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ScienceDirect

Computers and Composition 43 (2017) 135–146

Computers and Composition

www.elsevier.com/locate/compcom

Composing for Sound: Sonic Rhetoric as Resonance

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Abstract

This article describes an integrated approach for analyzing sounds and teaching sonic rhetoric that helps students develop strategies for multimodal composition. To analyze sonic practices, we use recordings and installations by sound artists Pierre Schaefer, Michel Chion, Susan Philipsz, and Lesley Flanigan, who all create immersive aesthetic experiences that treat sounds, including the human voice, as material objects, worthy and capable of close observation and manipulation. If sounds are "vibrational surfaces, or oscillators" as Steven Goodman argues, then sonic rhetorical engagement can be characterized as embodied and dynamic experiences with sound, from listening practices into composing practices. Sonic artworks can help us move beyond a static notion of sound and into a listener-centric sonic pedagogy that teaches students to integrate and resonate with other active sound producers and amplifiers in the environment (including rocks, water, air, bridges, buildings, mechanical engines, and non-human animals). We offer readers an extensive and flexible semester-long assignment sequence that provides complex tools for producing sonic rhetoric and sound-based multimodal projects.

Keywords: multimodal composition; resonance; rhetorical engagement; sonic rhetoric; sound artists

We have witnessed, since the rise of the Internet as a mass medium in 1995, how rhetoric and composition scholarship has worked to unseat the privileged place of text and alphabetic literacy as the center of composing processes. At the same time, the field of sound studies, generated by R. Murray Schafer's concept of the soundscape (1977), and pioneered by Jonathan Sterne (2003) has also challenged the hegemony of print and visual media with analyses of sound in various locations and cultural contexts. Sound theorist and artist Salome Voeglin (2010), quoted in the opening epigraph to this essay, argues that sound renders objects dynamic in their ghostly and breeze-like surrounding of them (p. 25). She explains further that sound, when "listened to *generatively*, does not describe a place or an object, nor is it a place or an object, it is neither adjective nor noun. It is to *be in motion, to produce*.... In this appreciation of verb-ness the listener confirms the reciprocity of his [sic] active engagement and the trembling life of the world can be heard" (p. 30–31, emphasis added). Like Voeglin, we advocate a generative and active form of listening to sound as a verb. Similarly, Cynthia L. Selfe (2009) emphasizes both the "movement" and "breath" of meaning in sound so as to "encourage teachers to develop an increasingly thoughtful understanding" of aurality (p. 618). Interest in sonic composition has emerged within the field of computers and composition as a complement to the field's interests in visual rhetorics and multimodal composition, but sound remained one of the more underdeveloped compositional modes. For example,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2016.11.006
8755-4615/

Kathleen Yancey (2004) mentions audio in her widely quoted article, "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key":

> [W]riting IS "words on paper,c̈omposed on the page with a pen or pencil by students who write words on paper, yes but who also compose words and images and create audio files on Web logs (blogs), in word processors, with video editors and Web editors and in e-mail and on presentation software and in instant messaging and on listservs and on bulletin boards – and no doubt in whatever genre will emerge in the next ten minutes. (p. 298).

Yancey characterizes writing as a series of dynamic practices using multiple semiotic modes, including sound, but since that time, the early lists of modes that included "audio files" and "sonic literacy" in compositional process have evolved into detailed articulations of multimodal composition processes. *Writing New Media* (2004), multi-authored by four incredible researchers and teachers, offers the best theoretical foundations for analyzing media alongside pedagogical approaches for learning how to teach and assess digital and other media projects. Rhetorical scholars, particularly those working in digital media, are now well positioned to theorize sound as a primary compositional modality and to develop strategic uses of technologies.

Milestones in sonic rhetoric include the 1999 special issue of *Enculturation* on "Writing/Music/Culture" edited by Thomas Rickert; the 2006 print and online companion issues on "Sound In/As Composition" in *Computers and Composition* edited by Cheryl Ball and Byron Hawk; the 2011 special issue of *Currents in Electronic Literacy* on sound edited by Diane Davis; and the 2013 online journal *Harlot of the Arts* special issue of creative works on Sonic Rhetorics, edited by Jonathan Stone and Steph Ceraso, (see Rickert, 1999; Ball and Hawk, 2006; Davis, 2011; Stone and Ceraso, 2013). These publications have included or prompted analytic and creative works in sonic rhetorics (for example, see Bowie, 2012; Ceraso, 2014; Elbow, 2012; Halbritter, 2013; Rice, 2006; Rickert, 2013; Sayers, 2012; Selfe, 2009; Stone 2015b). As another indicator of our growing interest in sound, the first dissertation in Computers and Composition on sound by Bump Halbritter (2004) helped encouraged a growing number of dissertations on sonic rhetoric like those completed the last few years by Katherine Fargo Ahern (2012), Stephanie Ceraso (2013), Jentery Sayers (2011), Kyle Stedman (2012), Jonathan Stone (2015a), and Crystal VanKooten (2014), among others.

This now burgeoning body of research and creative works in sonic composition and auditory rhetorics has encouraged us to return to earlier research on sonic literacy and revise our notions of "voice-over" and "soundscapes", as well as earlier conversations that focus on accumulating literacies.[1] For example, in 2006 we defined sonic literacy as "the ability to identify, define, situate, construct, manipulate, and communicate our personal and cultural soundscapes" and we characterized students' engagement with sound as "a critical process of listening to and creating embodied knowledge" (Comstock & Hocks, 2006). We later discovered that composing practices used by sound artists Pierre Schaefer (Schaefer, 2012), Michel Chion, Susan Philipsz, and Lesley Flanigan all demonstrate how to liberate the voice-over and soundtrack from the work of non-diegetic narration and exposition. As Philipsz makes particularly explicit beginning with her earliest installation (Pollock, 2012), these sonic artists all treat sounds, including voice, as material objects, worthy and capable of close observation and manipulation. If sounds are best understood in the words of Steven Goodman (2010) as "vibrational surfaces, or oscillators" (p. 7), as vehicles carrying both semiotic and non-semiotic messages about experience and the environment, then sonic rhetoric can be characterized as embodied and dynamic rhetorical engagements with sound. Sounds can offer us unique access to features and elements of "the surround" that Schafer (1977) first described it in his foundational work *The Soundscape* (1977). Thomas Rickert (2013) argues that the ambient noises of our daily experience often go unnoticed, yet they strongly inform every rhetorical situation, including our very sense of self and the world ("Introduction" p. 20). Like Rickert, we emphasize a need to pay closer attention in order to notice how the soundscape constructs our sense of being in the world. We are even more interested in fostering deliberate conscious and aesthetic experiences with sonic pedagogies.

We now focus on the practices of "reduced listening" (Chion, 2010) and the embodied experiences of sound to better articulate how "resonance" becomes the central metaphor for a listener-centric approach to sonic rhetorical engagement. Instead of plunging our students immediately into the process of writing scripts and recording voice-overs, we now train them in particular ways of listening, using sound art installations and musical recordings as sound objects. This shift came from our realization that writing for sound is difficult because it requires a vulnerability and sensibility to the sonic environment. Looking at words or visuals on a page often requires less time and less sustained

[1] See Michelle Comstock and Mary E. Hocks (2006), and Brian Street (2009).