Sonic memory material as 'pathetic trigger'

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Memory, according to Henri Bergson, is gleaned from the present and realises the present perception from its sensory-motor elements through movements towards that which it perceives.

The purpose of this article is to propose and debate the deliberate use of such 'present memory' in the sonic artwork. The suggestion is that *sonic memory material* – sounds that are plundered from old recordings – can be collaged into complex sonic works to produce, not a nostalgic experience in the sense of a recognition of the past, but a current production of sonic material in a continually present perception. Such a production strategy employs the affective quality of memory to 'trigger' a sensorial engagement in the sense of a 'pathetic' engagement understood as an emotional and sentimental involvement with the work. The understanding is that such an emotional engagement involves the listener centrally in the production of the artwork and challenges modernist (visual) art discourses, which evaluate the work from a distance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I would like to propose a strategy of working with what I will call *sonic memory material*, sounds that are plundered from old films, radio broadcasts, records, etc., in order to produce not a nostalgic experience in the sense of a recognition of the past, but a current production of sonic material. The main tenet of this suggestion is that memory is not something we summon from the past, from which we are temporally and geographically remote, but that it is triggered by a current event and becomes materialised in the now. Memory produces our present perception and at the same time, it '. . . can only become actual by means of the perception which attracts it' (Bergson 1991: 127).

> It is from the present that the appeal to which memory responds comes, and it is from the sensory-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life. (*ibid.*: 153)

Bergson's notion of memory sets up present perception as an activity, as movements towards that which we perceive; movements, which prolong and extend the idea of the past in the present. Essentially virtual, pure memory becomes actual in our present perception understood as an active motion towards the world. I will employ this model of memory production to discuss the use of sonic memory material as a strategy for artistic production and its perception.

In this sense, this article does not set out to observe or document the use of sonic memory material in existing work. This investigation is not that of a critic or art historian, surveying the field of plunderphonic productions. I do not wish to produce a generic definition of work that uses plundered sounds. It does not appear useful to me to arrest the multiplicity of such productions in typified descriptions. In fact, such descriptions would only counter my attempt at articulating the contingent subjectivity of their production. Rather, the purpose of this text is to articulate a strategy of production and perception, a work manual if you like, for 'home-assembly'. The focus of this text, then, is not on sonic artwork *per se*, but on the issues relevant to its production and perception.

The purpose of using sonic memory material as a strategy of production is to 'trigger' a sensorial engagement with the audio-visual or sonic artwork, in the sense of a 'pathetic' engagement understood as an emotional and sentimental involvement with the work. This pathetic involvement stands in contrast to the aesthetic rigour of artistic production.[1] Aesthetic theory articulates the totality of the artwork from a distance (i.e. from a visual place). By contrast, memory is affective, it moves us towards the action of perception in which it becomes realised. The suggestion is that such a sensorial engagement focuses and organises our perception and gets us involved in the production of the work.

[1] In his third volume on Modern Painters, John Ruskin writes against the 'pathetic fallacy' arguing that an emotional viewing falsifies the artwork. 'All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things' (Ruskin 1903: 170). Instead he promotes the idea of pure facts and rationality for the better production and judgement of art. In this context I borrow Ruskin's interpretation of the term pathetic as a strong emotional engagement, but use it explicitly to stress the imaginative and emotional quality of memory material, suggesting that it is precisely the pathetic quality of memory that triggers the engagement necessary to produce the work in a generative perception. This generative perception stands in contrast to the formal rigour of (modernist) aesthetics. Aesthetic theory pretends the possibility of an objective reading and evaluates the work according to clearly typified and categorised manifestations, or in the post-modern through contextual or relational frameworks, both of which grant a distanced view rather than an (emotional) immersive engagement with the material.

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Emotions, according to Noël Carroll, 'motivate behaviour' (Carrol 1997: 199). The behaviour I understand memory material to motivate is a generative engagement with the artwork. In this sense, what I attempt to provoke is a sensorial and emotional engagement with the work via the use of sonic memory material.

This aim is staged against the backdrop of a modernist aesthetic. And we are, even within postmodernism, working according to modernist principles and attitudes, producing modernist work which refrains from and even despises any emotional interaction with the material and prefers a formalist, analytical reading instead. Sentimentality and nostalgia are frowned upon and marginalised into the realm of indigenous or feminist practices. Within the art field, sentimentality is formalised via the notion of Kitsch, managed within the aesthetic rationality of this identification, and as such drained of any real emotional production.

My suggestion is that sonic memory material challenges such a modernist pragmatism by triggering an emotional engagement instead. With this suggestion I do not propose that anything that produces emotions is a work of art. I do not intend to open the field of art to *anything goes as long as it makes me feel*. This I believe would only invite prompt marginalisation and would not make for good art. Rather, the professional field and its rigorous framework of production and evaluation have to be in place. And it is then, even if paradoxically, within this formal field of artistic production, that memory material provokes the sensorial engagement that generates the work in a way that is useful to the field. It is the rigour of the art field that allows me to 'feel' something without floundering into an 'unsayable' that destroys artistic production.[2]

What is important in relation to this argument is the particular ability of sound in the production of such an emotional engagement. I argue that it is sound's quasi-virtual, immaterial blindness and 'immersivity' that renders it more effective than the visual in promoting an emotional engagement with the work. Bergson's memory in its pure state is virtual, only actualised in perception, and even then it retains a touch of virtuality. The same I argue is true for sound. And, this virtual residue of the sonic, I believe, is what allows for an emotional and even sentimental engagement with the work.

2. SONIC MEMORY MATERIAL

Memory, according to Bergson, is the intersection of mind and matter. It challenges the idealists as well as the realists and complicates the idea of present perception by placing its trigger in the past. In this sense, memory is forever becoming and has never been. It is not dialectically opposed to the idea of present but realises the present as an affection towards the world. In this way it is wholly dependent on the individual perceiving. Memory extends from me into perception, producing that which I perceive.

In this understanding there is no space for aesthetic distanciation.[3] The individual is sensorially involved in this generating of the present. Consequently it is impossible not to be emotionally and presently involved in anything that is here now. Memory as a sensory-motor activity prepares and guides my actions towards the world that it generates. That is not to say that there are things in this room that do not remain unaffected by my memory, I am sure there are, but they are not, at this moment, present to me.

This understanding of memory makes it central to my idea of artistic production in general and the production of sound art in particular. If, as I suggest, memory triggers the production of the now in such an audience-centred way, then the introduction of memory material into a sonic artwork provokes a listener-based production of the work and challenges the critical conventions of modernism and its 'visual' discourses, which favour a distanciated perspective.

Visual memory presents, whereas sonic memory suggests. Vision explores surfaces and creates overviews. Its aesthetic discourses aspire to objectivity and a rational understanding of its spatial relations. Sound's ephemerality plunges you instead into the blind depths of materiality and engages you in an

[2]I borrow this term 'unsayable' from Julia Kristeva's essay 'The imaginary sense of forms'. In this essay, Kristeva describes and discusses a particular viewing of sculptures by Alain Kirili which she views 'in the midst of the Gulf War' at *Commandement XI*, in Paris. I am inspired by her idea that sculpture, the artwork, 'lends its geometry to our projections, body and soul'. Rather than insisting on making her perception coincide with an art-historically verified reading, she understands the material 'lends itself to the most unsayable aspects of our corporeal experience' (Kristeva 1991: 29–30). I take measure on her method of viewing an artwork, and understand sonic memory material to perform just such a contingent projection, 'body and soul'. However, I am aware that this sensorial engagement is framed by and thus made 'sayable', in the sense of determined, within the rigour of the gallery context. It is corporeal but not floundering.

[3]The Brechtian term *distanciation* (Verfremdungseffect) describes the aesthetic process of producing a critical distance through the focus on the structures and materiality of the work. The processes of production are foregrounded in order to prevent empathy with the narrative or the characters. Bertolt Brecht used distanciation as a strategy for politicising the audience. However, I believe that a more complex and less collective political subjectivity is produced via a generative and sensorial *immersivity*. In this sense, my term immersivity critiques the Brechtian desire for critical distance and places criticality not in the place of the spectacle (the visual) but its generative perception, which is more akin to a sonic sensibility. Implicit in this critique of distanciation is the idea that criticism is not produced from an (aesthetic) distance, reading the artwork as a text, but through a physical involvement with the work.

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immersive production of its relationships. The artist working with sound can provoke and stimulate this engaged production by consciously playing with what I term sonic memory material: sounds plundered from radio broadcasts, records, feature films, the television, etc. This material sampled and collaged together, emphasises the tension between the now and the past in current perception and draws the listener into its production. The idea here is of course not to simply add different source material and expect them to do something exciting. Rather, what I am suggesting is the production, or the stimulation of the production, of narratives, through a complex collaging of different sonic elements. These sounds are brought together not for their 'visual' characteristic, what they signify, but for their material particularity and what they come to mean in an embodied understanding.

The introduction of 1950s film sound, for example, opens a particular space in the artwork by its recording quality alone.[4] The distinctiveness of its recording quality imports a particular 'old' or nostalgic space that is opened when listening to the work. This space is then 'filled' by the individual listener. His/her memory rushes in and produces a whole host of potential realities. Add to this recording quality the voices and sounds of that era and the present artwork is made more complex by a whole range of registers that will all have to be produced by the listener. The sentimental quality of the glass cut voices, the quaint music and muffled sound effects, build a filmic scene that is not really here now, but is produced in the juxtaposition of the memory material and its present perception.

The idea of introducing such sounds is not then one of re-presenting the 1950s.[5] Its aim in the context of the artwork is not that of documenting and rendering real. Rather, this material is brought together so as to produce the idea of a possible event, or indeed an impossible event, rather than the re-presentation of an actual occurrence. It presents a melting together of then and now, a possible past produced in the present, a false memory, being laid out for us to indulge in and get carried away by. However, none of these memories produced in this space are really false. When every memory is actualised in the present perception, there is no such thing as a false memory but only real fictional spaces produced between imagination and remembered reality.

[4]The 1950s soundtrack is of course only one example of sonic memory material. Any other recording would be equally valid and would bring with it a whole host of sonic qualities in which to become immersed.

[5]These 1950s sounds do not have to be recognised as 1950s sounds. Recognition might add another dimension, a personal recollection, a smile on the listener's lips. However, the issue is not the event re-created but a possible event being produced. In this sense, recognition of the era of recording is not a pre-requisite for memory material to produce a pathetic engagement.

Memory organises bodies and materials towards a reality that is ideal in the contingent moment of its perception. In other words, it dispels the opposition between ideality and reality, and instead purports reality as continually present, individual actions towards the world. The plundered material from a 1950s film sound track does not evoke in me the 'real' 1950s. What I hear are sounds that I produce at this moment through an amalgamation of various 'images' and ideas in my present reality of that time. The 1950s are produced now, not remembered.

The enjoyment and generative quality of this fictional space is, even if paradoxically, assured by the generic particularity of the material used: film music, film voices, sound effects, etc., produce a particular sonic 'space' with which the audience engages emotionally but not universally. The generic quality of the sonic material, its conventional structure and tone, is what allows us to produce it individually. These are not particular or personal memories, but general memory material, embedded in the conventions of their time and place. The specificity of its style and 'quality' triggers numerous contingent imaginations. What we hear is not a particular shared narrative, but affectively produced individual and contingent narrations.

In relation to this, the use of a well-known recording, say of Martin Luther King's 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., 'I Have a Dream . . .', inhibits the production of a present imagining. This recording is not sonic memory material in the sense that I have identified it above. Its iconic status overrides a generative engagement. It is a sonic icon, recognisable rather than imaginable. It has become a sonic signifier, a quasi-visual and substantial 'thing', that can be heard from a distance rather than produced in an engaged listening. In this sense, I would refrain from using such highly charged and recognisable material, as it will not trigger the wished for pathetic involvement but only produce a detached recognition, producing a quasi-visual distanciation.

In the same way, I would avoid overt processing of the sonic memory material. Analogue or digital processing and sound manipulation might mask the generic quality of the material and would instead foreground the processing mechanism, leading to a technological distanciation.

Instead, a more generic and unspecified material that remains materiality rather than becoming a signifier, is what is needed. Sonic material that alludes to a past at large rather than a particular event and thus is not closed down in a present knowing but rather produced in a present imagining. And this present imagining is individual rather than universal.

In a sense then I am setting up a neo-romantic position. An ostensibly romantic position, but one

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where emotionality and sentimentality are producing the work without, however, surrendering the formal rigour of the artwork, its material structure and position in art discourse, to an esoteric sense of personal feelings. And neither do they propose the idea of a universal representation of collective sentimentality via the idea of the void. Present memory does not produce a gap between then and now and hence does not produce a longing for something of another time or another place. Rather it immerses me in the present narrative of its production and any longing perceived becomes a longing for the now. Any void felt by the listener is an individual and sensorial rather than an aesthetic void, and thus cannot be filled through a representational replacement. Instead it invites a subjective and mobile production of the sensorial material. My neo-romanticism then is immersive and contingent rather than pictorial. Consequently it never allows the listener to take a distanced position from which he/she could replenish an experiential void.

This present quality makes memory material relevant now and does not justify a marginalisation of its sentimentality. Nostalgia is not the exclusive pursuit of women and natives, unable to focus on facts and losing themselves in sentimental fictions. And neither can it be distilled in a singular and universal romantic vision. Memory motivates the listening and triggers a pathetic production essential for the perception of the work. In this sense it cannot be passed off as trivial to artistic production. Without this engagement we do not *experience* but only *read* work. We can read Kitsch as an aestheticised and ironic version of sentimentality, mocking sentimentality and closing the space of its production. Kitsch is the modernist plug to sentimentality and emotions, separating the artwork from feelings and re-investing it in the categories of modernist discourses. In this sense Kitsch is not a post-modern practice as much as a motioning of post-modernism back into the fold of modernist principles, from which it never really strayed in the first place.

3. MODERNISM AND SENTIMENTALITY

The modernist aesthetic focuses on the production of form, the substantial, the essential, the categorisable artwork. In search of objectivism, the modernist art critic sets down clear rules as to what is good art in respect to clearly typified and categorised manifestations. From this principle identification, modernism mobilises the idea of unity and totality, deliberating the qualities and characteristics of the total artwork. According to Jean-François Lyotard, modernist art theory seeks 'to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt' (Lyotard 1994: 74). Its aim is to establish the artwork as certain and knowable in relation to a transcendental *a priori*. Its vocabulary consequently accommodates the description and judgement of spatial and substantial work: painting and sculpture, at some distance from the viewer. Modernism in this sense is a thoroughly visual discourse, it scans the surface and measures spaces, in search for a total ideality.[6]

In relation to music, it is the score that substantiates and qualifies the work in an *a priori*. The score visualises and thus spatialises and arrests the temporal performance in an ideal temporality. The score is proof of its existence and determines its value. According to Theodor W. Adorno, it is the quasi objective relationship between tones in harmonic intervals in relation to the compositional totality of the work that renders the musical work ideal. The temporal quality of music, which could be seen as its critical edge *vis-à-vis* spatial art practices, is for Adorno a problem, unless it is compositionally controlled; the temporal sounds fixed in what he terms a *Notenbild* (an image of notes).[7]

Such modernist criteria for discussing and judging a piece of work, visual or sonic, sees the processes of viewing and listening as having no impact on the appearance of the artwork nor on the subject perceiving it. The viewing/listening subject is assumed as a fixed identity, he/she too is totalised and unified as a transcendental subject.

4. THE VIRTUAL RESIDUE OF THE SONIC

Sound work that is 'blind' in the sense of working on the virtual residue of memory, cannot be totalised in this fashion. It necessarily involves the listener in its production and does not offer a distanciated position from which to totalise the work in an ideality that is remote from the sensorial material.

Bergson's understanding that present perception is already memory, and his observation that the past is virtual, actualised in a present perception whilst retaining an element of virtuality, seems to describe sound more than it does the visual. The visual insists

[6]Ideality is used here in the sense of the Hegelian notion of *Idealität* of an 'ideal objectivity', which for him decides the beauty of art as an absolute beauty that has overcome the '*Widerspruch*' (antagonistic contradiction) between discord and harmony in sublimation (*Aufhebung*), and has attained an ideal objective state, which is understood as ideal spirituality (Hegel 1979: 70).

[7]A danger that I observe in much contemporary discourse on Sonic Art is that the score is simply replaced by a technological manual. The *Notenbild* is replaced by illustrations of software processes and hardware interfaces, the ideology of an *a priori* objectivism remains in place, however. The work is identified within these processes only, and the listening subject too is fixed in relation to this ideal totality. Such a focus on the production processes, as composition, retains Sonic Arts' discourse within a modernist aesthetic. It avoids a consideration of the experiential status of the work, which would problematise any compositional control, intention, and the unified appreciation of the work.

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on a pure presentness, it is either perceived to be here or it is not. By contrast, sound phases in and out, sometimes I can hear it clearly, sometimes only a soft murmur passes my ear. The connection between a real, actually present, sound and a virtual sound is a matter of degree rather than of substance. It is always my embodied listening that realises sound, however virtual its material reality remains. Hence the division between an imagined sound and a real sound is rather fragile. At the centre of this fragile connection is my listening as a movement towards the sound work, which produces this work in my imagination.

In this sense, sound seems to be following postmodern principles, which, according to Lyotard, do not invite the understanding of the artwork as supplying or representing one total and ideal reality of the work, but rather assume artistic experience as 'real' and 'ideal' in the sense that the audience connects it to a personal and individual experience. In Lyotard's terms, postmodernism puts forward that which in modernism remains unrepresentable. I understand his use of the term 'unrepresentable' as referring to the moment when the modernist objective vocabulary clashes with the imaginative production of the individual listener and fails to account for his/her contingent experience. It is the moment when the objective observations and criticality put forward by modernist art theory alienate and limit the individual subject experiencing the work. Consequently, the subject seeks to free him/herself from this objective and essentialist interpretation to pursue his/her own pleasures and emotions in the work.

The affective quality of memory motivates such an individual engagement and focuses listening as a motion towards the work. It can be used by the artist to stimulate and manipulate the listener through material narratives. In turn these narratives become 'told' and 're-told' by the listener in his/her perception. These are then not modernist (grand) narratives, histories of aesthetic rationality, universal and fixed, but local and temporal (small) narratives: fluid stories, continually narrated. A heterogeneity of memories triggered by the same memory material, stirring up a plethora of emotional extensions of the work. In this sense, the postmodern is a radicalisation of the modernist understanding of the artwork through a focus on perception. It is no longer one objective referent, or universal memory, that determines a current perception of the artwork. Rather, it is the multitude of memories that the listeners bring to the work which trigger and are actualised by this contingent process of perception and which continually develop the interpretation and judgement of the work. However, in the overall context of modernism, the postmodern excursion into an emotional involvement is ultimately redeemed through discourse.

Postmodern discourse is not opposed to modernism and its way of theorising art but is rather a logical interpretation and development of its idealism of totality and unity via the consideration of perception: challenging modernism via a temporal dimension. The temporal allows for a more dynamic, fragmented and nonlinear engagement with the work. But, as an essentially modernist philosophy, postmodern aesthetic still refrains from sentimentality. Postmodern discourses limit emotions within a representation of sentimentality, Kitsch, the confessional, performance, etc. These are fragmented practices that seemingly invite the complicity of the audience, but soon discard their emotional engagement through critical theory. The apparent openness, then, to an emotional engagement is reduced again to rational knowledge and an idealised perception. My memories that trigger my engagement with the work are limited by a particular reading, contextualised through theoretical discourse, visually, rather than extending from the sensorial materiality.

5. CONCLUSION

The problem, then, with the visual principles of modernism and postmodernism in relation to sonic practices and the activation of the artwork via memory, lies not with their actual practices but their theoretical discourses, which take the sensorial out of the material and disregard emotions and sentimentality. If, as Carroll suggests, emotions motivate behaviour and thus produce an active attitude towards the artwork, memory as the trigger of such a pathetic engagement should not be drained through preconceived theoretical values and ideas. My suggestion is that through the use of sonic memory material we can re-invest in the emotional, and thus re-invest in individual perception, without becoming esoteric and doubtful, and without proclaiming a grand universal narrative either. The postmodern context, I believe, offers a rigid and yet flexible enough framework in which to be engaged with the sensorial material, without losing sight of professional practice. The conventions and borders of art practice, sonic or visual, are defined enough to withstand an emotional onslaught. The 'pathetic', I am convinced, will find a new articulation in current aesthetic discourses. And I believe that the understanding of the status and consequence of memory in the processes of present perception is a crucial factor in this re-evaluation.

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