

Each of the brief selections that you are going to hear represents an approach to what may loosely be described as "audio art." I have chosen pieces to illustrate how a particular technique is employed by the artist to yield a desired effect. As you will hear, successive pieces introduce an increasing number of techniques -- the first piece, a fairly simple exercise in tape editing by Charles Amirkhanian, gives way to a more complex, fugue-like piece by Glenn Gould, which in turn fades into a fairly complicated, highly produced feature by West Coast avant-garde newscaster Scoop Nisker.

Nisker's piece leads into an early exercise in electronic voice manipulation by Charles Dodge, which sets up a dramatic piece by ZBS Media, employing complex editing, electronic voice manipulation, and a highly sophisticated use of the acoustic space. Finally, we have an example of large-scale drama by the National Radio Theater of Chicago; in this piece, the conclusion of the NRT's production of MacNiece's The Dark Tower, a multitude of effects -- complex editing and mixing, elaborate musical and sound effects, the use of an extremely large cast -- combine to create an epic form of radio theater.

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The universe of audio art is much vaster than this very brief introduction would suggest; but I think it is possible to hear in this short audio sampler how a variety of audio artists capitalize both upon the potential of the medium and, curiously, upon its limitations. If audio art is to take its place alongside the other media arts of film and video, it must do so on its own terms. Just as in the final analysis the raw material of film is light, so too the raw material of audio must be sound -- not the sound, necessarily, of something, but simply sound itself.

In a paper I wrote two years ago on the possibility of an aesthetics for radio, I argued --albeit very tentatively -- that what in film theory we refer to as the profilmic event may have no counterpart in audio theory. By that, I meant

simply that the relatively easy correspondences we can discern between what we see on screen and what happened in front of the camera that allowed images to be recorded can scarcely be discerned at all in the case of radio.

In arguing this point, I have begun to think that an analysis of radio owes more to work in theater criticism than to work in film theory. Keir Elam, in his book The Semiotics of Theater and Drama, argues for what he calls the "polysemic character of the theatrical sign," which allows "a limited repertory of sign-vehicles . . . to generate a potentially unlimited range of cultural units." The "semantic ambiguity" of the theatrical sign, Elam goes on, "is vital to all but the most doggedly didactic forms of theater, and especially so to any mode of 'poetic' theater which goes beyond 'narrative' representation."<sup>1</sup> My thoughts about radio, from the most arcane forms of audio art up to and including news broadcasts and talk shows, lead me to believe that not only does the audio sign exhibit this same sort of semantic ambiguity, but that the repertory of sign-vehicles in audio is, indeed, as "potentially unlimited" as the class of signifieds that Elam sees being generated by the "limited" repertory of theatrical sign-vehicles.

Following from this, I would argue that anyone whose commitment to the media arts has been confined largely to film and/or video would do well to consider to what extent the potential of the arts of the moving image could be expanded through a rethinking of the role that sound plays in their work.

In a paper on which I currently working, called "Auditory Figuration," I argue that there is sufficient justification in the recent work of Christian Metz, together with American scholars like Mary Ann Doane and Alan Williams, to conclude that the potential relationship between cinematic images and "illusion" breaks down in radio. What this means in practice is simply that it is never necessary -- indeed, it is impossible -- to "show" anything on radio; a dog on screen is, in its discursive aspect, simply a dog -- but a "dog" on radio is

<sup>1</sup>Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theater and Drama (London and New York: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1980), p. 11.

either the sound of a dog panting, or the sound of a dog barking, or the sound of a dog howling.

If all this seems far afield of the goal of this session, let me remind you that our sense of community in the media arts is based upon our acceptance of the mediating role that the electronic arts play both in preserving the sense of illusion that the arts require and in dispelling that sense. Film, video, and audio are, perhaps, unique in the way they can do both at the same time.

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there is nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction, And that you believe in it willingly.

Wallace Stevens