the city-screen. Two early film theorists, Alberto Cavalcanti and Siegfried Kracauer, recommended the use of unrecognizable, "incognito" sounds²⁰ to shore up the physicality of the fused sound-image. Kracauer argued that recognizable sounds trigger personal associations in the listener, thus driving his attention away from the moving image, and that the listener's ears were free to soak up sounds that were unrecognizable and less apt to pigeonhole them as being some particular thing or another.²¹ In other words, we might think of an incognito sound as more of an adjective and less of a noun.

A recent site-specific performance by the Japanese noise band Boredoms illustrates this tactic nicely. One sunny summer afternoon (7/07/07) the band invited 77 drummers to play 77 drum sets arranged in the shape of a giant serpent in Brooklyn, New York's Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park.²² This free show was well-publicized and the park was filled to capacity several hours before the performance. As a result, the Brooklyn Bridge and many other nearby parks were packed with

²⁰ Alberto Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 108-109.

²¹ Siegfried Kracauer, "Dialogue and Sound," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 137-140.

²² Boredoms, *77BOADRUM*, 7 July 2007. Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park, Brooklyn, NY. <<http://www.viva-radio.com/77/Boadrums>>

people who hadn't made it in. I ended up sitting on the rocks facing the East River, listening to the drumming and watching the hypnotic rhythm of the small waves breaking against the shore. Towards the end of the performance, 77 cymbals began to fade and swell together, fusing perfectly with the rhythm of the waves. It almost felt as if the waves were creating the sound, as if the fade and swell was being drawn out of the waves themselves. An unknown, incognito sound had fused with the city-screen perfectly.

Distortion

Because manipulation often makes a sound less or even unrecognizable, another way to reveal a magical layer of the everyday world is to distort sound. Just as the camera reveals the magic of the world through manipulations such as time-lapse photography, slow motion and close-ups, so too can the manipulation of sound reveal hidden wonders in the world.²³ As anyone who's manipulated sound with tape recorders or computers knows, there are many ways to distort sound; I'll discuss a few of the more significant ways here.

Slowing down a sound slows us down. In *Her Long Black Hair*, Cardiff asks the listener to complete several experiments. At one point, she commands: "Stop. Turn around. Now slowly walk backwards, one foot back and then the other. Very slowly. It feels like you're in a video being rewound in slow motion, doesn't it? [PAUSE]. You can turn back now, and then keep walking." As the listener walks backward, the sound

²³ Although this idea was first explored in depth by Pierre Schaeffer beginning in the 1950s, filmmaker Jean Epstein wrote excitedly about the idea in the 1940s, comparing it to slow-motion and time-lapse cinematography. See Jean Epstein, "Slow Motion Sound" in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 143-144.

is slowed down, pitched down, and reversed. It does, indeed, feel like being rewound in slow motion, a perceptual change almost like a drug.

Changing the timbre of a sound (through filtering, for example), can imply mediation (a voice coming through a radio, for example, or a telephone or Dictaphone) or a different diegetic space. In the film *American Graffiti*, the same rock and roll songs are played with different spatial characteristics to indicate whether the music is diegetic or nondiegetic.

Finally, magnifying sounds through acoustic close-ups magnifies their importance to us, and allows us to direct the listener's visual perception, as alluded to earlier in this paper. We might hear the ticking of a bomb, for example, and look around us desperately to see where it is.

All of these changes can drastically shift the layers of the palimpsest. I believe that the narrative and metaphorical implications of distortion offer some very interesting possibilities to the sound artist working with physical cinema.

Rhythm and Structure

Rhythm turns listeners into participants, makes listening active and motoric, and synchronizes the brains and minds (and, since emotion is always intertwined with music, the "hearts") of all who participate. It is very difficult to remain detached, to resist being drawn into the rhythm of chanting or dancing.²⁴

-- Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*

²⁴ Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 244-245.

As you walk through Janet Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair*, you are literally following in the footsteps – 1, 2, 1, 2 – of the artist; her steps are audible and you follow along. In Christina Kubisch's *New York Electrical Walk*, you are instead left to create your own walking rhythm, but the rhythm you create (through your steps and the patterning in your brain) becomes the musical backbone of a piece that you yourself compose; you yourself are the DJ of this electromagnetic drone techno, creating the mix through your route and your speed as you walk through the city.

Another way to think about rhythm is through the interplay of visual and sonic rhythms. The sound artist might try to synchronize with the existing visual and sonic rhythms of the city, or to subvert them – but by creating some kind of identifiable relationship among these rhythms, she deepens the listener's involvement in the work.

Finally, the overall structure of the piece can be thought of as a sort of macrorhythm, just as we might discuss a harmonic rhythm in music. As with any work of art, overall structure lends a conceptual meaning to the work. Think about the dense sounds of *Apocalypse Now* as compared to the sparse soundtrack of Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped*. And in walking pieces, the walk structures the entire narrative of the piece. This is certainly true of *Her Long Black Hair*, which somewhat abstractly follows the route of 'the woman with the long black hair,' whose photographs accompany the walk; we are not only entering a palimpsest of dozens of layers, but are following (purportedly) in the exact footsteps of not only Cardiff but of the woman with the long black hair (who may or may not have existed). In a diary

entry made during the piece, Cardiff writes about the formal considerations of structuring the walk:

George and I spent many days walking in the park, finding a route that winds both sideways as well as up and down and underground. Both the physicality and contrast are always important for a walk. Just as drawing needs variety and texture, a walk needs small spaces, big spaces, quiet and noisy parts.²⁵

And later in *The Walk Book*, Mirjam Schaub suggests a fascinating relationship between topography and narrative when she quotes Leslie Stephen in relation to Cardiff's work:

The walks are the unobtrusive connecting thread of other memories, and yet each walk is a little drama itself, with a definite plot with episodes and catastrophes, according to the requirements of Aristotle; and it is naturally interwoven with all the thoughts, the friendships, and the interests that form the staple of ordinary life.²⁶

Language and Relationship

Human beings prioritize the human voice above all other auditory input. There are some pretty obvious evolutionary reasons for this, of course, but it is also why silent filmmakers feared the coming of sound. 'Sound film' made them nervous; 'talkies' terrified them. As a result, early film theorists came up with some fascinating ideas for nuancing the human voice, hoping to steer cinema away from filmed theater. In his essay, "Dialogue and Sound," Siegfried Kracauer lays out several intriguing

²⁵ Schaub, 33.

²⁶ Leslie Stephen, "The Praise of Walking in the Pleasures of Walking," quoted in Schaub, 80.

options.²⁷ Artists might include banal language, such as passersby chatting, or language that is clearly not understood, whether it is distant, muffled, in a foreign language, or simply nonsense. They might weave together scraps of sound in what Kracauer called a ‘word carpet’.²⁸ Or they might take advantage of commentary, as Cavalcanti felt was the way forward.²⁹

Or, of course, they might speak to us directly, forging a personal relationship. Indeed, this direct relationship is at the core of Janet Cardiff’s sound walks.³⁰ By walking alongside us, speaking with us, implicating us in her world, insinuating herself in ours, and directing our every move, Cardiff pointedly finesses her way into a relationship with us which is at once dominant and nurturing, never seriously considering that we will not obey her commands. I am less interested here in analyzing this very important component of her practice – her own *Walk Book* does so eloquently – than in thinking through the implications of such direct language in light of my ideas about memory, resonance, narrative, content and form.

For this kind of direct talk pushes the listener towards a conscious awareness of the present and away from the cinematic lull – often explicitly asking the listener to pay attention to his surroundings. It also implicates the listener as a subject in whatever ambiguous narrative exists – and makes sure that the listener is a player, not an audience. Once again, a step away from the cinematic lull. Finally, Cardiff regularly

²⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, “Dialogue and Sound,” in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 130-135.

²⁸ Ibid. Kracauer attributes this idea to British filmmaker John Grierson and his concept of a word ‘chorus’.

²⁹ Cavalcanti, 102.

³⁰ Schaub’s *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book* undertakes an extensive and valuable analysis of Cardiff’s use of language.

appeals to the intellectual side of the brain by posing deep philosophical questions to the listener, which are often followed by a casual gesture, such as a sneeze, that subverts the formality engendered by her philosophizing. Artists planning a site-specific work might do well to examine the overt strategies that Cardiff employs in order to outline her relationship with the listener, because there will always be a relationship between artist and listener; the only questions are what kind of relationship is it, and how consciously has it been created?

3. The Future of Physical Cinema

Future Exploration

There are several areas which I feel are particularly fertile ground for future sound artists to explore. They are listed below (in no particular order):

- The idea of reenactment and how it relates to palimpsest
- Anticipating and interacting with the listener's auditory imagination
- The interaction of all the senses: feel, smell, taste, as well as sound and vision
- The social aspects of physical cinema: communal mobile audio listening and the relationship of the listener to the shared sonic space and social environment.
- The subversion of visual aesthetics by sonic aesthetics (for example, creating a very loud soundtrack for a very quiet place).
- The exploration of repetition and ritual, particularly as they relate to the listener's sense of participation.
- The interplace of sonic and visual rhythms
- Site-specific theatrical intervention

Conclusion

This text puts forward a few introductory ideas about the relationships between mediated sound and the visual environment. Many of these ideas have already been explored in fascinating ways; many have not, and merit a second look (or listen) and some experimentation on the part of a curious artist. By making work which considers deeply the relationships among soundtrack, environment, artist, listener and palimpsest, I believe that sound artists might transform the public arena into a site for a guerilla physical cinema which supports a diverse range of artistic goals.