

# The Anxiety of the Lonely Listener

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"This is KAB Antonio bay California, six minutes after midnight. Have not heard from the weather-man yet so I can't say for sure about that rain. But there is a full moon and no clouds in the sky. I am Stevie Wane and if you don't have anything to do right now. I'll be here playing music all through the witching hour. And even if you do have something to do, keep me turned on for a while and I'll do my best to do the same for you"

(John Carpenter's The Fog)

The radio is not one thing it is multitudes. Radio is not innately anything, but is everything it is, dependent on who is listening. In this sense any radio transmission is truly contingent on the temporal, spatial and psychological (understood as an inner dimension) circumstance of the listener. The radio broadcast, emitting from its unsighted box, gives the room it enters different colours; working with the tones that are already there, stretching them in every direction. Sure, this idea of contingency could be applied to other media too, but nowhere is the multiplicity of production and perception more profuse than in the darkness of radio, where no image preserves our hold an on authentic sense of reality, and thus no sense of non-reality limits the imagination of the listener. The temporal flow of radio is a blind stream, emanating from a faceless, boundary-less place. The association of this transitory stream with a visual actuality is produced in a fleeting action of listening. Radio does not produce a certain object, but incites figments of individual imagination. It does not affirm the surety of a location or object but produces its own reality as a perceptual and individual uncertainty.

This is why tuning in to KAB you invent your own worst nightmare. The horror roles out of an opaque fog answering your contingent auditory imagination.

This blindness of production and the consequent abundance of perception lend themselves to art practice. The artist working on radio does not produce a work confined to its reading, but enables the production of a multitude of works in the perception of the listener. He or she can trigger a process of invention and imagination, whose course of production, however, is indelibly the listener's. Radio is thoroughly phenomenological; existing through a multiplicity of authorship. It does not work despite the audience, but works from the listener's autonomous and unintentional process of perception, reciprocally producing the sound as well as him- or herself in a constant stream of now.

Contemporary Visual Art which is engaged in critical discourse rather than the production of representations, laments the limitations of a recognisable aesthetic, and attempts to challenge and deconstruct its corresponding conceptions of authenticity and the production of meaning. The visual artist works from a constructed aesthetic and attempts to challenge and disturb it in order to thereby unsettle the values it is based on. However, the visual expression is prejudicially grounded in an at least seemingly substantial object, situated in an also at least seemingly substantial arena of the gallery or discourse. (In this context a photograph or a video screen is a visual object, and even a site-specific work is still signed by its visual environment and concurrent visual discourse). Any challenge to the material object and its in discourse constructed understanding necessarily remains in relation to that object. In this framework the artist challenges the basis of his or her own expression without however being able to ever abandon it entirely. He or she is caught in the substance whose valuation he or she set out to probe. Consequently the framework of visibility, which at once enables and constrains communication, remains intact.

Ideologically, the visual supports communication and the idea that we share in a common discourse, which makes it possible to understand each other, and in favour of such comprehension limits what can be communicated and imagined. Radio works from the opposite end, its starts from a position of isolated aural non-substantiality, and works towards a communication that consequently remains forever transient and intangible, open to further generative production in perception. Radiophonic sound produces a phenomenological *époque*: the individual listeners and broadcasters are separated from its source as well as from each other. Their gaze does not cross on a visual plain, which anchors and substantiates the experience of a piece as a reading of its intention. Rather, they listen from all angles, propelling the sonic materiality into a multitude of new directions all the time. The desire for radio comes, not out of a sense of visual certainty and collectivity, but out of an anxiety of solitude and a progressive fear of non-communication.

This motivation for radio reflects on an understanding of the fragility of interaction and an awareness of the solitude of one's position. The desire for communication is the motivation for listening to the radio. The non-substantiality of its transmission however does not produce a collective sense, but forever amplifies the singular position of the listener, continually impelling him or her to imagine, invent and interconnect, without fulfilling the expectation of communication. In his or her engaged solitude the listener can imagine anything, and anything he or she imagines is true in the context of his or her imagination. What public conventions there are, are soon hijacked and manipulated in the private and uncontrollable sphere of the listener's mind. No socially constructed sense of reality can force a limitation on the conceptual scope of the radio once it has entered the listener's ear. Instead, radio invites continually the production of multiplicities realities - footloose and fancy-free.

The sounds of the radio insidiously enter the space of the listener, mingle with the existing sounds and challenge its visual architecture. The individual listener is at first disorientated and blind in the dark box of the radio. He or she cannot assume an instant, visual, sense of orientation, and insecurely taps around in its dimmed light to find some bearings. In radio we do not know the space as soon as we enter, but need to construct it continually as we aurally amble along its ever-changing shape. There are no other people to ask for direction, there is no map, there is only us, and the

faceless voices and sounds emanating from the box on the table, the mantle-piece, the bathtub rim, the car-stereo, etc. The reality we construct when listening is our own, the traps and monsters heard are ours too. Nobody hears us, however loud we scream.

This radio reveals the certainty of the visual community to be a deception. It shows how fragile and tenuous its collectivity and communication is. The visual substantiality hides misunderstandings, and, in the service of expediency, constructs an idea of translatability of meaning. In contrast, the connections made on the radio are fleeting, unstable and contingent. They do not pretend complete communication but trigger the urge to make sense, to communicate, because of its impossibility rather than in spite of it.

Radio is like John Carpenter's *Fog*, you can't see it coming until it's in your ears. Entering insidiously into your body, it engages your imagination and transports you into a blind space all of your own. In there, cut off from a visual hold on reality, you are exposed to the imaginative dangers of its sounds, enticing you to produce your individual reality, and it's not necessarily pretty.

Stevie Wane, KAB's radio DJ, is talking to the listeners in the Antonio Bay area. She is in the light tower, 'on top of the world', overlooking the houses that delineate the visible community down below. Her broadcast roles out like the fog she sees coming towards the town, but is powerless to communicate the horror of. Her voice creates momentary connections with the individual listeners, but rather than bringing them together these fragile trajectories highlight the solitude of each of them, and amplify the isolation of their fates. The transient paths of the radio-waves invisibly chart the visible community, but the horror of the fog highlights the fragility of contact and the isolation that characterises the individual subject despite this visual communality. The radio is a lonely-box, it represents the wish for communication and connectivity but ultimately reveals the futility of such a desire. As human beings we want to communicate, make shared sense of the world. Radio in its insistence on isolation plays with this desire, edges the listener on to participate, gives him or her a sense of belonging without however truly being able to offer such a connectivity. Instead anxiously we play on with the material we hear, forever attempting and failing to stabilise its meaning and belong.

This uncertainty makes fertile ground for artistic expression. Doubt triggers a more reciprocal and temporary production of meaning, a personal sense or non-sense of the work, enabled by the dark space of radio.

Roland Barthes talks about the 'accent', as the location or moment in a photograph that goes beyond a collective and stable comprehension. He explains how he can infer a shared semiotic meaning from a photograph in its studium, and that there is only one particular point, the accent, where the collective meaning making processes escape him. There, at the accent, he is left baffled and alone in his experience of the work.

In the photograph the accent finds a dialectical counterpart, which frames it in relation to the studium. The radio however produces only accents. There is no certainty. Every fragment of every sound is an accent, unrecognisable, entreating the listener to place it temporarily in the individual context of his or her imagination. At the accent, I cannot refer to a visual framework to ascertain that what I hear is what is going on.

Any notion of an authentic, shared, reality is suspended. The only support for meaning is my own sense of imagination. Of course there are recognisable rules of production and transmission, commercial and independent. However, even within such a structure, the darkness of reception disorientates, and in this disorientation demands of the listener an effort of production, of re-orientation: organising the material heard to produce a personal and contingent sense. And any meaning so created is ever only fleeting and needs to be re-constructed again and again. Radio is not blind in the sense that there is no visuality to its production. But its visuality is produced in the imagination of the individual listener and not by the medium or its aesthetic and ideological parameters. The visual aspect of radio is temporal and contingent. It is produced by the listener rather than provided by the producer.

Radio curiously presents many characteristics that are promoted as digital radicalities in concurrent contentions of the network age. The notion of autonomy of production, the potentiality of interactivity and participation, and the idea of a multifarious production in perception are all issues that are hailed as new and exclusive to the digital.

The similarities and differences between the radio and the net invite a re-consideration of radio's potentialities for art practice in the age of networked art. The internet like the radio is a phenomenological space, a virtual-life world created through my being in it, and reciprocally I too am at the moment of surfing intersubjectively my on-line self. In this sense the internet, the virtual, has a thoroughly sonic character and demands a sonic sensibility. The net demands me to be engaged, enveloped by the act of surfing. I am not only reading a pre-existing text from a distance but as surfer I am a quasi listener, physically and directly involved in its production. On-line I generate the site and my trajectory through the site, through my surfing in it; I open rooms, unfold them, shed light into them. I close them, it goes dark again, the music stops, it does not exist anymore, at least as far as I am concerned.

The surfer on the net works in isolation. He or she is part of the same paradox between meaning production and communication as is the radio listener: the internet user goes on-line from a solitary and remote position, visits a visual chat room in order to communicate, to connect, but inevitably remains alone. The solitary user of the network, trying to communicate with the world outside, displays a radiophonic anxiety. The surfer on the net is, like the listener to the radio, motivated by his or her quest for meaning and communication. And like the radio, the net can only ever present the limits of a collective understanding. The horror of this anxiety resonates the experience of the lonely listener, who, tapping around in the solitary place of his or her imagination, becomes aware of the barriers to a collective sensibility, but urges on exactly because of this adversity.

Despite these similarities, the digital is presented as more radically participatory than radio due its actual interactivity. The digital offers me Barthes' experiential 'accent' actually at the 'clicking point' of its interfaces and feedback mechanisms such as mouse-click, mouse-over, plasma screen tactility, motion detectors and any other soft- and hard-ware operation input devices. Rather than working from the sonic 'accents' of the radio broadcast and extending the work conceptually in my individual imagination, in the digital, I can extend the work actually via a 'mouse-click' interaction. The abandonment of a singular collective meaning is represented rather

than invented in this clicking motion. The work unfolds outwards and a multitude of works become visible. However, this multitude is at once enabled and limited by the hard- and software devices that make it possible. The limit of participation at these operational accents is directly proportional to the extensions that the technology allows the user to generate. Digital interactivity is a visual interactivity in that it is forged and restricted by its enabling technologies and programming ideologies. Like the visual artist, the practitioner working in the digital can challenge this technology and its aesthetic outputs in order to unsettle the values it is based on. But due to its own tied-upness with a technological, visual, meaning and substantiality, even if a temporal rather than a spatial substantiality, it forever reaffirms the pretence of the collective.

However, the digital understood as a sensibility, a conceptual idea, rather than a technological actuality, emulates a radiophonic anxiety and imagination. After the advent of digital technology, radio becomes a conceptual digital: the listener produces, in his or her solitary imagination, the work continually from the sonic 'accents' understood as mental 'clicking-points'. As concept the digital rethinks radio and re-evaluates its production. It is no surprise then that radio is currently being revived as an artistic platform. However, the actual digital, despite all its emphasis on interaction, does not in fact produce its own promise of a truly generative radicality but only makes us think it.

And, as we realise that this actual interactivity can only ever be the representation of interactivity, we come to understand the unease of our own loneliness motivating any communication and do not presume that there is a way to mitigate this angst. Maybe we come to accept instead that we build communication, again and again, from the anxiety of unshared fantasies, through imagination, to fleeting understandings, and back again. The moments of understanding we get are contingent and fragile like the transitory sounds of the radio.

"I don't know what happened to Antonio Bay tonight. Something came out of the fog, and tried to destroy us. In one moment it vanished. But if this has been anything but a nightmare, and if we don't wake up to find ourselves safe in our beds, it could come again. To the ships at sea, who can hear my voice. Look across the water in the darkness, look for the fog."

(John Carpenter's *The Fog*)