

## Listening: Headphone Theatre and Auditory Performance

The listener is a central figure in theatre aurality, as part of an audience, and as a lone attender, often indulged in a private experience that is characterised by intimate technologies (either sporting some sort of headset or glued to a phone, but not necessarily in conversation). The aim of this type of individual audience varies: this might be the conduit for a one-to-one experience; or we may be receiving instructions for participatory action; or we may find ourselves performing by listening, replaying an audio narrative as a percipient—part receiver, part player<sup>1</sup>—or we may be hearing a performance via a contemporary version of the *théâtrophone*,<sup>2</sup> engaged in listening that is entirely separate from the visual and is exclusively heard.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the UK, the increase in such a variety of ‘headphone’ shows and ‘in ear’ experiences demonstrates a surge of interest in audio theatre and auditory performance.<sup>4</sup> A prime example of this is Rosenberg and Neath’s production, *Ring* (written by Glen Neath 2013, produced by Fuel), an almost entirely auditory ‘sound journey’ (Fuel 2013), which is produced using what is termed binaural recording. *Ring* takes place almost entirely in total black-out, not even a glimmer of an emergency exit light is discernible. Equipped only with head-sets to guide the way throughout the production, its audience is hostage to listening.

As an entirely auditory experience, *Ring* not only captures its audience, it also positions them, literally, as the subject of the production. As soon as they are all seated, the audience are addressed as members of an unknown

group who are gathered for a therapeutic meeting of some sort; however, it soon becomes clear that they are assembled for a different, more urgent purpose and that is to identify, accuse and potentially punish the elusive Frances/Francis, who is guilty of a range of misdemeanours from manipulation to murder—and who turns out to be us. As such, we are both subject to and the subject of this form of headphone theatre. Director David Rosenberg describes this positioning as ‘an audience shaped hole,’ a ‘gap in the performance where the audience fits in’ (McLaren 2013), a bespoke place for the listener which negates any other. For this reason, *Ring* is described by its producers as ‘an antidote to choice’ (Fuel 2013). Nevertheless, despite the absence of agency that this statement implies, *Ring* is utterly immersive, to the point that one critic claimed it redefined the term considering this production ‘completely submerging’ (Love 2013).<sup>5</sup> By relinquishing control, its audience is promised, in return, a more direct and acute immersive experience. However, the notion of an antidote to choice is also a purposeful misdirection of the participation in the production which, as this chapter aims to demonstrate, is nevertheless active, particularly in terms of auditory perception.

## TECHNOLOGIES

The auditory experience of *Ring* is created by binaural sound production. This records sound from the perspective of auricular reception in order to mimic live hearing by incorporating the difference between the ears. To achieve this, contemporary binaural processes involve a dummy head to position microphones, in order to capture the range and field of signals around it. It is not just the different receptive positioning that mimics this; the auricular differential is reproduced by capturing the difference in the perception of sound, including the hierarchies of signal, in particular precedence (which is dealt with later in this chapter, see p. 63) and the low-fi soundscapes of resonance and noise. Standing in for the audience, the dummy head carves out the ‘audience shaped hole’ that Rosenberg wishes to create. The idea being, of course, that when reproduced, the sound surrounds us as if it is present, happening in the here and now. Indeed, binaural recording has a history in the recreation of the presence of sound; its capacity for surroundability and potential for complex location of sounds, makes this technology ripe for realism. This is known as a process of ‘auralisation’ (Farina 1993, p. 2), a sort of sonic mimesis, if you like. Yet there are subtle but significant differences



**Fig. 3.1** Simon Kane as Michael in Neath and Rosenberg’s *Ring* (produced by Fuel Theatre, 2013), photograph by Suzanne Dietz

between the actual recorded event and our re-hearing of it that thwart the recreation of a realist sonic space. Our means of perception—the most obvious of which is the movement of the head to locate sound—no longer affect the signal, our perceptual positioning is fixed. Therefore, while the auralisation of binaural techniques may recreate a very realistic, three-dimensional hearing experience, our listening—in particular the focusing on specific sounds—is somewhat thwarted by it. This form of immersive experience is deceptively guided.

The auditory effect of *Ring* is also directed by a series of *misdirections*, which distract the audience from the binaural experience that awaits, the first of which takes place at the outset of the production and, seemingly, prior to it commencing. In preparing us for the show, our guide and master of ceremonies, Michael (see Fig. 3.1), involves the audience in a headphone test. The setup is that the production will be recorded and, more significantly, that we are about to be privy to a live

feed. He taps the (supposedly) single-rigged microphone (with his cane, which becomes a sonic marker of his presence throughout the piece) and apologises for its primitive quality as it transmits a monophonic signal back to us. This sonic sleight-of-hand is also a ‘setup’ for the auditory experience; the production preamble takes place in the monaural domain, therefore our everyday perception is somewhat reduced to a rudimentary auditory encounter, whereas the production itself exists in the three-dimensional aural sphere that quite suddenly engulfs us. Therefore, the monaural and visual denote the real, whereas the binaural darkness heralds the fictional aspect of the production—it signals the performance. This auditory shift between what we might think is real and what is performance is crucial to our immersive experience, but this is as much the result of the dramaturgies of technology as well as its augmentation of perception. One example is how the binaural recording has the effect of creating something of an audience paradox: the hearing experience is individual yet is undertaken collectively. The listener is simultaneously isolated and accompanied in experience, concurrently ‘alone together’ (Kenney in Sterne 2006, p. 163).<sup>6</sup> For Rosenberg, this is a key dramaturgical effect of this piece of headphone theatre, a means by which individual members of the audience finds their place within both the world and the narrative of *Ring*: ‘You are in the odd position of being very much alone—isolated in the blackness—but also linked to the other similarly lonely people in the room through the sound in your headphones. The performance then creeps closer and closer to you; pointing its filthy fingers at you’ (McLaren 2013). This describes a doubling of audience, while the binaural field invokes the presence of others; for instance, our relationship with Michael and our differing relations with other group members, so too this is within the presence of *actual* others—the audience. In *Ring* this results in a comingling of the two, this particular ‘alone together’ experience is a bleed between fictional and actual presences, which makes for a very complex audience experience. Our immersion is similarly somewhere between the collective hearing of a narrative and individual listening.

### AUDITORY PERFORMANCE

Considering the potential of headphone theatre to shift between actuality and fiction, between monaural and binaural perception, between isolation and collectivism, is the audience’s position as fixed as the phrase

an ‘antidote to choice’ suggests (Fuel 2013)? How directed is this immersive experience? Is our perceptual experience as positioned as the technologies are? Or do the technologies promote perception that challenges this fixedness? In order to explore how *Ring* produces different modes of auditory performance—the performance of our listening—and how this, in turn, produces immersion, this chapter draws on some theories of perception that I consider to be well within the domain of aurality: auditory phenomenology and aspects of auditory physiology. An auditory phenomenology becomes particularly relevant for understanding auditory performance, not just because the theory patches well onto the technology but because of the absence of the visual in *Ring*, which throws the auditory experience to the fore. Auditory phenomenology also demonstrates how aural immersion is far from the passive state it is commonly assumed to be. Rather it is active and, furthermore, it is *activated* by acts of the audience, which engage us in attending, listening and embodying sounds, immersing us by perceptive action not unwitting submersion.<sup>7</sup> Yet *Ring* is also made active by its aural technology and its recording technique, in particular its *production* of an immersive experience; its effect is not just within our perception of a recorded event, but in how the techniques require us to re-perform it. For these reasons, this chapter will investigate how the technology and auditory physiology also generate an immersive experience.

### PHENOMENOLOGY OF SOUND AND THE AUDITORY EXPERIENCE

While the field of phenomenology frequently refers to sound, few theorists have sought an exclusive phenomenology of our perception of it, except for Don Ihde, whose emphasis on a phenomenological auditory dimension is an attempt to recover ‘the richness of primary experience’ (2007, p. 13) as well as to challenge the dominant ocularcentrism which, he argues, has nullified this. To illustrate the auditory dimension, Ihde draws out two regions, one visual for the entirely available field of sight, the other auditory, which encompasses all sound presences. A primary reason for this division is that anything seen or heard is never done so in isolation because ‘the thing never occurs simply alone but within a field, a limited and bounded context’ (2007, p. 73). Both are characterised by the limits of visual or auditory experience, and in the case of sight this is that which exists beyond its sensual perimeter—a horizon of

invisibility, for sound—a horizon of silence. Flanked by Husserl’s tenet of intentionality (an experience at the centre of any field of perception) and Heidegger’s version (in which the horizon marks the extent of the coming into being of a perceptual event), Ihde’s perceptual fields are a phenomenological capturing of all available sense data that might contextualise, inform, disturb, become or *be* the object of intentional focus, visual or auditory.<sup>8</sup> As such, Ihde is pursuing a tenet of phenomenology, that all senses are essentially spatial, as Merleau-Ponty explains: ‘A sensation would be no sensation at all if it were not the sensation of something, and “things”, in the most general sense of the word, for example specific qualities, stand out from the amorphous mass of impressions only if the latter is put into perspective and coordinated by space’ (2002, p. 252). However, Merleau-Ponty placed an emphasis on the senses as ‘all open on the same space’ (ibid.), but in terms of perception, Ihde finds distinction between aural and visual spheres. The distinctive nature of the auditory dimension is revealed in the layering of the two regions (see Fig. 3.2). In the overlapping auditory and visual fields, objects are

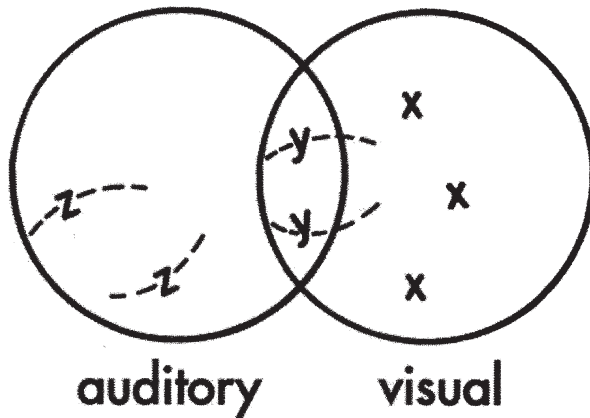


Fig. 3.2 Don Ihde’s Auditory Visual Overlap (2007, p. 53) which demonstrates how ‘the area of mute objects (*x*) seems to be closed to the auditory experience as these objects lie in silence, so within auditory experience the invisible sounds (*-z-*) are present to the ear but absent to the eye. There are also some presences that are “synthesised” (*-y-*) or present to both “senses” or “regions”’ (ibid.)

not merely seen and heard but are synthesized in a moment of movement between sensory fields. On either side are the familiar mute objects or invisible sounds, those which are ‘horizontal (or absent)’ (Ihde 2007, p. 53) for one region are present in the other. Yet there is a difference between these segregated presences, in how the sensed phenomena come into presence, and this is that the properties of movement are predominantly auditory—the visual world is by and large fixed in relation. We may move to intentionally focus upon the visual field, but the auditory moves us. This movement is not simply a shift of attention to an object, rather it describes our perceptual immersion in a sensing event that moves through us, becomes embodied by us.<sup>9</sup> Ihde’s purpose is not to denigrate visual perception (nor to deny that visual objects do indeed move, and that visual pleasures move us—of course they do), but is to demonstrate how the field of auditory engagement can be the primary means by which the visual world is experienced, or is that which calls visual objects into being. Ihde’s most common example is the bird-watcher who first hears the object of her intention, and what is heard then draws the bird object into her field of visual perception. The frequency with which sounds initiate and conduct perceptual experience, a regular occurrence somewhat muted by our predilection for the visual, is such, as Judy Lochhead asserts, that Ihde’s theory is a necessary reminder that we underestimate how ‘sound plays an important role in defining the world that we see’ (Lochhead 2006, p. 67). Thus, the auditory dimension offers an important dissolution of the binarisation and subsequent hierarchy of the senses, but it also avoids the theories of comingling them in order to examine more closely the perception potential of sound.

My interest in Ihde’s phenomenological approach is that this indicates how the domains of sight and sound might function together, when, in the case of *Ring*, one is sensorially censored.<sup>10</sup> This is, of course, the particular consequence of the pitch-blackness of this form of headphone theatre, as it is a formative example of the contemporary performance movement known as ‘theatre in the dark’. Though this complete blackout is obviously an absence of the visual, it must be said that the darkness in *Ring* is not about staging the loss of sight, far from it. Nor is it about quelling the desire to see, if anything it foregrounds this, as darkness may be an absence of what is visually present in the immediate future, that which may spring out at us from pitch-black space. Darkness is a loaded presence. It contains the potential for the visual. We are not sure

what gazes back at us in the dark. As such we might become anticipatory ‘seers’, straining to see what may appear, and therefore more conscious of our effort to look. Thus there is also an argument that darkness is not an attempt to partition seeing from the other senses; for example, Martin Welton considers that within darkness, looking and listening become co-extensive (see 2017). Seemingly dissipated by lack of light, the two primary senses might be considered searching for each other in the dark in order to cohere the deconstructed perceptual experience. This sensual search within darkness is premised on a more holistic version of the senses as Welton, drawing on Ingold, states ‘the seen and heard are not merely in parallel in theatrical experience, in the sense that the effect of one works pleasingly with the other, but they are unavoidably aspects of one another’s experience’ (2012, p. 77). Indeed, contemporary thinking around theatre in the dark draws together the senses in a more performative sensorium that allows us to consider perception as more embodied and haptic.<sup>11</sup> However, in *Ring* it is difficult to argue for an equal relation between the senses, as the censorship of sight is nevertheless a purposeful decision to foreground a sonic version of the world seen, an aural dramaturgy of the absent visual. In this respect, Ihde’s phenomenological approach can reveal how *Ring* is a recreation of visibility in the domain of the auditory, that which is seeded in the performance’s visual prologue and becomes fully manifested in the body of the work—in its aurality.

The audience are well prepared for the ensuing darkness, under the guise of the standard routine of pre-show housekeeping (such as turning off our mobile phones), we are treated to a preview of this absolute blackout, and equipped with safe words or gestures should it become overwhelming. All this is because, as Michael insists from the outset, that ‘the most important thing ... is ... the darkness’ (Neath 2013, p. 3). For Rosenberg, the darkness has the effect of increasing and intensifying an auditory focus which, in his opinion, produces a sort of heightened awareness,<sup>12</sup> but it also has a very pragmatic dramatic function in that ‘everything that then happens is still happening in the room, or what appears to be the room, the same room. But something has changed and it is very difficult to put your finger on what has changed’ (McLaren 2013). Thus, the space of the performance is revealed by the arrival of the darkness; the visual absence actually stages the proceedings, but leaves us entirely guessing as to what these might be. The darkness is also the means by which we are first implicated in the production. Michael’s



warning that ‘in response to the uncomfortable events that took place during our last meeting. Can everyone keep their clothes on?’ (Neath 2013, p. 4) is the point at which we enter the narrative. That *Ring* commences visually is important, not just for health and safety reasons but because our initial visual recognitions feed the auditory experience. The most important of which is the configuration of the auditorium, which is arranged somewhere between that of the obedient, generally mute theatre audience and an assembly for a participatory meeting. But equally significant is the identification of actor Simon Kane as Michael and, though we don’t know this from the outset, other members of the audience as potentially the rest of the cast. Michael can be envisaged and his image recalled. This is evident as he becomes the threat to the proceedings of the meeting, leaving under pressure and returning in anger to pursue the subject of the story (us), and this residue of information from the visual field becomes increasingly important. But the remaining characters are less clear, the glimpses of audience members facing us may appear, but as our focus was initially drawn to Michael, the stability of such ancillary, field-based visual information can be less than that of our pursuer. Furthermore, as the production progresses into headphone theatre, we must rely entirely on the auditory sense to draw any visual information, responding to sonic clues to imagine that seen, and as such, the characters form a kind of greyscale of diminishing visual data, some indexed to that seen, others entirely conjured up in the auditory dimension. In terms of Ihde’s visual and auditory regions, it is as if the former moves into the latter, as the visual seems to take on the qualities of the auditory. Ihde’s most persuasive argument for this is his model of auditory imagination, in which he argues the point that the visual can no longer be shut off from our experience—by closing our eyes—but surrounds us, as sound does. He explains:

I seem to be able to place the visually imagined object in any position in relation to the *surrounding* imagined space [...] then the space of the visual imagery parallels in at least one aspect the space of the auditory field and not its visual counterpart. In this sense the imaginative activity “exceeds” structurally its perceptual base. (Ihde 2007, p. 209, emphasis in original)

Understood in this way, the visual isn’t replaced or annihilated by the auditory but is reconstructed by it. The visual has a quality of movement

and becomes less stable. The mute object is no longer mute; it takes on the guise of the invisible sound and borrows the attributes of the auditory. In flux, and subject to change, the visual has an auditory quality of coming into being.<sup>13</sup> It is as if the censorship of the visual field draws it into the realm of aurality. However, the auditory experience of *Ring* cannot be entirely attributed to visual deprivation and aural recalibration. Perception is not parasitical to sense data, shifting allegiances from one region to another; rather in this case it is *directed*. This relinquishment of the visual field throws another aspect of the auditory experience into sharp focus, that the auditory realm has ‘bidimensionality’, according to Ihde (2007, p. 77): it is both directional and omnipresent.

### IHDE’S AUDITORY ENIGMA

Ihde’s assertion of the co-presence of direction and surroundability relies on a dismissal of the traditional physics of sound formation and reception, particularly because this is a visual modelling of sound and one which, he feels, is restricted to the ‘forward orientation’ (2007, p. 75) of the field of sight. He eschews the linear model, which limits our understanding of sound as waves that are received at the focal point of the ear, and pursues the different ways in which the phenomena of sounds *sound*. One of the means of *sounding* is the surface, not just of the sounding object but of the objects, resistances and environs that the sound encounters which, when all occur, means that we are listening more to a shape than a wave of sound. This ‘field-shape’ (Ihde 2007, p. 75), Ihde argues, is what distinguishes auditory focus from the visual, as this shape exceeds our visual perceptual position, it surrounds and encompasses: ‘As a *field-shape* I may hear all around me, or, as a field-shape, sound *surrounds* me in my embodied positionality’ (ibid., emphases in original). Situated within sound, its omnipresence becomes apparent, its directionality is that sound can be perceptually located. Put more simply, omnipresence could be understood as that sensed—in this case heard—and directionality as that intentionally focused upon—or listened to. A sound can be both surrounding and simultaneously the object of our intentional focus. In *Ring*, an example of this takes place immediately after the onset of the darkness and the second sonic misdirection occurs as we are commanded to move our chairs from the previous configuration into a circle. Immediately we hear the sounds of shifting chairs and mutterings about the task which, as this is our first encounter with the binaural recording, suddenly surround

us and are sonically omnipresent. This ‘activity’ is virtually indistinguishable from the ‘real’ space that we are gathered in; whether this is a real or recorded demand, we do not necessarily know whether or not to undertake the action, or if, because we are so recently enveloped in the darkness, it’s possible to do so. A sudden anxiety of perilous participation is upon us—only to be assuaged by a close whisper into our left ears, ‘It’s okay Frances, you can stay where you are’ (Neath 2013). This sound is purposefully directional; not only does it come from a particular direction it is *directed* at us, not just as a ‘voice’ which ascribes us our identity, but by where it becomes located, by its proximity to us within the shape of the auditory field. Indeed, it is this directional sound which gives specificity to the field-shape; without this, the surrounding sonic material is mere soundscape. Thus, it is the auditory directionality, not just the narrative function of the voice that positions us as a member of the group.

This co-presence of directional and omnipresent sound—Ihde’s ‘enigma’ (2007, p. 77) of the auditory dimension—is a key part of the auditory experience of *Ring*, and it forms the dramaturgical structure by which we move from witnessing the production ‘as’ Francis to coming into focus as ‘being’ Frances. This happens when omnipresent sound becomes directional, through the direction of our attention to it. An example of this occurs later in the production whereby a final ‘imagined’ sequence takes place, one which is staged as an escape from our implication in the serious crime: a quarrel between Michael and another group participant, played closely around us, breaks out into a fight—we hear the smashing of chairs and the breaking of the circle—and this is suddenly intercepted by soporific sounds reminiscent of a relaxation tape, which ushers in the following scene:

*As the sound [of the fight] fades away we realise we have been transported onto a beach. We spend a long [time] while listening to the relaxing sounds of the seaside: waves; seagulls etc., then:*

MICHAEL—(calling from a distance, as he approaches) Frances! Frances! Is that you? Frances. Frances. Imagine yourself on the beach Frances. (Neath 2013)

We are asked to imagine something that is already sonically present, which alters our auditory perception of it and shifts our position within the performance. What was omnipresent becomes directional; the beach becomes one we have imagined, it is the ‘product’ of our directional

focus (albeit one imposed upon us—made intentional—by Michael) and we move into the scene described as the producer of it. Our latent, horizontal presence as ‘Frances’ moves towards a ‘being’ of Frances within the scene because this directionality changes our position in relation to the omnipresent sound; we are amidst the auditory field, we are *in* the scene. Both these examples demonstrate how it is the aurality of the production, in particular the directed auditory engagement, which positions us within it and constitutes the experience. Ihde’s auditory phenomenology demonstrates how the auditory experience is as much the material of headphone theatre as we might ordinarily consider the text to be.

### AUDITORY PHYSIOLOGY AND SPATIAL RECREATION

Auditory physiology, in particular how hearing systems impact perception, can also demonstrate how the sonic space of headphone theatre generates our immersive experience. As this chapter has explored thus far, the fictional places of *Ring*—the ‘imagined’ scenarios of the crime scene or the beach and the ‘actual’ place of the group meeting—are created by sonic effects. The binaural recording casts us within these places, but in doing so also recasts the spaces around us. At the production of *Ring* I ‘saw’, I sat adjacent to a basement wall, fully aware of its damp presence from the outset. Yet once the darkness began and the meeting commenced this wall vanished, not because I couldn’t see it but because, by means of sound, the space extended beyond the fourth wall to my left.

There are effects preserved within the recording that, when replayed, have an impact on our perception by structuring the space of auditory performance. One of these is reverberation, described by Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue as ‘a propagation effect’ (2005, p. 111), which like Ihde’s auditory dimension, is ‘omnipresent’ (2005, p. 114). Reverberation is most commonly understood as reflective of an original signal, as the residues of sound once its source has ceased. However, reverberation is also key to the ways in which we distinguish between sounds, as well as the qualities of resonance that constitute them. The Precedence Effect, or Haas Effect, describes the process by which divisions of directional sound—or waves (if Ihde will forgive my recourse to this notorious visual model of sounds)—are either cohered as one entity or become perceptually discernible. Multiple waves (at a maximum distance of fifty milliseconds apart) are perceivable as a single sound, either by a dominance of the first wave or the filtering of the others. Any

identical wave above this becomes distinguishable *as* reverberation, for instance, as an echo. Thus precedence has an impact on how we hear spaces because, by hierarchising waves, it also prioritises certain surfaces. This is one way in which our perception plays a part in which signals are heard and, as such, precedence produces a particular auditory demarcation of space. The Precedence Effect is most commonly used for acoustic spatialisation; for instance, points of amplification in an auditorium can be modulated to maintain a coherent sense of space, one source arriving before another will dominate and radically alter the auditory shape, often flattening out the three-dimensional auditorium. However, the listener is not a neutral receiver of wave and reverberance, precedence is not just a binaural consequence, perception also modulates these potential hierarchies of sound. For example, more recent studies in auditory physiology have identified the function of ‘echo suppression’ (Bizley 2013) whereby the listener also ascribes precedence to a primary wave, arguably ignoring its reverberation and, therefore, also its constitution as another sound (even though this may appear as such in acoustic modelling). This means that we may have different perceived notions of the position of sounds than their physical manifestation in space. Therefore, the location of sounds is more problematic than first appears. As auditory researcher Andrew King has found, ‘we are good at localising sound in space, but we are essentially bad at judging the distance of a sound source’ (2013); put more bluntly by George Home-Cook ‘our ears often get it wrong’ (2011, p. 104). Indeed, King’s research into precedence, perception and spatialisation, has led to the assertion that it is not the determinacy of the ear but the relation between sounds by which we perceive space; ‘that the processing of auditory space is geared toward the representation of relative positional differences between stimuli, rather than their absolute positions in space’ (Dahmen et al. 2010). Sounds, therefore, become the co-ordinates by which we understand space. It is the information they bring forth to an audience that we attend to; their ‘opaque’ quality as James Hamilton described it (2015). This demonstrates another way in which the environment of *Ring* is determined within visual absence. Sounds do not alter a space because they were recorded somewhere else and, reheard, sound ‘as if over there’ is recreated ‘here’. Sounds recreate spaces because of their specific interrelation, in which actual spatial sources give way to re-heard localisations. Considering all this, it’s possible to see how auditory perception performs; this isn’t recreation but creation.

## AUDIENCE AS ACT

Auditory performance takes place within the constant flux between self and space, and in the case of *Ring*, this entails our movement between the actual and fictional worlds made possible by headphone theatre. As this chapter has shown thus far, auditory phenomenology and physiology demonstrate how sounds generate this flow, in particular how sounds move us and our environment: the sites, sights and subjectivity of the performance experience. But what of our movement towards sound? How does sound call us into the aurality of performance? How do we tend towards immersion? Another recent field of aural theory—more commonly termed aural, rather than auditory phenomenology<sup>14</sup>—focuses on modes of attention in relation to perception, how we navigate the interplay between sounds and within soundscapes and how sonic hierarchies—whether prioritised by precedence, the directional, or the relational, or by other means—draw us into attending or dis-attending. Thinking about notions of attention requires consideration of its other: distraction. More often than not, the idea of attention is predicated on that plethora of binaries from which the audience ‘proper’ needs to be drawn: hearing/listening, objectivity/subjectivity, signal/noise and so on. But attention as an *act* of an audience—that culturally encoded, well-behaved (or not), bored or jouissanced listening—actually requires the task of creating attention within a field of auditory presence that is already attended to. How does one listen if one is already involved in listening? How does immersion work within that which (arguably) already immerses? Within sound there is often more demand for our attention than we can pay attention to. As a consequence, listening is not necessarily so neatly aligned to that intended. Listening is not that well behaved. We do not necessarily attend to that which is *intended* to be the subject of our focus. This is not just a fending off of distractive elements within the field; rather, audience is also a movement between attention and its context, which requires a particular effort and an interplay between audition and focus, something which sound producers are acutely aware of. Theatre audience is not a mere fraught navigation of sonic phenomena, but is a conscious and purposeful negotiation of listening that requires constant reconfiguration and adaptation. It suggests movement, not just of sounds, but on behalf of the listener.

Considering the motility of listening, audience could be considered an *act*, one that requires an effort, or stretching, a concept that

Home-Cook has emphasised because the ‘word “attention” derives from the Latin compound *adtendere*, meaning, “to stretch”’ (2011, p. 99). Yet this effort is, of course, unseen, most obviously because listening is not always manifested visually (except for our expressions of it), and this is particularly so in theatre in the dark whereby any visual clue of listener effort is not available to the naked eye. Thus a more clandestine form of listening is indicated, which suggests a stealthy audience, an eavesdropping or even, as Steven Connor suggests, an unbounded opportunity for undetectable aural ‘stalking’ (2014). Indeed, the idea of stalking seems to capture the difficulties of attention, as the listener is always in a process of moving towards focus, but never quite attains it, hence the act of listening is caught somewhere in between absolute focus and inattention. This unattainability sheds light on our strange covert presence as the audience for *Ring*; we may be positioned as Frances/Francis but we also know we are not this character. We are an imposter; an aural equivalence exacerbated by the fact that we know there are amongst us many ‘Franceses’. Therefore, in the act of audience we have a simultaneous presence. Phenomenologically we are both the object of Frances—the intentional focus of the production—but also *not* the object, because we are also the audience of this production. We appear twice, once as the focus of the production and once more as the mute object, that peripheral presence so on the horizon it is almost, but not quite, absent. Following phenomenological theory, giving audience from the horizon, we might also be aware of the process of the coming into presence as the object of Frances/Francis, a phenomenological realisation of *being*.

To give audience to something is an act and, for this reason, aural phenomenology attempts to demonstrate a certain amount of agency in audition. But how does this agency square up with the ‘audience shaped hole’ of *Ring*, the determined position of us in the production? Our role as Frances/Francis is foisted upon us, whether we are designated *as* this character or are positioned from her aural perspective or ‘view’ ourselves listening-in as her from the aural periphery. Nevertheless, we have no choice but to hear the performance from this perspective. Consequently our identity, in relation to this narrative at least, is constructed, and our actions are not ours but entirely the consequence of others. As such, *Ring* is a performance of subjectivity as a profound *lack* of agency. The metaphor is not lost on us. In an age where identities are subject to malicious recreation and virtual persecution, *Ring* speaks of identity in peril. This is a more ominous example of the ‘alterity of aurality’ that

Frances Dyson identifies as a ‘technologically defined subjectivity—one equipped with new modes of perception, knowledge and self-knowledge’ (2009, p. 58)—but not necessarily one we desire to be. Therefore, the immersion that this auditory theatre creates is not an all-encompassing experience designed to separate us from the world by enveloping us in another one, rather it is submergence in the separation of us from us, an attempt to displace self, an ‘antidote to choice’ as to who we are. Thus, this immersion is political because it illustrates the ways in which our selves become performed, and it demands that we witness ourselves redrawn into a scenario over which we have no jurisdiction. A political immersive experience is not just the feeling of being othered from one’s self in this way, but brings to the fore such questions as who are we to be so easily lost, and how do we consider ourselves identifiable as ‘a self’ in the first place?

### IMMERSION AND AURALITY

Sound is commonly associated with immersion, yet immersion often assumes a passive auditory experience. To briefly recap: without the means to sever ourselves from the aural world—remembering our range of bodily haplessness from lack of ear-lids to the ever-present auditory imagination—sound always surrounds us. As it engulfs, so must we surrender to it. For this reason we tend to think of immersion as a positioning of interiority, whereas *auditory performance* demonstrates how our perceptive engagement is as much a *making* of an interior, whether within us or a space which we are within. Though the producers state that *Ring* is ‘an antidote to choice’, our audience position might not be as predetermined as it first appears. Our place in the production is created by acts of listening and auditory performance, not just by the act of rehearing, but by our recreation of the auditory space and our immersion in it. Therefore, while there may be no choice in terms of our narrative positioning, perhaps there is an auditory agency in our experience of it? As this chapter has shown, our positioning in *Ring* can be understood as constructed by a range of phenomenological perceptual positionings, including: the double dimension of surroundability and direction; sound’s ability to move and to move us, such as the shift between the monaural and bin-aural and their alliances with the ‘actual’ and ‘fictional’ worlds; and the broader auditory qualities of the visual. In addition to this, our auditory physiological system demonstrates how



an auditory phenomenology might be bodily generated, for instance the relocation—and therefore recreation—of space as being between sounds. This range of ways in which the immersive experience is created suggests that a sonic immersion, one based almost entirely on sound, and its passive connotations does not capture the active auditory experience, which involves not just sound and its reception, but complex auditory systems and phenomenologies of perception. Sound may no longer be associated with passive immersion, nor indeed is sound considered to be the only sense that immerses. Yet in headphone theatre, sound is the material of immersion and listening is the primary means by which we experience it. Immersive theatre is often an aural experience, yet it is directed and directional as well as utterly absorbing. In this way, theatre aurality demonstrates how sonic immersion is not the loose, uncritical experience in which subjectivity is lost: we may well get lost in it, but this is achieved with specific intent.

## NOTES

1. ‘Percipient’ is a term coined by Misha Myers to describe the hybrid performer-participant role in auditory performance experiences, particularly audio walks; see Myers (2011).
2. See Adrian Curtin (2013) and Melissa Van Drie (2016) for more on the *théâtrophone*, which was first demonstrated at the Theatre Français in Paris in 1881 and fully incorporated as a company and early telephonic service provider in 1890. Interestingly, David Collison (2008) describes the early Parisian experiments as having ‘no practical use’ (p. 72) and instead refers to the London-based *Electrophone* service that transmitted church services, as well as opera and theatre productions.
3. A survey gathered in 2013 via the SCUDD (Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, UK) mailbase identified some twenty-three ‘headphone’ shows of note ranging from those produced by Fuel, Shunt, Rotozaza and Blast Theory, amongst others.
4. ‘Audio Theatre’ is the term used to refer to theatre productions experienced primarily via audio means, most commonly headsets, mobile phones or other ear-pieces. Balme (2006) identified a genre of audio theatre, which (at the turn of the century) didn’t take place in theatres but in other cultural spaces or outdoors and usually involved the listener in motion; for instance, in the aural or audio walk. Balme is keen to make the point that this form of audio or ‘Walkman’ experience was intensely theatrical in that it effected a ‘*transformation of perception*’ (Balme 2006, p. 123 emphasis in original) despite it being site-generic. In the

intervening years, audio-theatre has snuck back into the theatre, engulfing the playing space and the auditorium; what Balme refers to as the ‘fictional’ space of that represented and the ‘collective’ co-present space of performance and audience spaces (2006, p. 118). Lavender (2016) makes the point that ‘audio theatre’ is now also associated with ‘wider shifts towards immersion, site-responsiveness and spatial dislocation’ (p. 57). Headphone theatre is also used to specify its material as well as its means, as a specific form made predominantly (and some might say exclusively) of sound. Auditory performance refers to the audience experience of audio or headphone theatre. The term auditory performance is preferable to auditory theatre for a number of reasons. First, it is necessary to distinguish practice from more traditional acts of auditory engagement within the theatre and, second, this term allows for analysis of auditory acts *as* performance and third, it invites investigation into the materials, processes and forms of these practices: as the term *perform* suggests, this auditory experience is only gleaned *through* form. Auditory performance points to a critical enquiry by means of audience experience.

5. Love’s blog found that ‘It redefines the horribly overused term “immersive”, completely submerging us in a disturbing experience from which we cannot escape (unless, that is, it simply becomes too much and we raise our hand with a cry of “help!”), which one overwhelmed audience member did on the night I attended)’ (Love 2013).
6. Jonathan Sterne makes the point that William Kenney’s notion of the principle of being ‘alone together’ was in the spirit of collective rather than the solitary experience of early phonograph recordings; the impact of ‘alone together’ was in the potential of the shared experience to create an ‘imagined community’ (Sterne 2006, p. 165). As Sterne points out, ‘private acoustic space was, thus, a centrally important theme in early representations of sound-reproduction technologies’ (2006, p. 163).
7. A number of recent studies have argued for the active, kinetic, participatory and political acts of listening in relation to contemporary performance including sonic arts, virtual and digital sonographies and theatre; see Dyson (2009), Voegelin (2010), Welton (2012).
8. Ihde’s phenomenology of sound, considered a ‘pragmatic’ theory, or ‘post-phenomenology’ by some, (see Dakers or Mitcham in Selinger 2006) draws more on Husserl and Heidegger than Merleau-Ponty. Key to Ihde’s theory of the auditory dimension is a co-presence of Husserl’s ‘to the things themselves’ (Husserl in Ihde 2007, p. 19) and Heidegger’s ‘letting be’ of the phenomena ‘to show themselves from themselves’ (Ihde 2007, p. 19), though Ihde recognises the important distinctions and development between the two as ‘the phenomenology of essence, structure and presence in Husserl leads to the phenomenology

- of existence, history and the hermeneutical in Heidegger' (Ihde 2007, p. 20). Ihde later wrestled with Heidegger's phenomenology, particularly his ambiguity towards technology, preferring the Husserlian approach.
9. Merleau-Ponty (2002) uses the model of listening to music to describe this process of aural movement as opposed to the traditional model of auricular reception; '... there is an objective sound which reverberates outside me in the instrument, an atmospheric sound which is *between* the object and my body, a sound which vibrates in me "as if I had become the flute or the clock"; and finally a last stage in which the acoustic element disappears and becomes the highly precise experience of a change permeating my whole body' (p. 264 emphasis in original).
  10. By this I mean that the visual field could be argued to remain 'present', particularly in the auditory realm, but it is no longer necessarily enabled by sight. The visual field arguably still functions; for example, according to Ihde, this can be understood as an act of the auditory imagination, a view commonly held amongst sound artists and producers of auditory theatre. For instance, Melanie Wilson considers listening is a 'fecundity of images' (Wilson 2013). For the purposes of this chapter, the point is that the visual field can be produced by auditory, rather than visual, location.
  11. I refer here to Josephine Machon's idea of the haptic, which places an emphasis on the tactile perceptual experience of the whole body, not just of the fingers, and explores this kinaesthetically through the body's locomotion in space. See Machon (2013), (2014) and (2017). The haptic as an affect of sound is explored in chapter six of this book.
  12. The idea that the depression of one sense increases perception in another is a moot point. Ihde frequently refers to notions of an advanced auditory or tactile engagement by blind people. However, disabled people may disagree; for instance, Jenny Sealey (Artistic Director, Graeae Theatre Company and Paralympics Ceremony co-director) considers the notion that deaf people see better and vice versa 'is a bit of a myth' (Sealey in Kendrick 2010).
  13. My point is that the residual visibility of *Ring* has a peripheral presence that is resonant of the horizontal phenomena that Heidegger regarded as coming-into-being. Ihde describes it thus: 'Being, which is that which comes-into-presence, that which is (already) gathered, is the *given*. But at the horizon one may note the giving, the *e-venting*, the point at which "there is given" into what is present' (Ihde 2007, p. 109, emphases in original). This arrival of being seems to herald itself at the circumference, where 'presence is situated within its horizons' (ibid.).
  14. There is a key difference between Ihde's auditory phenomenology, which is primarily focused on the hearing sense, and Brown's aural phenomenology, which is as much about the thing sensed as well as how it is

heard. This is developed by Home-Cook (2015), whose version of aural phenomenology places emphasis on attention, a form of audience that takes place between ‘sound as *intended* by design and the actualities of sound as *attended*’ (p. 10, emphases in original).

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