ARTCHIAE:

For a Media Ar(t)chaeology of Telepresence

edited by
B. Grespi, M. De Rosa, M.T. Soldani, L. Lazzari

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Abstract

This essay identifies different conceptualizations of tele-presence in the discourses around radio as a mass and an artistic medium. I will first refer to the historical discourses on radio and early "art radio" to argue that broadcasting in its formative years elicited imagination of the world as resounding space. Rhetorics of presence across physical distances were alternatively conceptualized as "you are there" (i.e., being transported in another place) or "it is here" (i.e., bringing places and people into the media user's environment). Secondly, I will focus on properly said radio-art of the late twentieth century: I will deal with Murray Schafer's and Bill Fontana's art works to explain how they took up similar rhetorics of tele-presence and reconfigured them in a "poetic of re-presencing" (i.e., "it is now" and "being then").

Keywords: Radio; Radio-Art; Art Radio; Sound-Art; Tele-Presence

Abstract

Questo saggio individua diverse concettualizzazioni della telepresenza nei discorsi sulla radio come medium di massa e medium artistico. In un primo momento farò riferimento ai discorsi storici sulla radio e sull'"art radio" delle origini, per per dimostrare come la trasmissione radiofonica, nei suoi anni formativi, suscitò l'immaginazione del mondo come spazio di risonanza. Le retoriche della presenza a distanza furono alternativamente concepite come "tu sei lì" (l'essere trasportati in un altro luogo) o "esso è qui" (il trasportare luoghi e persone nell'ambiente dell'ascoltatore). In seguito, mi concentrerò sulla "radio-art" propriamente detta della fine del Ventesimo secolo, analizzando le opere di Murray Schafer e Bill Fontana per spiegare come esse riprendano simili retoriche della telepresenza e le riconfigurino in una "poetica del ri-presentificare" (cioè "è ora" e "essere allora").

Parole chiave: Radio; Radio-Art; Art Radio; Sound-Art; Telepresenza

> New media represents an accumulation of the auditive technologies of the past: a realization of the telepresence first offered by the telephone […] an appropriation of the ethereal associations of radio, and an embrace of film sound's spatiality. The features that differentiate new media—the ability to "enter the screen," to interact with three-dimensional images or "virtual objects," to acquire a new subjectivity, a liquid identity, to enjoy authentic rather than mediated experience, and to transcend the material—all these features are present in the phenomenality of sound.
> (Dyson 2009, 3)

This quote from Frances Dyson's pioneering study *Sounding New Media* constitutes an evocative (and someway provocative) point of departure to deal with the archaeologies of tele-presence invoked by the *ARTCHAE* project, and an occasion to take on the invitation to critically re-think today's modes of human virtual presence in media environments by revisiting the experimental work of media art of the past. As a practicing artist and art theorist herself, Dyson maintains that the rhetorical architecture built around the experience of sonic media in the twentieth century pre-dated the emphasis on notions—such as immersivity, embodiment and tele-presence itself—we are now used to liken almost exclusively to a digital domain. All these concepts build upon a well-established characterization of mediated sound and listening as the almost transcending "feeling of being here now, of experiencing oneself as engulfed, enveloped, absorbed, enmeshed, in short, immersed in an environment" (Dyson 2009, 4), consequently calling for notions of transcendence that successfully obscure audio media's technological and cultural origins.

In building upon this suggestive genealogical hypothesis, this contribution focuses on the rhetoric and poetics of tele-presence that had been revolving around radio as a mass medium and an expressive instrument. It does so by putting in comparison different historical conceptualizations of tele-presence, located in the first half and in the second half of the twentieth century in Europe and in America, and different understandings of radio-practice as an art form. The difference between the considered contexts and the significant gap separating the two time periods immediately dismisses any possibly exhaustive account; on the other hand, the same *longue durée* perspective allows to collect close insights on the way in which cultural metaphors of tele-presence associated with radio, as "listening across distances," have changed across time, from the consolidation of audio broadcasting to the dawn of digital wireless. As I will argue, the fascination for challenging spatial and temporal distances through sound transmission and the fantasies of an inter-connected, resonating universe might take different shapes depending on the historical, technological and social contexts that produce them. In this sense, the first argument of this

essay is that, despite being well-rooted in the historical discourse around sonic media, the concept of tele-presence has been invested in different semantic nuances over time. The poetics of avant-garde and contemporary sound artists who have been dealing with the concept of tele-presence in one way or another are better understood when analyzed against the grain of historically acquainted rhetorical architecture. It is only against this backdrop that one can really appreciate arts' critical and self-reflexive take on the power of sound-transmission in superimposing the listener's physical location on the one hand, and the "placelessness" of a virtual listening space that exists only by means of electronic signaling, on the other one.

To support this argument and articulate this diachronic comparison I will maintain the distinction between "art radio" and "radio-art" that was first introduced by Tetsuo Kogawa. In a short essay, the performance artist defined "art radio" as "a radio program that has artistic and experimental content in it," while in properly said "radio art" "airwaves are not a means to carry the content (sounds) but the 'autopoietic' entity of how they appear by themselves" (Kogawa 2014, 50). For the purposes of this essay, the experiment carried out by exponents of avant-garde arts in Europe during the interwar years will provide examples of early art radio—that is to say content made especially to be broadcast and to exploit the expressive potentials of the medium; later artworks and media installation made by contemporary sound artists between the 1970s and the 1990s are instead to be considered specimens of radio-art, as they rely on the principles and the logics of sound transmission more than on the sound themselves. In the first paragraph I will trace back the conceptualization of tele-presence as showcased by some of the major experimental art-radio works of the 1920s–40s to a broader discursive strand of wireless imagination that permeated both technical accounts and the popular press. As I will argue, in this discursive/expressive context tele-presence is an eminently spatial figure, often associated with the modern(ist) notions of ubiquitous and simultaneous listening. In the second paragraph, I will refer to some 1970s-90s radio-art works that, unlike the earlier art-radio examples, involved the actual implementation of transmission channels and information networks to and from exhibition sites. In this context, the supposedly immediate (invisible) character of long-distance audio transmission is resumed and reconfigured to shape a different understanding of tele-presence as displaced, unhistorical listening.

1. Tele-Presence as Ubiquitous, Simultaneous Listening in Art-Radio (1920–40)

Rhetorics and poetics of tele-presence through sound transmission may be considered as an inherent part of a broader discursive formation we may refer to as "wireless imagination." The term is borrowed from the title of a well-known collection of essays on *Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* edited by Gregory Whitehead and Douglas Kahn (1999), which was in turn inspired by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1913 futurist manifesto. In this respect, a specification is in order: unlike Whitehead's and Kahn's, my understanding of wireless imagination does not refer exclusively to the practice and aesthetics of early twentieth century avant-garde. As I already argued elsewhere (Dotto and Ortoleva 2025), if it is true that artists acted as the interpreters of the technological imagination of industrial society, exploring the sensory changes and space-time horizons, it is also true that an imaginative component was already present both in the technically detailed accounts provided by scientists and operators as well as in the layer ones of the popular press.

As proof of this, radio magazines provide particularly fitting examples of the ways in which the "tele-presencing power" of radio was discursively (and visually) framed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Take for instance two ads, both included in an issue of the *Radio Broadcast* magazine in the late 1920s. The first one, by the Music Master Corporation, represents a radio "reproducer" (speaker) as it transmits sport, music, entertainment and other cultural situations (a football match, opera stars in a staging of *Madame Butterfly*…) by materializing them directly in the listener's household. The claims read "in the comfort of your own home—near or far—you hear the sermon, the organ, the singing, the entire church service, as though you were seated among the congregation"; or "you can, in the comfort of your home, follow your favorite team up and down the field" ("With the Tongues of Men" 1925a, 993). The second ad promotes the radio receiver manufactured and sold by the Mu-Ra Laboratories, presenting the image of two men with turban as they fly on a carpet into "Arab Nights." The analogy gets explicated by the claim: "the 'magic carpet' expressed the medieval idea of ultimate in swift transportation. TO-DAY, the radio scientists' conception of radio reception is the new Mu-Rad Receiver MA-20" ("Modern Arabian Nights Entertainment" 1925b, 656-k). These ads are nothing but two examples of the most re-occurring concepts of tele-presence that Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton identified respectively with the expressions "it is here […] that sense of presence that can bring the objects and people from another place into the media user's environment" and "You are there [...] in which the user is transported to another place" (1997). Although in these cases both the variants are aimed at emphasizing the life-like, apparently unmediated quality of transmitted sound coming out of the receiver, it is worth

noticing that neither of them constitutes an exclusive prerogative of the radio apparatus. Variants of the rhetorical motif of "living presence" had been applied to almost any kind of media experience, from listening to recorded sound (Thompson 1995) to watching tv, as a sort of media topos (Huhtamo 2011). Metaphors such as "home theatre" or a "window on the world" would eventually become quite common figures of speech to indicate the effectiveness of several media devices. Nevertheless, it is quite intuitive that audio broadcasting was particularly suited to evoke fantasies of space-traveling. Even a scientist of the like of Guglielmo Marconi, internationally renowned as the founding father of radio, indulged in similar fantasies of world-traveling through the airwaves. Significantly hailed as "a space explorer who […] immerses himself in the ocean of sound waves with the power of thought" ("Marconi" 1930, 1, my translation), in 1930 he accepted his nomination as President of the Italian Academy and gave a speech on the future developments of telecommunication technologies:

> Radio, that has obliterated distances and united continents, is about to connect every man to each other, assuring every dialogue the most jealous of secrets. Wonder! [It is] the infinite multiplication of what already seems a miracle, that waves dispose in the sky chasing, intersecting, overlapping and overtaking each other, bringing unchanged sounds and words from one horizon to another. […] Even the most distant house, after breaking all isolation, will be able to live in contact with the cities, to hear all the beautiful and interesting things that are happening in the world. (Quoted in "Marconi" 1930, 1, my translation)

Compared to the layer conceptions of wireless imagination, which often presented the process of sound transmission as a sort of "miracle" or "magic", Marconi's speech cannot obscure the techno-scientific dimension of broadcasting. By talking about how "the waves dispose in the sky […] bringing unchanged sounds and words from one horizon to another" he addresses the infrastructuralization of the ether that constitutes the very technical condition of wireless communication. Still, even the Italian inventor cannot help speculating on the foreseeable social consequences of the latest technological achievements and dares to predict the transformation of the sky into a communicational environment and that of the world itself in an increasingly resonating, interconnected, simultaneous space, where everything can be heard everywhere as soon as it happens. Being "carried far away" without moving or having any event in the world delivered at home are not only experiences accessible to the consumer who could afford buying a high-quality receiver or loudspeaker: they are instead, according to Marconi's view, a distinctive trait of technological modernity.

This widespread understanding of tele-presence as an eminently spatial figure and of radio's promise to annihilate physical distances consistently resonates in several of the major experimental radio-plays (or art radio) of the early

twentieth century. Years after having introduced the original concept of "wireless imagination" (*immaginazione senza fili*) to indicate the Futurist poet's capacity to discover and establish new analogies between apparently distant things and images, Marinetti later participated to the debate on the existing radiophonic theatre by advocating for a "a synthetic, quick, simultaneous, surprising theatre […] as the futurist one, which requires everywhere the speed of a revolving stage" (Marinetti 1931, 416, my translation). The challenge posed by the futurist sensibility toward more traditional theatre's unity of time, place and action is exemplified by some of Marinetti's works written especially to be transmitted by the Italian State broadcaster EIAR (see Fisher 2009). Transmitted for the first time in 1933, the "radiosynthesis" *Violetta e gli areoplani* ("Violet and the airplanes") is an unusual radio-play in three acts, telling the story of a young girl and a group of kids who hook the lighthouse tower to a three-jet aircraft headed from Costantinople to Naples. In explicitly likening the medium of radio to air transport, Marinetti's work also inaugurates what the poet concurrently defined "aeropoetry", "giving a minute-to-minute synthesis of the world and, like the radio in the fuselage, the center of a world-wide acoustic network" (Marinetti 1933, 3, my translation). In approximately the same period, pioneers of the emerging German *Rundkunst* of the Weimar era experimented different aesthetic formulas around the reoccurring motif of world-traveling (see Jelavich 2009, chap. 3). As they were managing the radio-drama departments respectively at the Breslau and the Berlin radio station, between 1927 and 1930 Fritz Walter Bischoff and Alfred Braun directed two widely influential radio-plays, *Hallo! Hier Welle Erdball! Eine Hörsymphonie* ("Hello! Here is Radio Earth Calling! A Sound Symphony") and *Weltreise durch einen Arbeitstag* ("A World-Journey in a Working Day"). While the former introduced the use of sound recording and audio-editing technologies to simulate newscasts coming from a transatlantic steamer or an office in New York, from someplace in Africa or Japan (H.U. 1930), Braun's radio-play juxtaposed acoustic impressions of "stokers on an ocean-going ship, fishermen in the North Sea, miners in the Donets Basin, Egyptian and Indian farmers, iron workers at Borsig and in Transcaucasia", resulting in "a colorful parable for the simultaneity of world labor" (quoted in Schwitzke 1963, 63, my translation). These artworks, created within the Futurist and the New Objectivity movements, are but two possible examples of the avant-garde's broader fascination for what Carolyn Birdsall defines as the "global ether" (2014, 261). As aesthetically diverse as they might be, both works constitute a meta-representation of radio through radio, or, better said, a medium-specific *mise en abyme* of the medium. Art-radio sets up the virtual listening spaces of on-air transmission to stage the act of listening across global ether into the (actual) listener's physical space—or, as Katey Lacey puts it, "for the listener's experience of time and place to be intercut into the acoustic reconstruction of a global geography of shared acoustic experience"

(2012, 97). In the modern rhetoric of science and popular culture and in the modernist poetics of avant-garde art, tele-presence implies the personification of the virtually ubiquitous character of radio broadcasting in the "here and now" of listening.

2. Tele-Presence as Displaced, Unhistorical Listening in Radio-art (1970–90)

Let us now jump forward a few decades and move the attention to a different global geography of sound. Canadian composer and musicologist R. Murray Schafer is often presented in continuity with the European art experiments of the first half of the twentieth century, both for having acknowledged the cultural autonomy of (non-musical) sound and for the global scale of his well-known *World Soundscape Project*—which would eventually prove quite influential for sound art in general. However, differently from Marinetti, Braun and other art radio exponents, Schafer conceives the world as a resonating place not *because of* but *despite the* ongoing technological progress in tele-communication. As a sonic environmentalist, he defined radio and other technologies of sound reproduction/transmission as "schizo-phonic" for they split sounds from their original source, therefore contributing to contaminating and corrupting the natural soundscape. In his words, "the benefits of the electroacoustic transmission and reproduction of sound are well enough celebrated, but they should not obscure the fact that precisely at the time hi-fi was being engineered, the world soundscape was slipping into an all-time lo-fi condition" (Schafer [1977] 1994, 88). The ecological sensibility in which the very notion of soundscape is grounded is at odds with the modernist fascination for technology as a tool to dominate and transform the environment. Nevertheless, this techno-skeptical approach didn't prevent Schafer from contributing to reviving the debate on the artistic potential of radio. In a short essay entitled "Radical Radio" he maintains that, should radio become an art form, "its content would be totally transformed. No longer would it spin as the slave to machine technology, mechanical and clocked. No longer would it palpitate with the spasms of production and consumption. It would outstrip the impediments of mechanization, it would drown the fury of the hawkers and hucksters, and it would muzzle the voices of newscasters" (Schafer 1990, 216). What the author means by radical radio is a "phenomenological," almost metaphysical concept of sound transmission, as opposed to the "humanistic," mundane notion consisting in the programming and broadcasting of words and music. As an example of this oppositive, anti-modern form of radio-art, Schaffer mentions an idea he has been working on for a while with his fellow composer and soundscapist Bruce Davis called "Wilderness Radio." The project consisted in establishing sound transmission

between urban and natural spaces by "putting microphones in remote locations uninhabited by humans and to broadcast whatever might be happening out there: the sounds of wind and rain, the cries of birds and animals – the uneventful events of the natural soundscape transmitted without editing into the hearts of cities" (Schafer 1990, 217). The *Wilderness Radio* project aims at radicalizing the very notion of sound transmission by refusing to rely on the already existing broadcast network and establishing instead connections from one point in space to another one. The artistic and social goal here is to criticize the industry of broadcasting by putting radio where it is not supposed to be and by transmitting something that the traditional listener/consumer wouldn't expect, superimposing the virtual, transmitted space (wild nature) over the listener's physical space (urban centers).

Even if it remained ultimately unrealized, the *Wilderness Radio* project has some traits in common with "radio-art" as defined by Kogawa or, at least, it identifies the artistic potential of the medium with something close to what other scholars described as "transmission art" (see Joseph-Hunter 2009; 2011). By critically reassessing the concept and technically reconfiguring the practice of audio-transmission, it moves away from the one-to-many communicational model of broadcasting in favor of a many-to-one/many-to-many interconnections. According to Anna Friz, transmission art acts to "de-industrialize communication and reconsider transmission as craft. Artists engage circuits and circumstances of transmission that are made, not manufactured, with an interest toward collaboration with the materialities of wirelessness" (Friz 2009, 47). Similar endeavors had been undertaken by the prominent sound artist Bill Fontana between the 1970s and the 1990s, with a series of site-specific installations called "Sound Sculptures" he had been creating across the United States, Europe and Japan. The concept of (analogue) "musical information network" was at the core of this series: Fontana started out by establishing temporary circuits of audio-transmission among different places, using an outside broadcast van, sending signal through telephone lines and wireless communication. Each sound sculpture consists of a network of simultaneous listening points that relay real-time acoustic data to a common listening zone—the sculpture site. One of these installations came quite close to putting into practice Schafer's concept of "Wilderness Radio." In fact *Sound Sculptures through the Golden Gate* (1987) transmitted the sounds of the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge—which hosts more than five hundred thousand birds and three thousand mammals—to the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, thus bringing wildlife sounds to the ears of the passer-by, who was suddenly turned into a (casual) listener (see Fontana, n.d.; Busechian 2020). What this artistic reinterpretation of sound transmission beyond mass broadcasting shares with Schafer's is the interest in connecting the natural and urban environment to critically reassess the often-unnoticed relevance of the aural dimension of our daily life. Unlike

the exponents of art-radio of the early twentieth century, Schafer and Fontana have no interest in addressing or magnifying the technically equipped, distinctively modern listener "in the comfort of his house" as their primary recipient. Their effort was instead aimed at stimulating Western modern men and women who live in the city to re-discover their sense of hearing and to cultivate their listening skills by providing them with an unexpected aural experience during their everyday life. Even if these aims have little to do with the modern(ist) ambition to master the environment as a communicational space by crossing the global ether, they can still be seen as claims for an alternative design of the global soundscape. What remains unchanged is precisely the artists' firm belief in the tele-presencing power of radio—Bill Fontana's insistence to hide the loudspeakers of his sound sculpture from the Golden Gate passerby's view to form "a transparent overlay to visual space" (Fontana, n.d.) hints at his confidence in the inherently immersive qualities of technologically reproduced sound. What changes is the expressive goal: in this case the virtual space of broadcasting and the physical space of the recipient do not conflate but create friction. In other words, radio can still transport the user to another place or bring objects and events to the user's environment but only to instill in the user a sense of displacement. Both in *Wilderness Radio* and in the Golden Gate's sound-sculpture the sound of wildlife *is there* where it is clearly not supposed to be; listeners/visitors *are there*, sensorially transported and virtually immersed in another, untamed environment at odds with the one they're physically moving in.

It should be noted that the critical instances of radio-art at the turn of the century are by no means limited to reconfiguring the meaning of tele-presence as a spatial figure but may also extend into the temporal dimension. In the already mentioned essay, Murray Schafer maintains that, like any other art form, radio-art should represent "an enemy of the present. It always wants to change it by introducing other tenses. It alters the perceived world by introducing new rhythms, forgotten, ignored, invisible, impossible" (1990, 216). Once again, the suggestion seems to find a practical application in Fontana's artworks, especially in those sound sculptures that were located in historically significant places. The most significant example in this sense is the installation *Distant Trains*, realized in 1984 by Fontana in Berlin and located in the area that used to be the railway junction and commercial exchange center with the west before being bombed and destroyed during the Second World War. The amplifiers, buried in the abandoned space of the building and arranged in parallel to evoke the conformation of the railroads, are connected to hidden microphones in the still-active railway station of Cologne to reconstruct a crowded acoustic space in a now deserted place ("Distant Train Presentation," n.d.). The expressive aim is not different from the one of the *Golden Gate Bridge Sound Sculpture*, to surprise the visitor by displacing him/her. Here, however, the temporary acoustic network connecting different points in space is not aimed at displacing the casual listener

into another place; instead, it intends to immerse him/her in a different time, when the Berlin station still stood up and the trains were still running. In this case the principle of sound transmission underlying the musical information network is set to elicit fantasies of time-traveling. As it was stated by contemporary art scholar Mandy Suzanne Wong, albeit in reference to another context, "Sound art can do some historical work that language can't. A sound artwork isn't a description of the past but a presencing of the past in the here-and-now" (2017, 363). In our case, the poetics of tele-presence exemplified by Fontana's radio-art make use of a sound transmission network to re-presence (that is acoustically superimpose) a different, apparently unrelated time and place in the time and place of listening. Paraphrasing Lombardo and Ditton's classification, one could state that, when understood as listening across time, as a temporal dislocation, tele-presence offers the listener the chance of "*being then*"—transported in a different time—or creates the "*it was now*" effect—hearing acoustic remnants re-emerging from the past as ghostly presences.

To summarize: as a rhetorical trope traditionally associated with sound media and tele-communication technologies, radio's tele-presence constitutes some sort of "varying same." Whereas a certain tendency to talk about sound transmission as traveling across worldwide distance had been constantly resurfacing in discourses about radio as a technology, a mass and artistic medium, this tendency has been significantly changing form and meaning over the decades. In the wake of the general enthusiasm toward the possibilities opened by the global ether, art-radio exponents and avant-garde artists tried to encapsulate the effect of simultaneous, ubiquitous listening with in-studio, partially pre-recorded works thought specifically for being broadcast. For their part, soundscapers and sound artists of the second half of the twentieth century engaged in the implementation of alternative transmission channels and networks to detach everyday listeners from their aural routine, using the tele-presencing power of radio to displace us in different spaces and times.

In conclusion, notwithstanding Dyson's thesis about the genealogical continuity between analog sound media and new (digital) media, it is important to remember that not all the aural presences have always looked (or sounded) the same. To paraphrase Schafer's famous title, there have been (and there still are) more than one way to "tune the world" by means of audio transmission.

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