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Memorscape: how audio walks can deepen our sense of place by integrating art, oral history and cultural geography

Abstract

This article explores how the sound walk (audio trail) has developed from the fields of sound art and oral history. The author uses cultural geography to understand how such trails can use sound and spoken memory to give us a sophisticated understanding of place and engender feelings of connection with our surroundings. He argues that sound walks could become a significant medium as location-based media becomes more widespread.

In the last 50 years the audio guide has generally been an experience reserved for the museum or art gallery. Visitors have become accustomed to being offered a set of headphones when they arrive in the exhibition foyer and the audio guide has become a well established means of offering 'expert' interpretation. In recent years my research interest has been in trails that use recorded sound and voice to interpret the outside world of the historical, cultural and physical landscape. Until very recently there were only very isolated examples of using recorded sound or voice in an outside setting – most commonly compositions by musicians and experimental sound artists. But now the popularity of MP3 players and a crash in the price of the equipment and software necessary to record and edit professional quality sound and voice has opened up new realms of opportunity for people to narrate, layer and intervene in the experience of moving through places. A small industry is developing in creating audio trails delivered through portable media players as a result of commercial enterprise, sponsorship or state funding (*Blue Brolly London Audio Walks*, 2006, ; *iTour website*, 2005, ; *Sound Travel Audio Guides*, ; *Soundwalk website*, 2005).

The technology necessary for access to media content that is geographically relevant to the user's location is also developing rapidly. In 2010 the new Galileo GPS navigation system will be ready, allow civilians to locate themselves in the world to within a metre without cost beyond the receiving equipment, and many new mobile phones already contain gps receiving chips (Amos, 2005). Computer manufacturers and software developers like Hewlett Packard have invested heavily in research and development work for outdoor, mobile computing – including roaming, location-based computer games that can geographically locate players in real time using gps. Content will be increasingly sophisticated and dynamic – it can already be varied according to other real-world sensors, such as heart rate, direction and light using bio mapping techniques (Nold 2006). Trail designers are also gaining critical recognition. In May 2006 the first ever interactivity BAFTA award went to a BBC production team for creating a series of mobile phone delivered audio walks linked to the Coast documentary series.

There is tremendous potential for practitioners of many disciplines to experiment in this exciting and rapidly developing area, and I hope this paper will provide some inspiration to do so. I will begin by providing some historical context to this kind of located media by describing some of the experiments that musicians and artists have made with sound in the outside environment over the last century. Some more recent artistic practice has included voice and memory and I will go on to examine how recorded memory, or oral history, might offer opportunities to create more sophisticated and nuanced experiences that might incorporate both mobile and sedentary conceptions of places and their cultural history. I have deliberately included many examples of practice, including my own, in the hope that it might inspire people to learn through doing, and draw on some of the creative models here to inform their own work and teaching.

How musicians and artists developed the walk of art

Throughout the 20th century musicians and artists have engaged with the multi-sensory experience of place and they have attempted to pioneer new ways communicating with audiences in a multi-sensory way, and sometimes at outside locations. This is therefore a particularly rich seam of work to consider in this context. Sound art is a vast area of different practices and in many respects defies generalisation, although an attempt to map out the history of the sound art movement has now been made (Kahn, 1999). Much of the art of noise and sound might be interpreted historically as a response to the rapidly changing character of modern, urban life. Modernity transformed the soundscape of everyday life with the sounds of car engines, fans and motors in all but the most remote areas. It has been argued that this change in amount and type of sound (or noise, a more disparaging word for sounds that are judged to be unpleasant or out of place) has accumulated steadily since the early modern period, and has had subtle but major effects on conceptions of place and identity. In the past the church bell had a geographical significance, created 'auditory communities' and helped to define identity and structure relationships (Garrioch, 2003). The bell was eclipsed by the sound of the factory whistle, the motor and industry as well as sound with less spatial significance: television, the radio, the i-pod. Aldous Huxley declared the 20th century the Age of Noise: 'Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire – we hold history's record for all of them' (Huxley, 1945). Little wonder that there were some major reactions to this new, predominantly urban soundscape, ranging from noise abatement societies to the invention of new, sound proofing materials and techniques that have greatly shaped modern architectural and building practice. Yet it would be a mistake to regard the historical changes in everyday sound as simply a destructive process of urban noisiness destroying traditional harmony. As Thompson has demonstrated in

The Soundscape of Modernity, there was also a creative side to this process - musicians and engineers constructed new cultures out of the noise of the modern world inside offices, music halls, cinemas and across airwaves (E. Thompson, 2002). Artists also began to try to incorporate these powerful, auditory aspects into their interpretations of the world: they simply could not be ignored.

Throughout the 20th century musicians experimented with noise. The Italian futurist Luigi Russolo co-wrote *the Art of noises futurist manifesto* (1913) in which he declared: 'We delight much more in combining in our thoughts the noises of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds, than in hearing again the Eroica or the Pastorale' and 'let us cross a large modern capital with our ears more attentive than eyes' (Russolo & Pratella, 1967). Russolo delighted in the latest industrial noise and even the noise of war. His compositions were performed inside, with specially designed instruments to recreate the outside noises of modernity. Russolo argued that his performances sensitised people to the music of everyday sound. He claimed that after four of five rehearsals, his musicians 'took great pleasure in following the noises of trams, automobiles, and so on, in the traffic outside. And they verified with amazement the variety of pitch they encountered in these noises' (Russolo & Pratella, 1967). This wasn't a sentiment shared by many people, some of whom actively campaigned against loud noise as being detrimental to health. By 1930 the noise abatement movement in had gained enough political momentum to set up a Noise Abatement Commission in New York, that began to measure outside noise with scientific instruments. It found terrific noise American cities from riveters on construction sites, subways, factories and the new amplified music. Zoning laws and public health acts were used to control some of this noise, but it seems that there was little impact overall. Instead, and partly because of this failure of city authorities to regulate noise, buildings, and particularly concert halls,

were specifically designed to keep outside noise outside (E. Thompson, 2002, p. 168).

It wasn't long before musicians deliberately brought 'noise' into the concert hall, but it took American composer John Cage and his notorious work 4'33", also known as the 'silent piece' (1952), to introduce the concert hall to geographically located outside noise. The performance of this work was held in a concert hall with a performer sitting at the piano. The pianist would count the time in three movements, making absolutely no sound. It is customary for audiences to remain quietly respectful in concert halls for the duration of the performance and the performer is instructed to remain quiet in all respects. As the realisation dawns that the performer is not going to perform, the listening attention of the audience inevitably drew to the sounds around them; the movements and noises of the area outside the hall, and any breathing, coughing or shuffling that happened inside it. As a site of meaning, the concert hall is transformed from highly ritualised and (self) controlled area into a dynamic, complex place where potentially anything could happen.

Since Cage's experiments there have been a myriad of practitioners that have used sound to draw attention to the urban landscape. Max Neuhaus composed a series of walks between 1966 and 1976; the audience would meet outside the concert hall where they would have their hands stamped with the word 'LISTEN' and they would then follow Neuhaus (who said nothing) around the nearby streets where they would be led to sonically interesting areas, like under fly-overs (Foundation, 2005). In this work the local soundscape takes centre stage and potentially anything might happen, although the route is authored to increase the chance of an interesting acoustic 'happening'. Sound artists, as well as musicians, have continued to bring audiences outside conventional sites of cultural consumption to appreciate local and situated sound. Bill Fontana, for example, installed Sound Island (1994) in the Arc de

Triomphe in Paris, in which he broadcast live sounds from 16 places in the city to a platform above the monument. By treating the landscape as a living source of musical information, he tries to challenge old ideas of noise and encourage people to appreciate the sounds they live with every day in a new way. Fontana has found that he has had to work outside the museum or art gallery – which he describes as institutions devoted to the visual, retinal experience. ‘The idea of placing a sound sculpture inside a museum space, which cannot be seen with the eyes is an apparent contradiction, which is why so few museums have ever been interested in the type of work I am doing,’ he says (Fontana, 2004).

Canadian artist Janet Cardiff also attempted to bring the art of the gallery out on to the street. In 1996 Cardiff first used an audio walk as an exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. Only a standard museum label with Janet Cardiff’s name was in the gallery to mark the presence of ‘Louisiana Walk #14’. Nearby a desk manned by a security guard dispensed headsets. But rather than leading a tour around the exhibition, the audio instructions lead the listener through a nearby exit to start an outdoor adventure:

‘Do you hear me? I want you to walk with me through the garden. Let’s go outside. Go down the stairs. Try to walk to the sounds of the footsteps so we can stay together.’ (quoted by Scott, 1999, p. 11)

Cardiff went on to make a similar trail around Brick Lane in London, *The Missing Voice (case study B) (Cardiff, 1999)*. This work has been described in depth elsewhere (Pinder, 2001), but the most important thing that differentiates Cardiff’s walk from the other authors and artists I have mentioned is the embodied nature of the experience, as the artwork is essentially inside your head. Most of the narration is in the present tense, and you are encouraged to follow the pace of the narrators

recorded footsteps ('so we can stay together'). In addition to this layer of virtual reality, Cardiff recorded soundtracks of her walking along these streets with binaural microphones. These are stereo microphones that are usually worn in your ears (or placed on a dummy head) to record sound that is more faithful to the way the human ear listens. The effect can be startling when listening to binaural recordings with earphones, because the spatiality of sound is recreated – a footstep or a siren wail can appear to come from whichever direction it was recorded.

Cardiff uses multi-track recording to create layers of sound that run at the same time; footsteps, street sounds, her voice and artificial sound effects or music might all play at the same time. When I tried Cardiff's *Missing Voice* trail the effect was very startling – walking up a quiet lane I had failed to notice the bell tower of a nearby church on the horizon, until the recorded sound of the bell suddenly alerted me to it. Sometimes unusual sounds were introduced that seemed to have nothing to do with the area. Shortly after the bell ringing the quiet lane became extremely disturbing as sounds of gunfire, air-raid sirens and, strangely, helicopter noise came from some unidentified war zone. The sounds of war create a dream world, perhaps, or another place, on the streets of London. Several themes in the Whitechapel walk appear in *Louisiana Walk #14*; a murder mystery type atmosphere; apocalyptic helicopter sounds; a scared woman walking along dark paths. Cardiff is an international artist who develops her work at Whitechapel, but it begs the question of how site-specific Cardiff's work really is. Of course there are specific reference points to the environment; the walk uses specific buildings with powerful effect (a library, a church and railway station), but her concern is more with the psychological and the imaginative than an engagement with local history or culture. The pace of the walk through the streets around Brick Lane is quick; for me the neighbourhood became a backdrop to her cinematic style of narrative, much of which could be heard along any city street with little ill-effect.

A more grounded example can be found a few miles away. In 2003 Graeme Miller produced an ambitious work called *Linked*, a trail which runs alongside the M11 link road in Hackney, the site of the biggest anti-road protest Britain had ever seen (Miller, 2003). This sound trail is made up of recorded memories from people who had lost their homes in the process of the motorway construction, broadcast from lamp posts along the route (the trail is still up and running – see www.linkedm11.info/ for more information). Miller lived in the area for many years and in contrast to Cardiff's imaginative style, his work is exceptionally grounded. He chose to use a variety of voices from the locality of each lamppost which gives his work a geographical and historical weight to the experience that can have some powerful effects when it is overlaid on the present (Butler & Miller, 2005). The interviews made for this work were informed by oral history methodology and they were archived at the Museum of London. In *Linked* the fields of art and oral history collide, and it is oral history and its relationship with place that I would like to consider next.

Connecting place in oral history

Oral historians have been gathering memories of places for decades. Researchers from all kinds of disciplines (for example journalism, anthropology, psychology, cultural studies) record interviews, but oral history has a firmly established practice of archiving recordings in museums and libraries that are usually made available to the public. There has also been an important 'grass roots' momentum to the oral history movement which exists outside academia and creates a large body of books and CD recordings created by and for local people about their community. In these respects oral historians work with a public audience in mind and have a great deal of experience in publishing or broadcasting memories in an accessible way. For this reason I will now briefly consider the potential of oral history to narrate and

geographically locate human experience.

Traditionally oral history projects that have been concerned with places have tended to focus geographically either on stable work-place environments, or on stable residential communities – an oral history of workers in a particular factory, for example, or a particular village (Blythe, 1973, ; Bourne, 1912, ; Evans, 1962). This work tends to take a fairly straightforward idea of place as a common-sense way to limit the work; for example one factory, village or parish boundary is picked as an arbitrary means of deciding what should and shouldn't be included. This approach can work well in a memoryscape as it gives an obvious coherence and theme (the locality) to a trail. In Kings Cross, London for example, Kings Cross Voices Oral History Project created an oral history sound trail around a community located at Argyle Square near Kings Cross railway station ("The Argyle Square Sound Trail," 2006). The problem is that places are not static; people move, leave, visit, pass through. Over time places and populations change with the seasons, the markets and the ages yet the stories tend to come from those that have stayed a long time in one area and can give the impression that communities are far more stable than they actually are. Other projects put more of an emphasis on shared experience, such as the Moving Here project that collected memories of migration, organised racially between Caribbean, Irish, South Asian and Jewish ethnic groups in England (*Moving Here*, 2003).

Other oral historians have developed ways of exploring networks or paths between people who might scarcely know each other but share common ground of some kind. In *Working*, Chicago journalist and oral historian Studs Terkel investigated American attitudes to work by interviewing people along a chain of relationships. For example, for a chapter concerned with telephony he might interview a receptionist who answers calls, a telephone engineer who installs telephone systems, someone who

manufactures telegraph poles, the chief executive of a telephone company, a telephone helpline worker (Terkel, 1974). The technique can also be applied at community level with place-based interviewing. In some cases the community or group doesn't actually have to exist as an entity in the first place. In Islington, London for example an oral history trail is being constructed with people who live and work along a road, the A1, which runs through the borough. The stated aim of the trail is to tell 'the history and heritage of the A1 as told by the people who live and work along it' in part as a community building exercise (Timothy, 2005, p. 19). Edward Platt also used a routeway in *Leadville: A Biography of the A40, a history of a road* (Platt, 2001). He knocked on the doors of residents in Western Avenue, recording the words of anyone who was willing to discuss the road and their lives next to it. Using something like a road as an organising principle to connect people is working with a more fractured perception of urban space which does not necessarily coincide with historical, planning, government or place-name perceptions of geography. The technique uses paths, routes, networks and trajectories through a city, talking to a series of people who might not ordinarily meet, or consider themselves a part of a group or a community. This is a geographical way of exploring the connecting power of oral history, which Thompson has argued is a unique quality in comparison to other historical sources:

We need to keep at the forefront the connecting value of oral history and oral testimony. That to me seems to be its unique quality; oral history is a connecting value which moves in all sorts of different directions. It connects the old and the young, the academic world and the world outside, but more specifically it allows us to make connections in the interpretation of history; for example, between different places, or different spheres, or different phases of life. (P. Thompson, 1994, p. 11).

Place, mobility and memory geography

To better understand how this connecting value of memory and oral history might work in the context of a walk through a particular place, it is worth considering what is meant by place, which has played an important role in geographical theory. From the 1970s the phenomenological ideas of Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph have been very influential (Cresswell, 2004). They argued that humans get to know the world through place and therefore topophilia, the 'affective bond between people and place' was a fundamentally important part of human experience (Tuan, 1974). Relph suggested that one of the fundamental aspects of being human was to live in a world that is filled with significant places, because place determines our experience (Relph, 1976). Place, home and 'roots' in these terms are a fundamental human need and they shape our cultural identity. This way of thinking, something that anthropologist Liisa Malkki has described as 'sedentary metaphysics', underpins much geographical and cultural thought, territorializes identity into commonplace assumptions about property, region and nation. This definition of place is not without its difficulties. For example Tim Cresswell's work on the tramp in America has explored the idea that such conceptions can lead to dualistic thoughts about people that are mobile, or displaced such as tramps, travellers or refugees as pathologically dangerous (Cresswell, 2001: 14-19).

In his latest book *On the Move* Cresswell explores some more positive valuations of mobility that have developed in social and cultural theory - a kind of 'nomadic metaphysics'. To summarise very briefly, Said's work on the shifting nature of nationhood, de Certeau's thoughts on mobility and Nigel Thrift's work on affective and empathetic ways that humans encounter place explore different aspects of how our fundamentally mobile humanity experiences places that might be regarded as

ever-changing, flowing and more complex than rigid conceptions of national or local identity might suggest. As a result many geographers have been exploring more active, sensory, self reflective and embodied methodologies. These ideas can be used in progressive and liberating ways, although as Cresswell suggests, the metaphors of mobility are not without their own limitations and politics (Certeau, 1984, ; Cresswell, 2006, ; Said, 1978, ; Thrift, 1996, 2000, 2004).

It seems to me that there are parallels and strengths to be drawn from both schools of thought, which are by no means mutually exclusive. The artists discussed above challenged traditional ways of seeing and listening by moving performance and display outside conventional cultural spaces which often deliberately insulate the visitor from their geographical environment. Oral historians have also attempted to break free from rigid place-based conceptions of what makes up a community. These might both be seen as 'mobile' practices that try to break free from sedentary ideas of what makes a performance space, or a culture. Yet in both there is also a strong element of the sedentary or the topophilic. The specificity of place can actually play a much more important role in performances that actively engage with outside settings and use everyday sound and noise. These practitioners are trying to encourage people to make more connections with place, rather than reject the situated idea of place outright. In terms of oral history, exploring alternative networks or paths through a community reveals more complex connections between people, place and their identity, but place, home and roots still have a fundamentally important role.

You can talk the talk – can you walk the walk?

To further illustrate this point, and to demonstrate the kind of practice-based research method that I am arguing for, I will end this paper by mentioning my own experiment with creating audio trails, inspired by much of the work mentioned above. I created

two audio walks of my own that incorporated elements of both sound art and oral history along the banks of the River Thames in London (Butler, 2005). The walks featured edited interview recordings with 30 different people concerning their life on the river and an accompanying trail map showed where to play each track along the Thames Path. The interviews were carefully edited with background sound recorded binaurally from the path. The audio walks were made freely available for download to an MP3 player from a website (www.memoryscale.org.uk) and a CD version was sold by the shops at the Museum of London and Tourist Information Centres. Several thousand people have encountered these walks in some way and I think it would be useful to consider how this discussion might translate to the public realm.



Fig. 1: A group of partially sighted people experiencing a memoryscale walk at Greenwich, London

I surveyed over 150 people who tried the memoryscape audio trails. People responded extremely positively to the experience of walking and hearing local voices in situ. They particularly liked the authenticity of hearing 'real' people rather than a narrator. The stories and memories they heard related to the landscape in some way and creating these connections, or links to place, seem to have had led to a feeling of closeness, or rootedness for some people. One newcomer to London wrote 'now I know a sense of a beginning attachment'. Another walker who had recently moved to the area described the process beautifully as 'deepening my attachment to the river. Like roots shooting off into the soil'. I think it is interesting that mobility and rootedness seems to be able to coexist so readily; like an aboriginal songline, the stories are given a profound geographical presence (Chatwin, 1987).

This was not negated by the mobile practice of hearing the memories on a walk – in fact the scope afforded by moving through several miles of landscape, and hearing so many memories, seemed to increase the chance of some connection relevant to the individual concerned being made. It was also apparent that the physicality and sensation of walking in the locality is a powerful part of the sensation of being connected to place. Some walkers reported that it helped them to 'feel closer' and more empathetic to the people they were listening to as they were subject to the same surroundings. Being in the landscape also helped people to imagine the episodes in the past that were described and feel that they were physically participating in the experience – one said 'it makes one feel as though one is a part of what is going on'. This seemed to be a particularly embodied experience; a reviewer wrote:

As one listens, one encounters not the hidden but, in fact, a riverine pentimento: the temporal past re-emerges from the depths of recorded

memory to merge with one's contemporary spatial experience of the Thames as it is now. (Friedman, 2006, p. 107)

The metaphor of the *pentimento* – in oil painting, the fragmentary traces of an underlying picture, such as an earlier painting on the same canvas, showing through, wonderfully captured the conceptual idea of the interviews and the sound colliding different temporal and spatial presents together (the present of the memory, the interview, the background sound recording, and the listener).

The range of voices and memories used also afforded the listener a plural and multi-layered impression of place. Several people talked about the experience adding a new reality, or a new dimension of reality to the existing landscape. Furthermore, anyone who visited the riverside landscape again could use those links to remember something of the stories that they heard; as one walker put it, 'memoryscape has made me consider the part the river has played in so many people's lives. I think about this whenever I visit the river since listening to the recording'. In this way perhaps the memoryscape can mimic the way our memories seem to work in the brain – it is an active, mobile process, connecting often disparate things in an intensely creative way to make sense of our past, present and the future.

Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate through the various examples of practice-based work above that the audio sound walk, or memoryscape, might offer us an exciting way of creating more nuanced, embodied, complex, multi-sensory methods of experiencing and representing our surroundings. Walking, sound artwork and some of the experiments in oral history practice mentioned above might be seen as a part of the 'nomadic metaphysical' school of thought that is excited by the possibilities of using

sound (noise), memory and place in more fluid, complex way. Yet this practice does not seem to negate other, more situated and sedentary feelings of identity and belonging. In fact the use of located sound and located memory can engender deep feelings of rootedness, or being in place, and the geographical setting seems to encourage understanding and a feeling of inclusiveness, even with listeners that do not know the area that they are experiencing.

I believe that this kind of location-based, mobile media could have a range of possibilities for geographical and public projects. Most obviously it has great potential for geographers to interpret and curate the outside world to the public, as well as their students. The excitement and immersion of a field trip experience could be emulated for a much wider audience. Physical and human geographers will be able to create understandings about specific places that could be delivered in the field. Whatever technologies evolve, they will all need one thing – interesting, located (local) content and geographers should be well placed to meet that demand. But the medium will have much more to offer than a purely expert-led experience, valuable as that might be. Building on the technique and inclusive tradition of oral history I think there is also tremendous potential for participative work with student and community groups to co-author complex, multi-vocal experiences that can quite literally give people a voice in the interpretation of their neighbourhood that are listened to in an active way. As it becomes easier for individuals to author and distribute their own interpretations of place, people will need practical training and access to the means of production to make their own located media experience. Thousands of hands – and voices – will be needed to build what Hayden Lorimer might call an ‘active archive’ of place (Lorimer, 2003). There will be a whole host of ethical and practical issues to grapple with, but this surely could be a great opportunity for educators from a variety of disciplines to create mobile but deeply spatially engaged practice that can explore multi-layered and plural histories of place.

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