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Electronic Literature and Sound

John F. Barber

Contexts

Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan argues that each new medium incorporates, extends, or amplifies those it follows. As the earliest medium for communicating human thought, speech (sound) was incorporated and/or extended by later media technologies: writing, printing, reading, and visual arts (McLuhan 1964). Thus, speech claims a presence in most all media that follow (Levinson 1981). As James O'Donnell notes, "the manuscript was first conceived to be no more than a prompt-script for the spoken word, a place to look to find out what to say ... to produce the audible word" (O'Donnell 1988: 54).

McLuhan described two spaces, acoustic and visual, in which humankind has contextualized itself. "Acoustic space ... is spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic," he says. "Visual space is structured as static, abstract figure minus a ground; acoustic space is a flux in which figure and ground rub against and transform each other" (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988: 33).

In his descriptions, McLuhan expands the terms "figure" and "ground," both coined by Danish psychologist and phenomenologist Edgar Rubin in his 1915 dissertation exploring visual perception (Rubin 1915). Ground is surface, configurational, and comprised of all available figures, objects rising from or receding into ground (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988: 5). Ground is subliminal, spatial, universal, a surround, corresponding to the

environment in which sound(s) exist. Simultaneously, ground is beyond perception except through analysis of emerging and receding figures (McFarlane 2013: 62, 103).

For McLuhan, acoustic space is ground, the surface from which figures (sounds) emerge and into which they recede. Figures are sounds heard in that space. They help conceptualize the space. McLuhan suggests expansive, unseen possibilities within acoustic space, making it more powerful and encompassing than visual space with its more precise and limited fixed point of view.

Acoustic space is a world awash in sounds and pre-literate (pre-speech and writing) humankind, the only ever to live in this space, relied on sound as an important sensory input. Sound formed the basis for humankind's explanations of and interactions with the surrounding physical world. With aural information emerging from all directions, and with no opportunity to shut off or organize the constant stream of sound, pre-literate humankind perceived its world as both surrounding and inclusive, a permeable extension of itself, and they of it (Levinson 1999: 5–6).

Acoustic space, filled with environmental sounds, was, we might suppose, a fearful wilderness. The emergence of speech technology allowed pre-literate peoples to communicate abstract thoughts regarding their situation and agency. Storytellers produced explanations for the sounds in acoustic space and wove them into larger narratives that helped explain the presence and purpose of humankind. Orality provided a means to preserve and share cultural histories and memories. Alphabets and writing, according to McLuhan, preserve and extend the aural nature of speech (McLuhan 1962).

McLuhan hoped that evolving forms of electric media with their ability to convey sound over time and distance would reverse the ascendancy of the visual and transition humankind back to acoustic space. He argues that electric technologies extend the human nervous system into a global embrace, abolishing time and space, and imploding divisions between formally diverse peoples and cultural issues. He sees possibilities for far-flung citizens to communicate with one another, in what he calls the global village (McLuhan 1962: 31).

Within the global village, issues and peoples are no longer separate, or unrelated. Instead, peoples' lives are connected (McLuhan 1964: 20). The global village is "a brand-new world of allatonce-ness [all-at-once-ness] ... a simultaneous happening. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 63).

In short, in the global village, using various electric media, people could, metaphorically, talk among themselves in virtual town centers, or across their virtual backyard fences.

Forms

As to a medium to facilitate this dialog, McLuhan suggests the electric medium of radio, which he says resonates as a tribal drum, its magic weaving a web of kinship and prompting more depth of involvement for everyone (McLuhan 1964: 259–60). Radio is an extension of the human sensorium matched only by speech, he adds. As such, radio affords tremendous power, as “a subliminal echo chamber,” to touch and play chords (memories and/or associations) long forgotten or ignored (McLuhan 1964: 264).

As a “fast hot medium” radio provides accelerated information throughput for personal information frequently utilized to involve people with one another (McLuhan 1964: 265, 267). Radio, says McLuhan, offers a “world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener” (McLuhan 1964: 261).

This tendency to connect diverse community groups, according to McLuhan, produces an artifact more compelling than, for example, the newspaper, with its continued emphasis on the linear pattern of the printed word. The opportunities afforded by current and future digital media for combining, remixing, and remediating all forms of content, including sound, may predict a return to acoustic space (ground) characterized by the verbal, musical, and poetic traces and fragments (figures) of oral culture (Edmund Carpenter 1970).

Practices

To put these ideas into practice, consider radio and speech. Broadly, speech, based upon verbalization of abstract thought, is a fundamental component of narrative (the recounting of a sequence of events and their meaning), the driver of storytelling (the addition of setting, plot, characters, logical unfolding of events, a climax), the basis for literature (written works considered to possess lasting artistic merit), and the various practices and cultures associated with its production and consumption (reading, writing, and listening).

Radio is an ecology of sound-based content historically shared across time and distance from creator to consumer. Little opportunity is provided the consumer to answer back. But, with the digital turn, the technological means for creation, communication, and consumption of sound-based content are easily available to anyone interested.

By sharing narratives across time and space with far-flung audiences, radio serves as a storyteller, binding audiences in the act of listening. While radio programming has historically been predominately speech and music,

there is no reason to think it cannot express higher literary values, especially when these audiences, as noted, can create and share content, either in response, or as original expression. With sound and radio, there is potential for anyone interested to be both creator and consumer, creating and sharing sound-based content as narratives or stories, even literature.

Radio and speech, both based on sound(s), share commonalities with electronic literature. All are ephemeral, temporal, disappearing soon after their initial production. Speech, radio, and electronic literature are present but invisible, a feeling, a sense, capable of facilitating tangible experiences. They can connect people using invisible, disembodied sound (voices, music, other) rich with representation and fertile with ability to engage listeners' deep imaginations. Radio subsumes speech, re-emphasizes the aural, and returns the paralanguage qualities that printed text or pixilated screen strips from speech. This promotes deep listening, a term proposed by Pauline Oliveros to describe a philosophy of "listening in every possible way to everything possible" (Oliveros 1995: 19).

This combination of sound, radio, and electronic literature suggests that we broaden our understanding and appreciation of sound as integral to electronic literature, both as a changing cultural artifact and creative expression. Could sound and radio promote imagination, interaction, even immersion with regard to electronic literature? Could the radiophonic voice, as a trace of the body, immaterial, manifest powerfully enough to engage listeners with compelling narrative experiences? I believe the answer is affirmative and that connections might be made regarding contexts, forms, and practices.

With regard to contexts, McLuhan considers acoustic space ground, from which emerge figures of sound. The technology of speech provides meanings and a methodology for sharing narratives associated with sound(s). Speech, as the basis for narrative and storytelling, was incorporated into writing, printing, reading, and electric media, like radio, each of which extended the voice over time and distance.

Radio provides a form in which to produce, broadcast, archive, and curate sound. Sound-based, or sound intensive electronic literature provides a fluid ground, which when facilitated by the features and affordances of online, on demand digital radio can provide virtual listening spaces—think podcasts, streaming, and sound-sharing services—that link sound and listening to curation, inquiry, and making of literary media art that is both creative and compelling.

Sound(s), especially when designed and/or utilized to provide an immersive context, can provide valid literary experiences. For example, radio drama, with its foundation in scripted dialog, sound effects, and music, is amazingly effective at invoking listeners' imaginations, placing them within the narrative context, and engaging them in a literary experience than can have lasting value.

If sounds can provide valid literary experiences, then we can locate narrative and storytelling not solely in reading and writing but also in the act

of listening. This suggests new practices for the creation and consumption of sound-based electronic literature.

Conclusion

With this short chapter, I suggest that sound is central to contexts, forms, and practices of electronic literature. More specifically, I suggest that works of electronic literature may incorporate or be based upon and/or inspired by sound(s) and their relationship(s) with narrative.

One *context* was McLuhan's idea of acoustic space as ground, from which emerge figures of sound. Speech, as an example figure, helped contextualize the acoustic space in which pre-literate humans found themselves. As a technology, speech allowed these early humans to share their abstract thoughts and apply meanings to the surrounding sounds. Storytellers, bards, and poets wove these explanations into narratives and stories, and for centuries held audience attention with the sound(s) of skillfully employed voices. According to McLuhan, speech, as the basis for narrative and storytelling, was, in turn, incorporated into writing, printing, reading, and electric media, like radio.

Understanding the centrality of sound(s), might we reconsider sound as integral to current and emerging forms of electronic literature? For example, the sound of a narrator's voice can be the framework for sharing stories. E-books are an example. In addition to human voice, could a sound-based work of electronic literature be composed of environmental and/or mechanical sounds? Given that music is a form of nonspoken narrative, I think the answer is affirmative.

Considering the central nature of sound may suggest new *practices* for the creation and consumption of sound-based electronic literature. Rather than sound(s) *in* or augmenting electronic literature, sound(s) might be heard *as* electronic literature. Sound-based electronic literature may be well suited to engage listener's because it engages the ear, and hence the listener's imagination. As result, sound(s) might be considered, like reading and writing, a central element of contexts, forms, and practices of electronic literature.

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