

Analog Echoes: A Poetics of Digital Audio Editing
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It is something of a cliché to say that the computerization of literature has ended the tyranny of linearity. A quick survey of almost any literary endeavor of the past one-hundred years will expose the shallowness of such a suggestion. While linearity has seldom been a monolith in prose it is particularly rare in poetry. Species and scenes of poetry too numerous to mention were non-linear before the digital dawn, while after it the influence of hypertext and multi-media pushed off-the-screen poetry to be more open to reader/user assemblage. But if linearity now appears as only a wispy literary phantasm, there is one poetic arena in which it remains the only imaginable mode. The presentation of poetry on radio, and now in webcasts, is dogged by the watchwords “flow,” “continuity,” “narrative” and “linear.” Given that poetry—if only by virtue of its line breaks or its unconversational aural delivery—would seem to have a built-in resistance to this kind of flattening, and given that today’s dominant audio production technology is literally called “*non-linear* digital audio editing,” it seems quasi-miraculous that our audio poetry programs should continue to toe the line.

Adalaide Morris, in her introduction to the indispensable anthology *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, characterizes much of poetry culture and even sound poetry culture as constipated on the printed page—her goal being to “unstop” literature, to sound it, both in terms of giving it voice and sound it in terms of plumbing its depths. My contention here is essentially a very simple one: given that the criticism and review of sounded poetry has been considerably “unstopped” in recent years with a raft of wonderful writing on the subject (in addition to *Sound States* see also Charles Bernstein’s *Close Listening* and Douglas Kahn’s *Noise Water Meter*) our production and presentation of sounded poetry, especially in the digital environment of the web, should not continue to work in and reproduce the “stopped-up” presentational modes familiar to a radio tradition, presentational modes even straighter than the longest-lived forms of print communication.

What is ultimately at issue is poetry’s relationship to the technology through which it is transmitted. Today it is hardly radical to suggest that poetry *is*, or is at least inseparable from, its technology. Decades of scholarship chart this relationship and much of it (the work of Marjorie Perloff and Steve McCaffery being particularly important to me) speaks directly to sounded poetry’s relationship to its technology. My aim here is to add a small codicil to this scholarship, but more importantly to encourage a harnessing of this critical momentum and an extension of the tradition of innovative presentation of innovative poetry by independent presses onto the way we present sounded poetry on the web. To this end I offer a vocabulary and a method for poetic digital audio editing which makes thorough use of the technology’s potential.

Our problem has its roots in the doctrines of radio theory, doc-

trines which have calcified around established radio forms and which neglect the field's intellectual history. In 1936 Walter Benjamin observed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that audio had a special place among the arts in that it allowed "the original to meet the beholder halfway," meaning it elicited a kind of participation and engagement from an audience. Three years earlier F. T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata wrote in their manifesto *La Radia* that radio should begin where narration ends. Here however, as in numerous other cases, the history of radio foreshadows the history of the internet: possibilities gave way to programming and—as corporatization came to demand radio commodities—options for multi-faceted consumption and listener participation in meaning making appeared less interesting. Today's theory responds to this narrowly defined reality rather than to radio memories or radio dreams. The most widely read text in radio studies, Andrew Crisell's *Understanding Radio* establishes a taxonomy of radio signs simply incapable of dealing with the possibilities proposed by Benjamin, Marinetti and Masnata. Interestingly, Crisell borrows a semiological system that predates broadcasting itself: the turn-of-the-century pragmatist C. S. Peirce. Via Peirce, Crisell places all radio emanations under three rubrics: the iconic, that which resembles the object which it represents; the indexical, that which provides some direct link to its object; and the symbolic, that which has no connection to its object.

Crisell says that because all radio signs are auditory "they consist simply of noises and silences, and therefore use *time* not space as their major structuring agent." This presumption means Crisell only hears radio in terms of continuity and the flow of one audio event into the next. Such an interpretive strategy is obviously predisposed to hear radio words in terms of discursivity and narrative. Crisell's micrological analysis of radio words is as revealing. Following Peirce's taxonomy, he argues that words have a dual semiological status: they are first symbols of the things they represent, but they are also indices of the person speaking—meaning they provide a direct access to the object which produces the sound. At this point it is possible to make a very productive intervention into Crisell's schema which might be the first step in elaborating a radio poetics focused on the formal and the extra-narrative. Words on radio (indeed everything on radio) are not indices of some original voice or authentic sound producer, but indices of the technology of radio. The series of receiving, transmitting, editing and recording devices are what is directly available through radio; voices and words are always created through a technological mediation. Indeed plenty of radio is possible solely with the technology, not dependent on a person or musical instrument (David Tudor's resonating circuits being an excellent example). Doubtless Crisell would resist this emendation. For him sound is almost always referenced to narrative, never to the production of narrative and certainly never to the production of radio. In fact, he is at his most uncomfortable when discussing an old radio trick that threatens to make a connection to the actual mate-

rial of radio production: He expresses disquiet with the technique of rustling a ball of reel-to-reel tape to provide the sound effect for a person walking through dry grass. He is wary because this technique comes a bit too close to indexing the technology of radio production, that which must remain inaudible in the service of the continuous delivery of narrative. Crisell's blindspot is caused by an attachment to the "real" that he inherits from Peirce, a suspect notion in literary circles for decades before *Understanding Radio*. Using coconut shells to create the sound of a horse galloping cannot be indexical because there is no real horse involved. But neither a recording nor even a live broadcast of an actual horse would be indexical as Crisell imagines because he is unable to recognize the mediating apparatus, the very thing that digital poets should find most interesting and should delight in indexing.

The adoption of Crisell's framework by the producers of literary radio has so influenced their counterparts presenting poetry on the web that it is not an exaggeration to say that *all* webcast poetry programs are aesthetically redundant. By webcast poetry programs I mean audio programs (typically weekly programs from a half-hour to an hour in length) that package, discuss and otherwise present poetry for people to listen to online; these are usually offered at a regular broadcast time and then permanently archived online. Such webcasts feature poetry from quite a remarkable range of genres: Christian, slam, love, historical as well as poetry more resistant to categorization (perhaps the best example being a program called *GoPoetry*). To describe these programs as aesthetically redundant does not (necessary) indict the poetry itself but does refer to the presentation of poetry: In much the same manner that the first moveable type faces mimicked the monks' handwriting these programs transpose an aesthetics and a semantics developed for one production technology (quarter-inch reel-to-reel tape) onto another newer and different production technology (computer-based, non-linear digital multi-track editing). As I have said, this is first and foremost an aesthetics of linearity, a linearity virtually necessary when using tape for audio production. In most cases when producing a program using tape we record audio onto a tape machine and then edit it in the simplest way imaginable, we literally use a razor blade to cut out anything undesired. In teaching radio production to college students who aspire to the ranks of news radio editors and public radio producers, it would be professionally irresponsible if I did not teach them to replicate the established radio edit: the seamless, invisible, inaudible edit which dislodges nothing, which interrupts nothing, which is in fact deployed to remove interruption, to remove digression and to clarify. In sum, I teach them to linearize, to use their razor blades to carve out the direct speech from a jungle of David Antin-like talk poems. Again, this works with the characteristics of our editing technology: the tape is a literal single line of sound and it is the work of the traditional radio editor to develop and enhance that linearity. In an essay in the forthcoming Duke

UP anthology *Communities of the Air* suggest that this technology influences the semantics of interviews with poets on NPR's literary program *Fresh Air* which a need to find a connected series of causalities limits an interpretation of poetry to mere biographical flotsam. Under the traditional use of tape editing then what Morris calls the phonotext, the text whose presence is found in polyvalence and in aural slippage, is not released, is not sounded by the technology but *transcribed* by it, stabilized by it, rendered a kind of hissing graphotext.

Obviously while webcast poetry programs' borrowing of *Fresh Air*'s aesthetic might be described as emblematic it is not absolute. Tape machines are also chained together or fed into mixing boards for more complex manipulation. And the history of sounded poetry includes numerous useful examples of modernist efforts to foreground the production or transmission technology of an art event in that art event. Perhaps the most noteworthy for our purposes here being Henri Chopin's audio poems of forty years ago which used disjointed razor blade splicing and tape machine speed changed to focus on process, or John Oswald's audio sample art of William Burroughs's language done in the 80s. But these are discrete poetic experiments, not presentations, contextualizations or compilations of poetry. To date very few audio poetry programs exist which foreground the material elements of their production in the way that small press chapbooks and poetry journals have been doing since the mimeo revolution and before. This situation seems like an almost willful disregard of the potential of digital audio editing, a stopping up of the speakers before anything untoward escapes. In fact the twenty year history of digital audio has been almost exclusively about silencing itself—like an undiscovered Oz behind a curtain orchestrating the perfection of someone else vernacular. Digital audio (CDs being an excellent example) has always been about a greater fidelity of something else: a more direct and clear access to the human voice, less noise, less distortion, less evidence of process, in short, less audible technology. Today, in the form of audio multi-track software, digital editing has become the best razor blade money can buy. It is sold as the apex of fidelity, better than Memorex and better than even the live because of its ability to remove with surgical precision all extraneous Cagean sounds and allow unfettered access to the pure voice.

Here it seems necessary to provide some basic sense of the workings of today's digital audio editors. Instead of a single linear continuum of sound from which we would remove offending elements, numerous tracks of audio are available simultaneously on the same screen. It is in fact as easy to add sound to multiple tracks as it is to add sound to one track. Individual pieces of sound can be cut as desired and layered in overlapping positions with the slightest effort. Visual representations of the waveforms render simple enormously complex mixing jobs. But perhaps most importantly from a poetic perspective, these digital audio editors are a

genuine invitation to expand on the work done through the tape art experiments of the 60s and 70s in which acoustical imagination and criticism exceed the technology of their realization. William Burroughs is the obvious poster boy: his own tape experiments were outmatched in complexity by the visions for interrupted and multi-layered speech described in his *The Ticket that Exploded*

The project of extending this work, again, hardly seems radical, yet it remains very scarce on radio and more surprisingly scarce on the web. Instead of being used to streamline and perfect the voice, digital audio editing might be used to disassemble the voice and dismember the rarified body it indexes; it might take that voice-body and render it audibly processed, it might sound the very production methods that have been used on speech broadcasts and now webcasts since the popularization of magnetic tape in the late 1940s; it might, in typically modernist fashion, sound the traces of technology on the voice. What I am advocating is an editing process utterly common in other media. The quick cut has been a mainstay of MTV video editing for twenty years and self-conscious editing has been essential to the semantics of the moving image for nearly a century. We need, at this point, to develop a new taxonomy, a new vocabulary for our speech editing, one that considers the characteristics of our technology, that considers the ability of listeners to approach material with a variety of interpretive strategies, and finally one that recognizes that today's listeners are media savvy—they do not assume they are listening to a “real” or “natural” audio event but to something that is always already highly processed and produced. Against the seamless edit we should posit: the *breathless edit* which splices two parts of speech unnaturally close to each other in violation of proper spoken rhythm; the *weave edit* where two or more separate lines of thought are cut into various pieces and rearranged in an interlocking manner; the *slow fade to silence edit* and the *cross fade* in which two or more separate lines of thought overlap and interfere with each other; the *jump cut* in which two or more takes of the same speech repeat each other or follow one after another; the *acoustic match edit* which one piece of speech or sound is transformed into another sound of similar pitch and rhythm; and the *interjection* in which a small fragment of related or unrelated speech interrupts a longer line of thought. Numerous other possibilities might be gleaned from studying other arts (the silent films of Sergei Eisenstein for example).

In contradistinction to the seamless edit we might then describe our edit as a *spangled* one (listen to the *ENGAGED* radio program available at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/sound/file-list.html> for a variety of examples). The spangled edit undoes the temporal nature of radio assumed by Crisell and invites a spatial appreciation. Elements of voice are removed from their linear flow and sculpted into highly-considered patterns in ways which invite different modes of appreciation. None of this is meant to imply that narrative and linearity are always suspect, in fact it is possible to

imagine that the deviations of the spangled edit might enhance a narrative experience. It is however meant to suggest an alternative to the transparency of narrative and the inaudibility of the technology mustered to support it.

One could of course make the case, as I suggested earlier, for a tradition of radio semantics based in its old production technology. But today perhaps three-quarters of all fully produced radio programs in this country are done with digital audio editors and some media studies departments have completely eliminated their course material dealing with analog editing. Yet even the more formally ambitious radio programs which deal with poetry—everything from local late-night hip-hop shows to *Studio 360*—earnestly repress the spangled edit in favor of the seamless one. The presentation of material on these programs, the announcements, the interview segments and the literature itself might all be opened up to a diversity of interpretive strategies through the spangled edit, through an indexical link to the technology that creates them. Still we could, how ever begrudgingly, allow radio its custom. What is by far more troubling is the way in which such a conservative production aesthetic has been transposed onto poetry webcasts, where the means are necessarily already digital and where the content has a pedigree of formal innovation.

Object

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