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Discussing the Relationship between Sound and Image: The Scope of Audio/Visual Strategies in a Contemporary Art Context

Abstract:

Guy Debord challenged our consumption of images as pertaining to the "Society of the Spectacle." Hence, in his film "Hurlements en faveur de Sade" (1952) there are no images, other than a white screen or a black screen, the former as visual backdrop to an audio track expressing Debord's "situationist" critique, the silence of the latter to reinforce the perception of (audio-visual) absence thus confronting the audience with its (frustrated) expectations and desires. John Cage's landmark composition 4'33'' (1952) also aimed to create awareness, albeit of a very different kind, where the perception of sound in its duration was not determined by the format and expectations of music but by the (timed) awareness of the listener's acoustic environment. In view of these (now historical) efforts to arrive at a radical perception of sound (and image), and also referring to artists such as Bruce Nauman, Tacita Dean and Anri Sala, this paper will discuss some of the author's video works and their strategic use of image with/without sound to reflect on Bergsonian duration as experience of multiple time flows within art installations.

Keywords: Perception, Video, Sound

In the early days of cinema, the presence or absence of sound in relation to the cinematic image had been a determining factor in the presentation of visual material, with dramatic consequences once technological developments allowed for filmic sound track. In 1952, two unrelated events tested the expectations of cinema viewers and concert audiences — Guy Debord's film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* and John Cage's musical performance 4'33'' — both involved absence as a means to reflect on the perception of sound (in Debord's case this involved also the filmic image whilst Cage reflected on the perception of sound as music).

Debord challenged our consumption of images as pertaining to the 'Society of the Spectacle': "The Spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world." (Debord, 1983, no pagination).

Hence, in *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* there are no images, other than a white screen or a black screen, the former as visual backdrop to an audio track expressing the 'situationist' critique, the silence of the latter to reinforce the perception of (audio-visual) absence thus confronting the audience with its (frustrated) expectations and desires. Debord explains in a letter to André Frankin: "With the first appearance of the white screen, the film starts to completely contradict itself (...) It is (...) quite explicitly an anti art film (...) a quite realist description of a life style devoid of coherence and importance. Its form corresponds with its content. It is not the description of this or that activity ... but of the centre of this activity, which is void." (Ghezzi and Turrigliato, 2005, 26)¹

In its radical format, Debord's film not only illustrates the situationist critique of a society steeped in visuality and conditioned by its commodity factor, he equally tests our cinematic viewing habits by engaging in a somewhat minimalist exploration of sound without image (other than a white screen) and absence of sound and image (other than a black screen) thus disrupting conventional sound and image relations. However, despite his condemnation of cinema, he still operates in an audio-visual context where the audience is confronted with the void of the screen.²

¹ Author's translation. "Avec l'apparition du premier blanc, le film commence à se démentir lui-même sur toute la ligne (...) Il est (...) assez explicitement, anti-film d'art (...) et description, finalement réaliste, d'un mode de vie privé de cohérence et d'importance. La forme correspond au contenu. Ce n'est pas la description de telle ou telle activité (...) mais du centre meme de l'activité, qui est vide." (Ghezzi and Turrigliato, 2005, 26)

² Debord's critique of a visually driven consumer society is an early announcement of what was still to come in the age of the Internet. Recent years have seen an exponential growth of image consumption, in particular through social media such as Facebook, Flickr and Instagram, confirming some of Debord's worst nightmares of society caught up in the dynamics of the 'spectacle'.

John Cage's landmark composition *4'33''* (1952) also aimed to create awareness, albeit of a very different kind, where the perception of sound in its duration was not so much determined by the format and expectations of a musical performance but by the (timed) awareness of the listener's acoustic environment. However, it was staged as a concert performance presenting ambient sound as music. Brandon LaBelle comments: "What *4'33''* captures in the move from composition to audience, from musical instrument to found sound, from composer as writer to composer as listener, is a conceptual frame in which music and context set each other into relief, mobilizing silence to incorporate the noise of all that is outside music." (LaBelle, 2006, 14)

As important as *4'33''* has been in the world of experimental music, it also has contributed to creating awareness in the visual arts of (ambient) sound and its representation of place by allowing for a receptive spatial temporality.

This discussion is less concerned with sound per se but rather with sound as counterpoint or extension of the filmic image in a contemporary art context. By considering the strategies of various artists it aims to highlight the scope of sound as a means to inform the moving image. The intention here is to allow for a fine-tuning of audio-visual possibilities in order to determine how sound enhances spatiality and sculptural presence within filmic installations.³

Contemporary artists and their use of sound and image

Bruce Nauman is known as a sculptor but equally as someone working with text, sound and video. Many of his single and multi-channel video works use repetition of sound and image to convey a sense of unease and examination of socio-psychological situations. In his work *Get Out of My Mind, Get out of this Room* (1968) he used his voice for the first time to engage with the viewer (Lewallen, 2007, 101); the piece consists of a small 'empty' space where visual stimuli are reduced to bare white walls and a light bulb dangling from the centre of the space. This makes the sound recording of his voice all the more present and confrontational in its crescendo asking the viewer to 'get out' of (Nauman's) mind and of the installation room.

Experiencing this piece at the Hayward Gallery, London (1998), I recall how I was looking for visuals, only to find sound, which in turn took me back to consider the sparse visual setting. There was no image but blank walls, yet the room was brightly lit reinforcing a sense of visual absence. Janet Kraynak comments on Nauman's motivations: "One of the artist's most trenchant critiques of Minimalism's embrace of the phenomenological was to call attention to the naiveté of its claims for a primordialism of perception, which visually translated into an unrestrained freedom of physical movement granted to the subject." (Kraynak, 1997)

In *Get Out of My Mind, Get out of this Room*, the viewer's perception and 'freedom' to roam is challenged by an astute interplay of sound and image (or absence of the latter). The piece also featured in the installation *Raw Materials* (2004-05) in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern where Nauman used a range of his earlier sound works. However, at this occasion, the (spatial) context was drastically changed as speakers were aligned along the sides of the enormous exhibition space letting the viewer's pace modulate the experience of sound and space.

Anri Sala's installation *Ravel, Ravel, Unravel* at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) was inspired by Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the left hand* commissioned by pianist Paul Wittgenstein after losing one hand in the first world war. Sala's installation plays with relations of sound and image, not as discrepancy between the visual and the acoustic, but using audio-visual means to show differences of musical interpretation in order to explore the spatial potential of sound. One part of the presentation consisted in a two channel video projection that was shown in an anechoic chamber to minimize the reflection of sound. As a consequence, the spatial effect of sound was entirely due to the discrepancies between two (choreographed) versions of Ravel's piece, interpreted respectively by Jean-Efflam Bavouzet and Louis Lortie — the differences of their play were orchestrated in separate recordings, like in a 'film script' to achieve the spatial effects desired. (Pigeat, 2013, 25)

³ The selection of particular art works is less motivated by art historical gravitas but is based on my own research interests as audio/visual artist. Given the importance of the phenomenology of perception, I have only chosen works (with the exception of Debord's film), which I have actually experienced in an exhibition context (Cage's *4'33''* only as a video recording in the exhibition *A House Full of Music* at Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, in 2012).

This was not a classical concert, not even a film of a concert but the filmic juxtaposition of two interpretations of a musical piece. Seeing the music performed on the concert piano accentuated an awareness of discrepancies between the two players, time was not simply doubled up or moving according to different speeds but the duration as a whole seemed to expand and recede, with smaller or longer gaps between the two interpretations. Anri Sala states: “My intention is to make a space resound consecutively to the temporal gap between the two performances; to paradoxically create a ‘different’ space in an environment conceived to annihilate the feeling of space (by suppressing echoes).” (Bochicchio, 2013)

Sala sees himself as a visual artist but describes his process as taking its inspiration in ideas of sound, which he then develops in an audio-visual context.⁴ “So I always try to expand my idea first via the sound, and then let the image come in as the actuality in which the sound is produced (...) I simultaneously expand through the sound while reducing through the image. That’s my process. Even if I’m a visual artist, I build on the sound, I build with sound and in the process I let sound trigger its visual reality.” (Meyers and Sala, 2013)

In contrast, Haroon Mirza brings sound and image to a strident collision. His audio-visual installation *The National Apavilion of Then and Now* (2011) at the 54th Biennale of Venice was striking in its complexity and minimal reduction. Entering the enclosed space, an anechoic chamber, one’s attention was solicited by an electronic sound; as it grew louder a circular light fixed at the ceiling became more intense creating a blinding effect. Then it all stopped. When leaving the space,⁵ the sound still resonated in my ears and the circular afterimage on my retina juxtaposed (a very physical) memory with the actuality of whatever I saw in front of me.

Mirza explains in an interview with Linda Yablonsky: “You only saw and heard that, nothing else. The idea was to limit two of your senses — hearing and seeing — so the experience becomes more intense. And when it ends, abruptly, it leaves a pattern on your retina and a slight sound in your ear. It’s the most minimal work I’ve made, the most simple, basic description of it.” (Yablonsky, 2012, 84)

My interest in Mirza’s piece is not in its physical confrontation⁶ but in its distinctive juxtaposition of vision and sound reflecting on presence and absence.

Whereas some of the works mentioned above are rather stark, at times even somewhat aggressive in their use of image and sound, Tacita Dean’s approach is more understated allowing for a subtle intertwining of the audio-visual.⁷ She often uses (seemingly) ambient sound to represent an embodiment of place conveying a sense of here and now. In the mid-1990s she started to explore sound more fully using material that ‘sound engineers usually edit out’ as it normally is considered ‘background noise’. (Fer, 2007, 19)

Dean’s working methods often allow chance to influence her work; this gives it a fluidity and openness. She sees her films closer to painting than to cinema. The impression of painterly qualities is reinforced by her use of a static camera and her interest in light to reflect time and space. (Pigeat, 2012, 39)

In her filmic portrait *Mario Merz* (2002), we see the Italian sculptor sitting in front of the camera. There is no urgency. Not much action. The camera seems to have a lot of time, so does Merz. We notice changes in light whilst he holds a pinecone commenting every now and again on everyday matters. Here the (seemingly) ambient sound⁸ reveals and obscures — it points to an actuality, to the outdoor space where the filming took place and to Merz’s engagement with this environment (including his relation with the camera). It also leaves much unsaid allowing his casual observations to distract from the absence of more rehearsed statements about his art. When accepting to be filmed he agreed on condition of not having to speak (Trodd, 2011, 6).

⁴ The term audio-visual is very general whereas the relation between the two components can vary greatly. However, and this is a key concern of this paper, the role of sound input is often considered mere support to visual information — its absence or presence in filmic art installations warrants further exploration to appraise its vast potential.

⁵ Monica Sosnowska’s ‘parapavilion’ (purpose-built within the Arsenale galleries).

⁶ “Haroon Mirza’s sculptures are collisions of objects and sound”. (Le Feuvre and Morton, 2010, 114)

⁷ Most of her films have sound whereas her film *The Green Ray* (2001), being exclusively concerned with a visual phenomenon, is mute.

⁸ “We see Dean’s close attention to the sound-track of her works, which are characterised by the use of apparently natural sounds wandering or breaking in as if by chance, which she stitches in the studio into a close weave of simulated naturalism.” (Trodd, 2011, 7)

In Dean's film *Merz* does speak but not really to the camera; furthermore, the volume of the soundtrack is quite low making it difficult to grasp what is said. Like in one of Jean-Luc Godard's films, we realise that sound here is used strategically as interference — obstructing and simultaneously highlighting other things of importance. With Dean, this involves the visual presence of the sculptor whose embodiment is enhanced through a play with light and shadow making him seem like a 'sculptural object' in front of the camera. (Trodd, 2011, 1)

Thought Dwellings – an audio/visual⁹ study of multiplicity

Having pointed to diverse approaches to sound and image, I would like to turn to my own audio/visual strategies. *Thought Dwellings*, is the title of an on-going project involving painting, photography and video. This juxtaposition of media involves movement between images and sound, an oscillation between presence and absence proposing an audio/visual spatialization of Bergson's 'duration as multiplicity'. (Thoma, 2011) Bergson's philosophy relies on the view that the experience of the present as 'actuality' implies or coexists with the past as recollection, as memory, as 'virtuality'.¹⁰ He states:

What is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number (...) a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities (...) What duration is there existing outside us? The present only, or if we prefer the expression, simultaneity. No doubt external things change, but their moments do not succeed one another, if we retain the ordinary meaning of the word, except for a consciousness which keeps them in mind (...) To put duration in space is really to contradict oneself and place succession within simultaneity. (Bergson, 1910, 226-227)

Whilst acknowledging Bergson's critique of spatializing time, my work explores opportunities within contemporary art practice to develop a spatial configuration involving multiple coexisting durations.

Thought Dwellings: In Situ – a differentiated experience of sound and image

When considering the exhibition space where *Thought Dwellings in Situ* was shown in 2013,¹¹ I realised that the work needed to be orchestrated, similar to a musical piece — a fugue, involving many folds whilst engaging in duration as multiplicity to enable a differentiated experience of time and space. As much as this undertaking was motivated by a visual journey, it was equally defined through different sonic environments. Brandon LaBelle commented on how sound informs the perception of architectural situations:

Sound (...) performs with and through space: it navigates geographically, reverberates acoustically, and structures socially, for sound amplifies and silences, contorts, and pushes against architecture (...) it expands and contracts space by accumulating reverberation, relocating place beyond itself, carrying it in its wave, and inhabiting always more than one place (...) it is boundless on the one hand, and site-specific on the other. (LaBelle, 2006, xi)

Some of the above could be observed in particular audio-visual situations within *Thought Dwellings in Situ*. Here I quote from my exhibition notes (Thoma, 2013):

Moving on, from (silent) images of the entrance hall, to a small, dark, window-less room at the end of the corridor, one finds absence of (actual) daylight replaced by projected light. In the video work *Spanish Window* (2009), one perceives the semi-darkness of an interior space whilst looking towards a window with its wings opened. Bright light seeps through the interstices of its closed shutters — like an antechamber to the exhibition. We can't see what is behind these shutters, we only hear roaring sound, which seems to animate the still video image. The street noise reminds us of the 'world out there'. We hear what we do not see; in its invisibility, the sound enables us to perceive movement.

⁹ I use this spelling to indicate a relation of 'and/or' as some of my works are purely visual.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze (1989, 79) reiterates Bergson's concept of the actual and the virtual coinciding in the crystal image.

¹¹ Lifton Studios, University of Leeds.



Figure 1: Spanish Window

Source: Andrea Thoma 2009

Moving away from this image — still hearing the sound — towards the main exhibition space, a screen with images of the sea is noticeable through a glass panel of the (actual) door. On entering the space the low-pitch roaring traffic noise of Spanish Window merges and slowly gives way to the sound of the breakers of the video piece *Ocean* (2012), which imbues the space with its rhythm. Looking around, various formations of lines expand through the space — the horizontal crests of the waves of *Ocean* are picked up by sequences of colour bands across the *Lines of Light* paintings (...)



Figure 2: *Ocean*, Installation Lifton Studios.

Source: Thoma 2013

The second dark (window-less) space is at the core of the exhibition — here one can enter and exit through different doors allowing for circular movement; again, actual daylight is replaced by projected light to create a ‘clearing’ (Heidegger and Krell, 1978a, 442) where images show themselves in their appearance/disappearance to reflect on ‘Dasein’¹² as engagement with being-in-the-world. Birdsong and muffled traffic/machine noise — the soundtrack of *Lichtung* (2012), fills the space lit by the projection of

¹² David Farrell Krell notes that for Heidegger ‘Dasein’ is ‘existence that is always involved with the understanding of its own Being’. (Heidegger and Krell, 1978b, 48).

different views of a forest clearing on one wall (images of *Lichtung*), and by the (smaller) appearing/disappearing image of *Moon* (2009) on the adjacent wall. The silence of *Moon* is a counterpoint to the sonic density of *Lichtung*; it offers another register — the simple appearance and disappearance of an image. As a whole, this room intertwines absence and presence of image and sound to reflect on the complexities of time-space relations.



Figure 3: *Lichtung*

Source: Thoma 2012



Figure 4: *Moon* and *Lichtung*, Installation Lifton Studios.

Source; Thoma 2013.

(...) In the ‘back room’ of the main exhibition space, we find a soundscape created by the mutual interference of the video works *Back Garden* (2012)¹³ and *In the Park* (2010), both use ambient sound of urban green spaces as they reinforce/obstruct their respective sonic texture. At the threshold between the

¹³ “The visual, almost abstract scenario of *Back Garden* meets a more figurative, even narrative dimension through the sound track, which runs parallel but seems of another order — an index of the world out there. The latter indicates a territory that remains invisible, but is experienced through the spatial dynamics of sound, where vehicles, animals and people move across the audible space suggesting acoustic depth-of-field.” (Thoma, 2012)

two spaces, one hears all three soundtracks (this includes Ocean); however, in this zone of interference¹⁴, of Derridian ‘vitiating’ (Derrida, 1991), each of them is somewhat compromised by the others whilst maintaining its distinctiveness.

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element (...) is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not (...) an interval must separate the present from what it is not (...) this interval is what might be called spacing, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (temporization). (Derrida, 1991, 65-66)

Light interference and ‘spacing’ also comes to play within the juxtaposition of *Lichtung* and *Moon*. Due to differing lengths of the video pieces, we see at the end of each looped cycle of *Lichtung* another ‘phase’ of the appearing/disappearing moon — the moment of darkness within *Moon* happens to be more or less illuminated (or ‘vitiating’) by the projection of *Lichtung*.

‘Spacing’ also occurs in *Spanish Window* where the depicted space of the video still is expanded in time through sound.

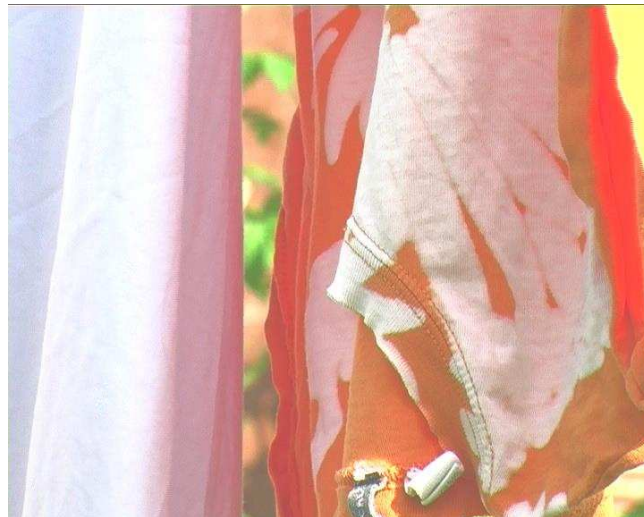


Figure 5: Back Garden

Source; Thoma 2012.

¹⁴ Due to the architectural setting, there is little sound spillage between the two spaces, which makes the area of ‘triple’ sound interference quite small.



Figure 6: In the Park

Source; Thoma 2010.

Diverse audio-visual scenarios

As it often occurs within practice, one explores initially through making (with all that it encompasses), motivated by a range of ideas or questions; however, it is only at a later stage that certain patterns emerge. In my video work I have developed different strands,¹⁵ these are: moving images without sound, juxtapositions of moving image/s with composed and/or ambient sound, combinations of still or moving images with composed and/or ambient sound.

In order to reflect on the above I would like to offer a close reading of *Recurring Viewpoints* (2014), a more recent collaboration with composer/musician Todd Harper. Here the sound editing involved excerpts of Harper's compositions¹⁶ juxtaposed with ambient sound. In the planning stage I wrote: This whole piece should have a dizzying effect and also a crystal-clear focus on sound and image pointing to actuality, a toing and froing between (virtual) memory and (actual) present.

¹⁵ At the outset of a project, relations between sound and image are not yet determined to allow for an intuitive development of their dynamic.

¹⁶ Harper generously agreed for me to use excerpts of 'Mayflies' and 'A Full Life' of his album *The Bear Within* (2000).



Figure 7: Still from Recurring Viewpoints

Source: Thoma 2014

Some of the still images seem like ‘recollection images’, (Deleuze, 1989) like memories brought forward into an awareness of actuality through the distinct sound of Harper’s compositions where individual notes at times create an awakening similar to the bells of a Zen master. In *Recurring Viewpoints*, ambient sound allows to create a sense of embodiment — a here in this place — where snippets of conversation introduce figurative presence of actual people into an audio-visual setting of architecture and landscape.

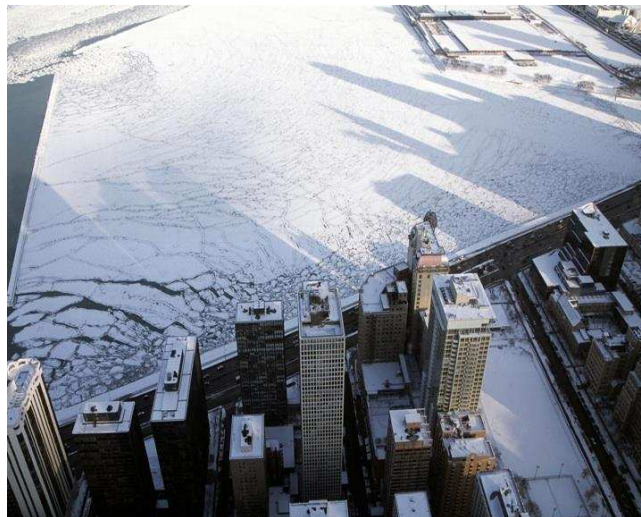


Figure 8: Still from Recurring Viewpoints

Source: Thoma 2014

As an antipode to the lingering images of awe-inspiring vistas, the edit uses repeat-inserts of brief hand-held camera footage with (wind-distorted) ambient sound. This creates an impression of vertigo where we suddenly become aware of our own body in an effort to find stability. In this video piece, sound is centre stage (with only a brief instant of silence at the beginning) expanding the space of the visuals as they oscillate between still and moving images to allow for the proximity of sonic embodiment.

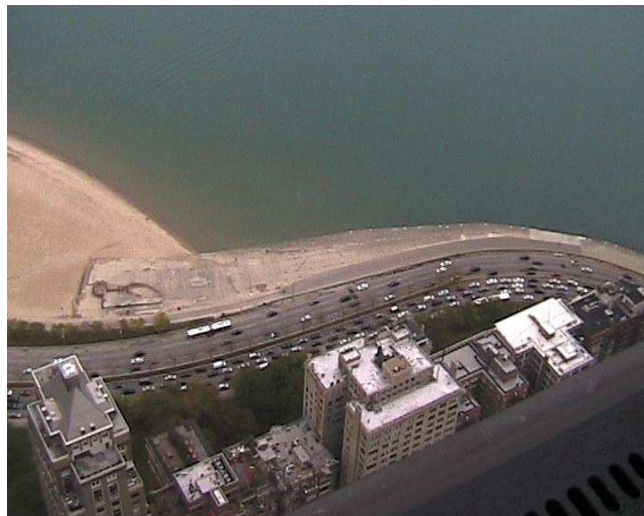


Figure 9 and 10: Stills from Recurring Viewpoints

Source: Thoma 2014

Conclusion

Having explored various case scenarios, informed by Debord's radical critique of our image consumption and equally by the bold staging of ambient sound in Cage's *4'33"*, this paper has drawn from a range of conceptual approaches in relation to sound and/or image, including some of my own audio/visual endeavours. The discussion has aimed to consider how the ideas of pioneers such as Debord and Cage are resonant within the contemporary context.

In conclusion, I propose that sound with its physical, sculptural and spatial impact offers a 'way out' of the constraints of our image addiction or rather 'a way in' to reconfiguring audio-visual alignments — allowing us to reinvent our relation with images not as consumers but as active participants.

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