

2013

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## Recommended Citation

Kennedy, Ian Mason (2013) "Redeeming The Aural: Amodal Resonance And Media History," *Criticism*: Vol. 55: Iss. 3, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol55/iss3/6>

# REDEEMING THE AURAL: AMODAL RESONANCE AND MEDIA HISTORY

Ian Mason Kennedy

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*Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* by Frances Dyson.  
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Pp. 262. \$60.00 cloth, \$28.95 paper.

In tracing the hitherto overlooked influence of sound on the theory and practice of new media art, Frances Dyson's *Sounding New Media* offers a productive point of entry into historicizing 1990s cyberculture and the newness of new media. Dyson's central argument is twofold. First, Dyson claims that the features that supposedly mark new media as *new*—qualities such as tactile interactivity and total sensory immersion—have roots in older, predominantly sonic media (e.g., radio, telephone, and early electroacoustic sound art). In developing this first claim, Dyson argues additionally that “sound is simultaneously neglected and appropriated by the rhetorics of immersion and embodiment that have inaugurated new media discourse and have announced new media as ‘new’” (6). That is, for Dyson, the rhetorical frameworks through which we make sense of sound—the distinction between original sound and recorded sound, for instance, or between signal and noise—have quietly and tacitly laid the groundwork for the visual and tactile tropes we tend to use when we talk about digital media. At stake, then, is the redemption of the aural in a regime that only *seems* to be dominated by other sense modalities.

Although *Sounding New Media* offers a compelling impressive account of new media, the book has greater consequences for what has become a central problem for

scholarship on audiovisual media in general—namely, the relationship between the modal and the amodal. By *modal*, I mean the idea that sensory experience differentiates into discrete modalities: sight, sound, touch, smell, and so on. In contrast, to describe sensation as *amodal* is to emphasize how any given perceptual event cannot be reduced to just one modality. When a car speeds by me, for instance, I not only hear and see the car but also feel a rush of air and a slight rumble. In cinema and media studies, the following questions arise: How do media such as the cinema and television use sight and sound to evoke sensations that resonate in the human body amodally, beyond merely the visual and sonic modalities? And, for that matter, how can we identify ourselves as scholars in one modality—musicology, sound studies, visual culture, and so on—while doing justice to the richness and complexity of resonance among multiple modalities? Dyson answers these questions by using a sonic figure: the *embodied voice*. The dominant tendency in cinema and media studies, however, has been to answer in another register: that of *touch*.

The aspect of touch that has done the most theoretical work is the reflexivity of self-touching—in particular, the experience of touching one's left hand with one's right hand. Especially in film theory, scholars such as Jennifer Barker

and Vivian Sobchack have taken this figure from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who uses it to describe the fundamental reversibility of subject and object in perception. For example, for Barker, just as I may reverse between being *in* my left hand touching the right hand and *in* my right hand touching the left, so, in the cinema, may I reverse between being *in* my body and being *in* the counterfactual world of the film.<sup>1</sup> The amodal is central to this discussion in that tactile structures come to underpin all other sense modalities; the tactile is posited as the reversibility from which all other modes of reversibility derive. This bias toward the tactile—and an attendant denigration of the visual—is less ingrained in the field of media studies, in which Dyson is writing, than it is in the narrower field of cinema studies. It is, however, present, and is best exemplified by media theorist Mark B. N. Hansen's concept of "primary tactility," which he develops in *Bodies in Code* (2006). Tactility is primary or originary for Hansen in that other modalities, such as vision, need something outside the body—a "technical artifact," such as a mirror—to produce the kind of specular, reflexive relation (seeing oneself seeing oneself) that self-touching has from the start, without such an exteriorization or artifact.<sup>2</sup> Hansen invokes Jean Laplanche and Didier Anzieu to argue productively that we should

understand this derivation of vision from touch in terms of *anaclisis*—a psychoanalytic term for the way in which psychic processes are at first synonymous with, but eventually detach from, biological processes. Hansen generalizes *anaclisis*, arguing that it underpins not only the individual psyche but also the human's relation to technology: *anaclisis* becomes the name for how amodal structures (originally tactile ones, for Hansen) detach from one sense modality and move to another with the support of a technical exteriorization, as when the mirror exteriorizes the reflexivity of touch and extends it to vision.

Although Dyson never mentions the concept of *anaclisis* explicitly in *Sounding New Media*, an important consequence of her book is that it offers an alternative account of *anaclisis*, technicity, and the amodal—one that posits the aural rather than the tactile as the primary structure of the amodal. Specifically, Dyson offers the figure of the *autoaffective voice*: the reflexive, proprioceptive feeling of oneself speaking (the resonance of one's voice inside one's own ears, chest cavity, and vocal cords). In the first chapter, "Ethereal Transmissions," Dyson looks at gestures toward the voice in ancient Greek metaphysics, Christian theology, and Descartes, arguing that the reflexivity of speaking is the *anaclitic* ground for the way these accounts develop the metaphysical concept

of the *inner voice*—the voice inside one's head, abstracted from all exteriority, and synonymous with the amodal domain of thought. As Dyson puts it,

Decontaminating the voice has occupied Western metaphysics for millennia—a process that predates the voice's actual mechanical reproduction and transmission—and can be roughly characterized in three phases: first, removing air from the voice—the voice becomes anaerobic; second, removing temporal and spatial presence—the voice becomes anechoic; and finally, removing sonority—the voice becomes static and silent. (20)

Whereas traditional metaphysics holds that the silent, inner voice of thought exists prior to, and extends outward into, the phenomenal world through the audible voice, Dyson claims that the inverse is true. For Dyson, the psychical process of thinking of oneself-thinking—Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, or "I think, therefore I am"—actually derives its reflexive structure *anaclitically*, from the bodily reflexivity of feeling oneself-speaking. *Anaclisis*, however, involves not only the derivation of psychical structures from biological structures but also (to use Dyson's term) an eventual "decontamination" or detachment

of the psychical from the biological. That is, the inner voice derives from the detachment of the embodied voice from the speaker's vocal cords, resonant bodily cavities, and breath ("the voice becomes anaerobic") and thus also from the materiality of the acoustic world ("the voice becomes anechoic").

The figure of the inner voice, and its anaclitic detachment from the embodied voice, recurs throughout *Sounding New Media*. For instance, where Hansen argues that the mirror and other visual media extend the reflexivity of touch into the visual modality, Dyson makes a similar claim in the second chapter, "Celestial Telegraphies"—namely, that audio technologies such as the telephone and radio technically extend the inner voice of metaphysics. As Dyson puts it,

Electricity and technology thus act as a conduit through which the presence of the voice, in its metaphysical guise, can be reasserted. The characteristics of inner speech: that it is silent, atopic, self-directed, and timeless can easily be transferred to the perception of the electronic voice, since both occur in the absence, the here-and-now embodiment of the speaker. (51)

For Dyson, the ability of telephone and radio to function despite

abstracting the voice from the body and space-time of the speaker hinges on the fact that the embodied voice had already, centuries earlier, been abstracted in another register: that of thought, or the "inner speech" of the metaphysical tradition. This is to say that, just as Hansen's mirror exteriorizes in the visual modality the originary, primary reflexivity of self-touching—seeing-seen exteriorizes touching-touched—so does the telephonic or radiophonic voice's framing of signal and noise, or message and medium, exteriorize the structure of the inner voice: "By amplifying the volume of the voice at close range, rendering inaudible any extraneous sound, and concealing as much as possible the presence of the technology, the broadcast voice echoes the autoaffective circuit of its metaphysical corollary" (53). That is, the close-range radio (or telephone) microphone picks up the speaker's voice while filtering out the sonic background, just as metaphysics picks up the inner voice while filtering out the extraneous sound of its resonance in the speaker's body.

It is important to emphasize, however, that Dyson's claims about embodiment and technical exteriorization involve a different methodology than Hansen's. Hansen poses his object of inquiry as a problem for phenomenology, while Dyson approaches hers primarily as a rhetorical problem. That is, Hansen seeks to describe encounters

with new media from the inside, as it were, in terms of embodied experience, whereas Dyson sets out to analyze encounters with new media from the *outside*, to unpack and historicize the discourse and rhetoric around them. In this respect, Dyson retains the methodological orientation of what might be called the “second wave” of sound studies in the humanities. The first wave of sound studies—exemplified by work in the 1980s and early 1990s, from film and media scholars such as John Belton, Alan Williams, Rick Altman, and Tom Levin—takes the approach of ideology critique, arguing that successful sound reproduction boils down to deception: the listener is deceived into experiencing the audio recording as identical with the original sound event.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, scholars writing in the second wave—James Lastra, Jonathan Sterne, and Emily Thompson, among others writing in the early 2000s—aspire not to criticize the perceived identity between original and copy, but rather to look at the historical and cultural conditions that make the original/copy distinction possible in the first place. In *The Audible Past* (2003), for instance, Sterne argues that what is at stake is not an ontological disjuncture between a recorded sound and an original sound, but rather how listeners put their “faith in the social function and organization of machines” through the

practice of what Sterne calls “audile technique.”<sup>4</sup> For example, in order to feel a sense of participation in the telephone network, users practice a kind of culturally learned listening technique: they attend to the voice while ignoring the noise of the telephone line—just as the vinyl fetishist places his or her faith in the machine by attending to the music while ignoring the crackles and pops of vinyl, or the physician by attending to the patient’s heartbeat while tuning out the the stethoscope tube’s constant hum. Although Dyson herself (unconvincingly) denies it, there is a striking resonance, here, between Sterne’s examples of audile technique and Dyson’s claim that audio technologies filter out noise from signal while technically extending the way in which metaphysics filters out the embodied voice from the inner voice (77–80). That is, for both Sterne and Dyson (and for Lastra and Thompson, as well), listeners have not been deceived into conflating *recorded sound* and *original sound* so much as they have inherited culturally ingrained techniques for attending to certain aspects of sound and ignoring other aspects.

Dyson moves beyond this second-wave approach, however, in that she offers a sustained account of how the rhetoric of audio fidelity has had an impact *outside* the history of sound media, and on 1990s new media art in particular. In the third chapter, “Aural

Objects and Recording Devices,” Dyson impressively traces this lineage back to the sound art of the 1950s and 1960s, devoting most of her attention to the work of Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage. Regarding the former, Dyson focuses on Schaeffer’s concepts of acousmatic listening and the sound object. *Acousmatic listening* names a mode of listening in which the listener experiences a sound on its own terms, without reference to a visible sound source, while the sound object refers to the kind of sound Schaeffer prescribes for acousmatic listening. Similar to the telephonic or radiophonic voice, Schaeffer’s sound object inherits the *anechoic* status of the inner voice, in that it is detached (through audio recording) from any real-world acoustic context. The other defining characteristic of the sound object is that it becomes a repeatable, enduring *object* in being recorded, and stored for future playback, on the (at the time) new medium of magnetic tape. The upshot for Dyson is that Schaeffer “reaches into aurality and the unknowable reality it represents and transforms it into a phenomenon that can be known through a prosthetic ear” (58). That is, Schaeffer aspires to extend the enduring objecthood and epistemological clarity traditionally associated with visual objects (e.g., I know that I have seen the same house today that I saw yesterday) to the more ephemeral, more fluid (and for

that reason unknowable) identity of sounds. For Dyson, Schaeffer thus prefigures the 1990s discourse around the posthuman and the cyborg by imagining a “prosthetic ear” technically extended to function like an eye: recording and re-playing an otherwise fleeting sound event gives the listener the ability to *know* that sound as an enduring object, as if technologically to extend into the aural modality the certitude with which vision registers physical objects as having a stable identity over time.

According to Dyson, Schaeffer’s concepts of prosthetic listening and the sound object inherit the inner voice’s metaphysical framework insofar as they valorize the detachment of sounds from the ephemeral space-time of real-world acoustics. John Cage’s investment in silence and radio does something similar for Dyson: it works within the metaphysical framework laid out by the inner voice, while looking ahead toward the rhetoric of cyberspace and virtual environments. Dyson claims that, in works such as *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) for twelve radio receivers, radio is amenable to Cage’s defamiliarization of silence since “the broadcast signal, dependent on the workings of an already existing technology, can remain silent in the living silence of the yet-to-be-tuned airwaves . . . a silence whose presence is actualized even when its sonorous potential is not” (62). For Dyson,

the figure of “yet-to-be tuned air-waves” enables Cage to argue for a redefinition of silence, not as the absence of sound, but instead as the presence of vibrations (radio waves) outside the range of what is humanly perceptible. Cage thus valorizes the figure of vibrations that withdraw—like the inner voice for metaphysics, or the nonspace of networked computers for early commentators on cyberculture—into an amodal state below or to the side of the phenomenal.

After tracing these neglected sonic roots of 1990s cyberculture in the first half of *Sounding New Media*, Dyson finally moves to specific examples of sound-indebted new-media art in the book’s final three chapters. In the fifth chapter, “Immersion,” for instance, Dyson considers the work of artist Char Davies, arguing that the importance of sound to Davies’s immersive environment *Osmose* (1995) has been ignored in a way that is symptomatic of *Sounding New Media*’s broader thesis: that new-media art appropriates aspects of aurality but does so in a way that conceals this indebtedness to sound. As evidence, Dyson analyzes responses from participants at the artwork’s premiere, as well as Mark B. N. Hansen’s reading of the artwork’s tactile aspect. For Dyson, both the participant responses and Hansen’s account understand *Osmose* to be foregrounding tactile interactivity on the part of the user, when actually the work foregrounds

*aural* interactivity; more precisely, both sets of evidence undervalue the use of breathing, in its aural rather than tactile aspect, as part of the work’s navigational interface. Tactile interactivity in virtual environments emphasizes the sensation of moving oneself through space, whereas, in *Osmose*, aural interactivity—regulating one’s breathing, continuously attuning it to the interface—forces the participant to maintain a kind of awkward stillness. Dyson’s point is that, in foregrounding aurality and uncomfortable stillness rather than tactility and seamless self-movement, Davies “ruptur[es] the fiction of the perfect body that virtual embodiment implies,” a “fiction” central to rhetoric around cyberspace, virtual environments, and the transcendence of the physical body (117). Dyson thus uses her sound-oriented reading of *Osmose* to historicize, and qualify, the lofty rhetoric of cyberculture.

Indeed, similar to Sterne’s assertion that early audio technologies functioned successfully because listeners put their “faith in the social function and organization of machines,” Dyson argues that new-media art of the 1990s elicited the responses it did because participants put their faith—perhaps excessively so—in that art’s utopian and transcendent potential. In the sixth chapter, “Embodying Technology: From Sound Effect to Body Effect,” Dyson develops an argument introduced in the fifth

chapter—namely, that participants in new-media art events put their faith in virtual environments—which is to say, put their faith in the *newness* of those new media environments—precisely by attending to certain affective and proprioceptive sensations experienced in those environments and ignoring others, as if to rehearse in the proprioceptive modality the rhetorical framework at work much earlier in the case of audio fidelity. Similarly, in the seventh chapter, “Atmospheres,” Dyson looks at the work of Catherine Richards, arguing that the latter’s use of old media to reveal a long history of humans’ immersion in the electromagnetic spectrum asks us to qualify even further the newness of our more recent immersion in cyberspace and digitally constructed media environments. Despite a fourth chapter that feels out of place—a detour through Heidegger that oversimplifies the latter’s notion of *Stimmung* and also distracts the reader from the more focused media-historical lineage Dyson is attempting to trace—*Sounding New Media* thus provides a productive, sobering criticism of the future-oriented rhetoric around new media. Dyson shows, that is, that to ignore the

quiet influence of the sonic on the nonsonic is not only to overlook the past, resulting in an incomplete media history, but also (more crucially) to misconstrue the amodal resonance of the present.

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#### NOTES

1. Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 19.
2. Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 77.
3. James Lastra offers an excellent overview of this first-wave tendency (naming its proponents the “nonidentity theorists”) in *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity*, Film and Culture Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 123–52.
4. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 219.