

CHAPTER VII

VOCAL LANDSCAPING:  
THE THEATRE OF SOUND IN AUDIOWALKS

MISHA MYERS

**Introduction**

As an innovative form of site or context-specific performance, audiowalks create a theatrical auditory space through the sound of voices speaking in the ear. Such works involve the listener-walker-participant as an active performer in the work through a multi-sensory involvement within specific places and landscapes. Their attention is conducted through particular techniques and technologies of and for voicing and listening. In this “theatre of sound” places are perceived from multiple sensorial vantage points, through “earpoints” as much as “viewpoints” (Edmund Carpenter in Feld 1996, 95). This mode of performance challenges prevalent conceptions of meaning production, forms of discourse and sense making involved in the experience of theatre. Furthermore, it contests notions of landscape and of spectatorship of theatre as predominantly visually orientated experiences or constructs. It could be argued that the central criteria of the medium of theatre are no longer present: co-presence of performance and audience in shared time-space. However, previous theatrical hierarchies, relationships between performer and audience and the phenomenological reality of the stage have been challenged and subverted by the use of innovative technologies in contemporary performance (Carver and Beardon 2004, 181). Indeed, as these authors have argued, the use of technology could be understood to reaffirm the centrality of immediacy in the theatrical experience, where ephemerality and contingency are augmented or enhanced. In this chapter it will be argued that the combination of practices of walking with those of listening presents a particular way of knowing landscape that situates or contextualises an audience in the visual and imaginary space that is

already involved in the experience of theatre. In particular, it considers how the use of technology in the audiowalk expands the phenomenological space in which theatre happens and the sensory modes of audience engagement within that space.

For example, particular attention is given here to the practices of listening involved with movement through auditory spaces in audiowalks through the mediation of audio technology in works such as: Mike Pearson's *Carrlands* (Pearson 2007), which he describes as a series of original sound compositions that combine spoken word, music and effects inspired by and set at three locations in North Lincolnshire (Pearson 2007); Duncan Speakman's *sounds from above the ground* (Speakman 2008, 2006), a site-responsive guided walk that combines text, performance and live sound with a group following a lone walker with his internal monologue transmitted to headphones; and Platform's "operatic audio walk" *And While London Burns* (Platform 2006), in which recorded voices guide the ambulant listener through London's Square Mile. While it is not possible within the scope of this chapter to analyse each of these works in great detail, this discussion moves alongside or accompanies these works to focus on the general techniques and technologies of and for listening employed in audiowalks. Consideration will be given to how such works affect and produce particular theatrical experiences of landscapes through kinaesthetic, mobile and multi-sensory experiences of sound within everyday environments.

With *Carrlands* a series of audio works can be downloaded<sup>1</sup> from the Internet to either listen to at home or to take on a walk in one of the three rarely visited locations in which the work was set. When experienced in these landscapes, the work becomes what Pearson describes as an innovative form of site-specific performance "from which performers are *absent* but within which the audience member plays an active and generative role in meaning creation, as a participant" (Pearson 2007, 2). This is a complicated sense of absence, as it is not simply that there is no performer there. This is addressed further in a discussion of issues of embodiment and speech that will follow. However, I have previously referred to the participant engaged in this active role within such modes of performance as a *percipient*. Where the locus of meaning creation or content is shifted away from conventional performers, I have employed this term to refer to a participant as a locus of place and knowledge production who alters and determines a process and its outcomes through their skilful, embodied and sensorial engagement (Myers 2006, 2008,

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<sup>1</sup> *Carrlands* can be downloaded at <http://www.carrlands.org.uk/project.asp> (accessed November 20, 2010).

2010). In *Carrlands* the percipient is guided through the integration of spoken texts for solo voice with musical composition and suggestive instructions of particular actions for the user to take. Pearson describes the instrumental and vocal components, sound effects and electronically generated material of the musical composition as providing “a matrix within which the text is embedded” (Pearson 2007, 6).

In *sounds from above the ground*, a group of percipients are given stereo wireless receivers and follow behind the work’s creator and guide Speakman as he leads them through the streets of a city. He asks the percipients to walk behind him at such a distance that if they were to raise their voice, he couldn’t hear them. Speakman’s internal monologue is transmitted to the audience’s headphones and is instantaneously remixed with sounds of the city via a laptop, which he carries in a backpack. Speakman instructs the percipient suggestively in the way that Pearson does in *Carrlands*: “Listen through my ears. Things that happened before will happen again” (Speakman 2008). The percipient listens to the manipulated ambient sounds Speakman encounters and “collects” as he walks just ahead. Meanwhile, the soundscape of the percipient’s immediate surroundings is drowned out by the sounds that precede them. Although a performer is present in this work in the conventional sense, he is also absent or displaced in a related, but different way to that of Pearson’s absent performer. Speakman’s voice is not recorded, but transmitted live and he is seen by the percipient walking up ahead and then he vanishes around corners. However, he is displaced sonically within the body of the percipient as his voice is heard through headphones. There is also a shift of the locus of meaning production in this work as the percipient is engaged both in meaning creation and in a role as a performer. A percipient of the work commented:

The artist is murmuring in my ear like a friend, telling me where to go. My inner monologue rises to tangle with him [...]. I’ve followed instructions. I’ve had space to look around, to be puzzled, to disagree, to feel stubborn” (Osunwunmi 2006).

*And While London Burns* is an operatic audio walk produced by the arts organisation Platform with composer Isa Suarez, that takes the listener, equipped with an MP3 player, on a walk “through the web of institutions that extract oil and gas from the ground [...] the ‘carbon web’ that is London’s Square Mile” (Platform 2006). The MP3 files of the walk can be

downloaded<sup>2</sup> from a website along with a map. The recorded voice of a narrator, or guide, gives directions for walking, relays factual information about the buildings and landscapes passed through, and sets a pace with the sound of her footsteps. This landscape is also seen through the eyes and experience of the operatic audio walk's fictional protagonist, a financial worker implicated in the "carbon web". These voices speak directly to the percipient and, similar to *Carrlands*, invite them to perform particular actions along the way, such as looking into a luxurious window display in the Royal Exchange, walking around and around the Swiss Re Tower, leaning up against a tree, climbing to the top of the monument to the Fire of London and then looking out over the city imagining a new future. While directing the attention of the percipient to their reflection in Swiss Re's mirrored windows, the protagonist whispers: "You in there, I'm here, in here between your ears, inside you. Look inside the windows [...] Do you see me [...] or is it you?" (Platform 2006). In this moment of the audiowalk, the performer of *And While London Burns* also directly addresses a distinct experience of entanglement of internal and external space offered by this mode of performance.

### **Listening that speaks, voices that sound: intimacy, touch and proximity**

Each of these three works utilises the mediation and transmission of recorded or live voice and ambient sound through headphones to direct percipients' direct and active engagement and sensual attention within a specific environment. In each audiowalk solo voices speak monologues, which could be understood as the sound of inner speech. In Frances Dyson's critique of vocal production of mainstream radio, she finds that the,

characteristics of inner speech—that it is silent, atopic, self-directed and timeless—enable it to establish a philosophical system where the mind can be conscious of itself without reference to the world, and without interruption or interference from the uncertainty of life (1994, 169).

This inner speech can assume the sensuous characteristics of voiced speech, which leads to the association of personal presence, sincerity, depth of character and truth with the sonorous quality of the voice. Dyson

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<sup>2</sup> *And While London Burns* can be downloaded at <http://www.andwhilelondonburns.com> (accessed November 20, 2010).

argues that a simulation of interiority is produced by the media through the transmitted and amplified voice cleansed of any noise of the body. With the addition of reverberation projected onto the amplified voice by reverb, this atopic voice can be “placed” in an idealised space. It acquires spatial solidity and dimension suggestive of that of a natural voice reverberating in a somewhere, although this somewhere is nowhere as it is absent of noise. However, the percipient in the audiowalk, and in some cases the performer, such as in the example of Speakman, will almost inevitably be amidst the “noisy” uncertainties of life where contingent and ephemeral ambient sounds of wind, passers-by, traffic, footsteps contribute significantly to the work. This contrasts with the conventional theatre space, which has been designed over time, like the radio studio, to be sound-proof and impermeable to the outside with its thick walls, cushioned seats and carpets. This section will primarily focus on a discussion of the transmitted voice rather than address the permeability of external noise as a central part of this mode of performance. While the latter will be considered in the next section, it is nevertheless worth noting that this aspect of the audiowalk increases the sense of immediacy that is central to the theatrical experience, as discussed in the Introduction.

The notion of the solipsistic, atopic and authoritative voice is inherited from the early Christian theological notion of *logos* and Plato’s institution of this metaphysics into an ideal: the revelation or truth of *logos* is only possible through the medium of speech and the technology of language, expressing ideas already in the mind. With this conceptualisation of speech, there is a consequential separation of the voice of the body and the voice of the mind, a dematerialised voice. Sound is eliminated from the voice to be replaced with the inner voice, the metaphor for reflection and intellection.

With the traditional conventions of Western theatre and acting inherited from the Greek theatre and this idealisation of a dematerialised voice, the actor, like language, is the transparent medium of truth and language, and is viewed as the primary sign system transmitting meaning. But what of the percipient in *sounds from above ground*, whose inner monologue tangled with Speakman’s or the protagonist of *And While London Burns* who gets inside the listener? This mode of a soundless and placeless inner speech does not adequately describe the mode of speech or indeed the spatial dimensions of theatrical speech involved in *And While London Burns*, *Carrlands* or *sounds from above ground*. Indeed, it was suggested earlier that the locus of meaning in these audiowalks is shifted to the percipient or listener. What alternative forms of listening and voicing, of

meaning production, of sensing meaning and making sense are offered, then, by the mode of performance they employ?

The interrelationship or implication of interiority and exteriority is significant to audiowalks where there is a certain intimacy constituted in the particular mode of listening mediated through the technologies and techniques they employ. Proposing a joining of a history and phenomenology of interiority with a history and a phenomenology of listening, Roland Barthes describes a kind of listening that followed from the internalisation of religion in Judeo-Christian civilisation as “*taking soundings*”, where an intimacy is “plumbed by listening” (1991, 250; emphasis in original). In Barthes’ account of forms of listening, the development of interiority leads gradually from the exterior voices of demons or angels to the object of listening becoming the conscience itself. He suggests that the shift from public confession to private listening within the confessional advanced a limited and clandestine listening that “brings two subjects into relation” (1991, 251). With the development of the instrument of the telephone and psychoanalytic listening Barthes suggests a new mode of aural attention has progressed that is active, dialogical and intersubjective: “*listening speaks*” (1991, 259; emphasis in original). A transference or a kind of touch between two subjects is constituted through “the quasi-physical contact of these subjects (by voice and ear)”, where ‘*listen to me*’ means *touch me, know that I exist*” (1991, 251; emphasis in original). With telephonic listening, Barthes suggests a return to the tactility or embodiment of hearing: the speaker is invited to collect the body into the voice and the listener to collect themselves into their ear (1991, 252).

Steven Connor suggests that amplified voices close up space through what he calls an aggressive-sadistic use of voice. He writes, “For when we shout, we tear. We tear apart distance” (Connor 2000, 34). The voice is brought closer in proximity to the receiver in an imposing closeness and intimacy. A range of organic vocal sounds such as that of the lips, tongue, and breath can be heard where in ordinary hearing they would not:

Microphones permit the use of a range of dynamics and the projection of nuances; even very small and inward elements of dialogue and expression can carry a lot of force (Salzman and Desi 2008, 28).

The voice has an embodying power to produce bodies, to manipulate itself into an object and to occupy space. This is the case with the voice that has an identifiable source, but exceeds that source, such as the singing voice, as well as the voice that seems to be separated from its natural source. As Connor suggests:

This voice then conjures for itself a different kind of body; an imaginary body which may contradict, compete with, replace, or even reshape the actual, visible body of the speaker (2000, 36).

Or indeed, in the audio walk this visible body of the speaker is conjured within the imagination of the listener. As the protagonist intimates in *And While London Burns*, the listener staring at their own reflection in Swiss Re Tower's windows might envision the voice they hear as their own. The audiowalk then reshapes the dimensions of theatrical space and the relationship between audience and performer. It is not enough to say that the performer is not present in this theatre of sound.

### **Vocal acts of landscaping: spatialisation of voice and sound**

With the technology of the headphone and personal stereo, audiowalks suggest an additional space and instrument of intersubjective listening that not only extends or transfers this touch between two subjects within an interior bodily space, or "body-as-site" associated with discourse (Barthes 1991, 255), but also externally with and within a specific landscape with its spectrum of ambient sound. As Barthes suggests "listening is the very sense of time and space" (1991, 246). In *And While London Burns*, *sounds from above the ground* and *Carrlands* the voice is placed somewhere where a range of ambient sounds of a material place, including the soft and nuanced, are amplified, imposed and transformed as elements of musical composition.

In recent thinking on landscape in cultural geography, as seen in John Wylie's work on the specific practice of coastal walking, narrative and writing, the dimensions of bodily space and landscape become enmeshed. As Barthes finds a metaphor in the "folds and detours" of the ear for the folding of the body into the voice and the self into the ear, Wylie suggests, "The circulation and upsurge of affects and percepts is precisely that from which these two horizons, inside and outside, self and landscape, precipitate and fold" (Wylie 2007, 215). The audiowalk might be understood as what Hayden Lorimer refers to as "embodied acts of landscaping" (Lorimer in Wylie 2007, 166), that is "the ongoing shaping of self, body and landscape via practice and performance" (Wylie 2007, 166).

Charles Stankieveh notes that the "*technique* of listening" that was initiated with the stereo stethoscope, the techniques of isolation and amplification, have persisted with the "*technology* of headphones", but they have been enhanced to produce imaginary voices and spaces:

But while the stereo stethoscope allows for a transportation of a real space into an imaginary space (from heart chamber to headspace), headphones allow for the creative manipulation of any kind of sound—from natural to technical to musical—to create imaginary spaces within *another* imaginary space (Stankievech 2006, 94).

Furthermore, current headphone technology permits the transmission of binaural recordings, M-S stereo recordings, or ambisonic recordings, which create a 3D impression “that accurately replicates an exterior perception of the world” (Stankievech 2006, 94). Stankievech suggests that audiowalks utilising binaural recording create a realistic immersive environment, such as those of Janet Cardiff and George Miller, where in their case a fictional element is combined through the use of *film noir* elements. The listener enters into “a hybrid reality where they are given a dramatic role to play” (2006, 94). Stankievech suggests that the success of their work is in the contrasting quality of Cardiff’s voice, recorded in mono and proximity to the microphone, with the binaural recording of the soundscape; as the guide’s voice feels like it speaks “not just from within the soundscape, but from within the listener’s own body” (2006, 95).

Different senses, spaces and sounds become fore-grounded as the audiowalk directs the listener’s attention to various levels of detail and sensorial experience, which is not unlike everyday experience:

Lived experience involves constant shifts in sensory figures and grounds, constant potentials for multi- or cross-sensory interactions or correspondences. Figure-ground interplays, in which one sense surfaces in the midst of another that recedes, in which positions of dominance and subordination switch or commingle, blur into synaesthesia (Feld 1996, 93).

With audiowalks the artists carefully compose such shifts of figures and grounds to direct percipients’ attention to details and narratives of particular landscapes. The voices of the guides involved in each of the works discussed above invites actions that activate other senses and/or sensations are amplified by musical elements. As Barthes suggests:

It is against the auditive background that *listening* occurs [...] if the auditive background invades the whole of phonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), then selection or intelligence of space is no longer possible (1991, 247).

This relationship between figure and ground might be considered similar to that between signal and noise. The ambient sound and the noise of the



body in motion may not always be composed, but may be accepted as a condition of this theatrical mode. Where it may be most effective in terms of an intelligence of space, is where the audiowalk allows for and anticipates the contingency and uncertainty of ambient sounds encountered in the landscape, and the particular gait of the walker into its composition. In such case, noise is no longer a distraction of unwanted sonic debris, but rather an element of the composition that enhances and augments the theatrical experience and space.

### **Listening through the feet. Mobility, multi-sensoriality, interanimation**

It is significant that with the audiowalk, the self that is collected in the ear is mobile and moved by the body. Indeed, Tim Ingold suggests that sometimes auditory perception is also “heard” through the feet in the form of vibration (2004, 330-331). But the motion of walking itself enables a different mode of sensory perception, as do other forms of mobility that move at a human pace. The tactile, sonic and visual senses are drawn upon and coordinated with the motion of the body, “the kinaesthesia and sonesthesia of shaped place, [is] encountered and learned by the moving, sensing, experiencing body” (Feld 1996, 105). This kinaesthetic, synaesthetic and sonaesthetic mode of perception (Casey 1996, 22), “the whole body sensing and moving”, is an “actively passive” mode, both absorptive and constitutive at the same time (Casey 1996, 18). Places are vivified through what Keith Basso refers to as a process of “interanimation”: “As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed” (1996, 55). This idea is perhaps related to how Pearson suggests *Carrlands* enhances appreciation of “a seemingly featureless terrain” by “animating that which is observable through story” (2007, 3).

Filipa Matos Wunderlich argues that the Walkman or iPod affects bodily disengagement in modes of walking, which she refers to as “purposive”, that is walking as a task of everyday necessity, a rapid paced and “anxious mode, in which we long for arrival at a destination” (2008, 131). The ambient sound of the actual environment and the sounds of the body, of breathing, of footsteps, of clothing are sometimes dampened, become background or are amplified or displaced. This is not dissimilar to the lived experience of shifting sensory grounds and figures described by Feld above. Ian Chambers contends: “[The Walkman] does not subtract from sense but adds to and complicates it” (1994, 51). There is a destabilisation of the senses that does arise in all of the works discussed, as

what is heard is not always what is seen. With *sounds from above ground* the delayed sound or intimate proximity with a sound source that can be seen at a distance is disconcerting. The conversation of a couple of passers-by walking up ahead is audible. By the time they reach me I no longer hear them. We are in a disjunctive time, as if we were in different worlds. However, there are also instances where what is heard and what is seen are conjoined in the synaesthetic and sonaesthetic perception of place.

While auditory perception may be conceived as the primary mediating sense in audiowalks, that you are being called to collect all of yourself into your ear (Barthes 1991, 252), the involvement of the other senses is significant to the experiences and opportunities for understanding they invite. “The more apparently distanced, disembodied, or deboned a sound might seem to be, the more substantial, the more bodily our relations find a way of becoming” (Connor 2004, 171). This multi-sensorial engagement potentially intensifies the emotional, imagistic and metaphoric associations, attachments and connections made with places (Wunderlich 2008, 130).

## Conclusion

Michael Bull has described personal stereos as “technologies of accompanied solitude” (2004, 177). He suggests this technology “shrinks space into something manageable and habitable” through the combination of noise, proximity and privacy (2004, 177). Bull focuses on the privatising and colonising aspect of this technology through which users can reconfigure, aestheticise and familiarise the spaces of the everyday and faraway with their own private experience. With this technology users can,

create a seamless web of mediated and privatized experience in their everyday movement through the city and [...] enhance virtually any chosen experience in any geographical location (Bull 2004, 182).

The audiowalk does aestheticise particular spaces of the everyday. However, this mode of performance interanimates and shapes landscapes through a theatre of sound that is not simply or primarily a visually orientated or directed experience. In this mode of performance, voices conjure bodies and landscapes in the imagination, voices are touched and touching and voices are placed somewhere amidst the amplification, imposition, transposition and transformation of ambient sound of material place. In addition, it is not necessarily a solitary experience in a shrunken

and isolated space. The audiowalk is a theatre of intersubjective listening that both closes the distance and extends touch between two subjects within an interior bodily space, as well as within a landscape. Indeed, there is a particular way of touching the world and of being touched with the particular landscaping practice of walking while listening to voices and sounds through headphones: “Landscape becomes the close-at-hand, that which is both touching and touched, an affective handling through which self and world emerge and entwine” (Lorimer in Wylie 2007, 167). In this theatre of sound, self, body and landscape are shaped and enmeshed through voicing and listening bodies in motion.

Ongoing innovations in locative media technology and the increasing use and access to basic mobile recording devices, GPS-enabled technology, and other hyper-media offer a range of applications that can further expand the dimensions of the theatrical space of the audiowalk. As well as making possible alternative modes of co-presence of performers and audiences in new dimensions of shared time-space, they also present modes of theatrical experience that are customised by and responsive to percipients and their presence within specific locations. Acting as multi-sensory receptors, transmitters, recorders and amplifiers, these technologies offer new modes of theatrical landscaping, as well as new opportunities to experience, create and express changing cultural, social and political landscapes.

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