

Transcript for: Moe Folk, The Visual Rhetoric of Sonic Rhetoric and the Value of the Voiceless

Audio 1: Introduction

[sounds of spaceships whizzing by]

[Folk speaking]

Welcome to the future of sonic rhetorics...the future of sonic rhetorics.

Just kidding! [pause] [ambient background music starts and plays in the background]

There's really nothing futuristic about this piece, just like there's really nothing futuristic about most futuristic movies: Slap some delay on the voice, use some 80s synthesizer sounds, and rely on haircuts from the 1920s. In a similar sense, when we approach sonic rhetorics, we often go back to the past---back to thousands of years of rhetoric rooted in orality—in an attempt to discern how our age confounds, extends, supports, and negates earlier ideas.

In this piece, then, I hope to build on some of the stellar scholarship relating to sonic rhetorics in recent years, such as Cindy Selfe's "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning", Rickert and Salvo's "...and they had ProTools," Comstock and Hocks's "Voice in the Cultural Soundscape"; Heidi McKee's "Sound Matters," and Tara Shankar's "Speaking on the Record" to name just a few.

In doing so, I do not wish to re-inscribe the writing/aurality divide, but it seems odd that the de facto method of much college instruction, the lecture, relies on audio, yet those working with audio in the composition classroom often face skepticism from their colleagues, very often from colleagues within their same department. As many digital rhetoricians and multimodal compositionists have pointed out, the history of writing instruction can serve as an unwanted anchor. As Cindy Selfe argued in "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning," the [QUOTE] "history of writing in composition instruction, as well as its contemporary legacy, functions to limit our professional understanding of composing as a multimodal activity and deprive students of valuable semiotic resources for making meaning" [UNQUOTE]. For example, given the local contexts many composition classrooms reside within, it's perfectly fine, and perhaps even expected, to have classroom-wide oral discussions about a written text because that model has been regarded as an efficacious learning tool for a long time, but having each student produce a digital audio text in response to an audio text—which builds the same skills as the previous example and then some—still seems far afield to many.

Thus, teaching is ultimately nothing but a series of rhetorical choices, which makes all teaching, especially in our current age of budget cuts and limited resources, a political act that has real consequences. Therefore, I hope to help practitioners of multimodal composition in connecting with colleagues who might be hesitant to try—or even to understand—the importance of sonic rhetorics by providing different ways of approaching assignments and student production.

- 1) I want to contribute to the perceived semiotic affordances of audio in the writing classroom
- 2) I want to show the relation of visual rhetoric to audio production and analysis
- 3) I want to show the value of the so-called “voiceless” audio essay in transcending outdated, romantic notions of writing.

Audio 2: Affordances and Context

[Folk speaking]

In the course of this piece, I want to share two student compositions with you. Although I use audio compositions in all my classes, both of the examples came from the same class, a mixed undergraduate and graduate student course in Digital Rhetoric and Composition. The assignment was to craft an audio argument using at least four sound resources—in other words, music, sound effects, clips, interviews, that sort of thing. I asked students to make a point and try to influence people, and I implored them to select topics that would enable them to take advantage of the affordances of audio. Other than that, I gave no parameters because I believe the more open an assignment is, the more a student gains by productively grappling with the challenges of invention. In “The Movement of Air,” Cindy Selfe identifies the strengths of audio when she notes of Sonya Borton’s audio piece that [QUOTE], “The affordances of sound characterizing this text—the emotional tone and historical information contributed by melodies and instruments; the meaning carried by accent and volume; the nuance conveyed by pace, quality, and tone of voice—could never be fully replicated in print text, although such a text would have its own affordances.”

In the following student example, I’d like to build on identifying more of those nuances conveyed by voice. Since the original student composition was 20 minutes long, I edited it into three clips that exemplify the whole argument, and, in order, to share the student’s work in this environment, I added images to the audio to make them movie files. This graduate student was also a middle school teacher, and she used her audio essay to explore the idea of standardized testing, especially how the importance placed on such tests by outsiders is not quite the same as the importance placed on them by middle school students. The first clip is the introduction to her piece.

Audio 3: “Standardized Testing” Student Excerpt: Introduction

[sound of heels clicking down an empty hallway]

[female teacher talking]

Every morning, I walk into an empty classroom filled with silence.

[sound of heels stops]

A classroom in which many expectations exist. I’m expected to teach the scope and sequence my district has provided me. I’m expected to prepare my students for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments, otherwise known as the PSSAs. My students are expected to perform well on these tests, so our school can make its adequate yearly progress, which in turn determines the amount of our federal

funding. My students are expected to care about these tests. Every day, I remind myself of these expectations as the bell rings and the hallways begin to flood with students.

Audio 4: Discussion of Introduction Excerpt

The introduction sets up what might be perceived as a linear argument—a teacher alone before the school day, alone before classes and tests.

To look back in time, the rhetorical figure of anaphora is used in this introduction with the repetition of “I’m expected.” Doing so helps to illustrate the pressures placed on teachers when standardized tests are used to determine jobs and funding, and the composer’s use of the phrase bookended by the halcyon silence of the pre-student classroom helps to illustrate how it pervades a teacher’s thoughts at all times. The repetition of “expected” as a rhetorical figure would function just as well on paper as it does in sound; however, the nuance of pace and the cavernous echo of sound in the school hallways, silence, the shrill of the bell, and the excited student voices complement the figure in a different way than words alone are capable of.

Audio 5: “Standardized Testing” Student Excerpt: Test Question

[female teacher talking] However, these tests don’t often relate to students. Take the following PSSA sample passage entitled “Pressure: Vacuums are all about nothing” as an example. It begins:

[man’s voice reading test question]

“Air pressure acts in all directions. But what if there’s no air there at all? Please consider the following. When there’s a place or space with no air we call it a vacuum. Vacuum comes from the word that means empty. Usually things that we call empty aren’t really empty. They’re filled with air. An empty room may not have any books or chairs or goldfish in it, but it’s got wall-to-wall air.”

Audio 6: Discussion of Test Question Excerpt

The second clip highlights the affordances of audio. Not that expediency is always wanted or necessary, but the use of the sample oral passage from the test is definitely worth a thousand words. Including the sample passage also preserves a level of objectivity for the teacher—the teacher doesn’t have to produce a lengthy, opinionated passage to describe what test passages are like and why they might not connect with their intended audience of middle schoolers; the sample does this quite well by itself; such an approach could contribute to the composer’s ethos for undecided members of the audience because it is less polemical. This passage is visceral in that it helps listeners recruit their own memories of standardized tests: The pace of the passage is excruciating, probably boring for most people, and it might make listeners contemplate stabbing their leg with a #2 pencil rather than concentrate on listening to the passage in order to answer questions. In short, the passage offers a heightened ekphrasis for listeners, something the words don’t completely possess when transcribed only as text.

Audio 7: “Standardized Testing” Student Excerpt: The Classroom

[Female teacher talking] They have perfected how to appear interested and entertained, but upon further inspection, most middle school girls are thinking about only one thing.

[Justin Bieber song “Baby” plays in background]

They are only thinking of Justin Bieber. So while you *think* they are taking the notes you are writing on the board, they are actually doodling “I love Justin Bieber” *around* their notes. They are listening to the soundtrack of their pretend romance with the teenage heartthrob as they imagine what their life might be like as the future Mrs. Bieber. [music ends]

If they are not dreaming of being serenaded, there is still a variety of things they could be doing. So even though I might ask the question, “Do we need a nominative case or objective case pronoun in this sentence?”, I might get the following responses.

[girl’s voice] “Umm, are we gonna have to run in volleyball practice today?”

[boy’s voice] “Ugh, excuse me, may I go to the bathroom?”

[different girl’s voice] “Umm, this has nothing to do with what we’re talking about, but, when’s the pep rally?”

[female teacher talking] There is no telling what’s going on in their constantly running minds and it certainly makes teaching them difficult. It might be easy to deal with one or two teenagers in a house as a parent, but if you put 33 of these deceptive creatures together? So as I monitor their progress on a writing assignment by circulating throughout the room, I might hear:

[Excited young male’s voice] “Oh, yo yo. I played all night. And I finally got to 7th prestige. And oh yo, one of these games before I prestiged, I was in summit. And man, dude, I went 122 and 13, I was beastin’ it up.”

[Female teacher talking] I don’t even know what that means, but I know it has *nothing* to do with what I’m attempting to teach them.

Audio 8: Discussion of the Classroom Excerpt

[Folk speaking] In one sense, it’s very logical to hear the voices of the students in an argument that centers on their dispositions and capacities. Doing so in audio, however, packs a bigger rhetorical wallop for the audience, especially older members of the audience who can look back at their own middle school days. When listeners hear the student voices, listeners cannot help but hear the physical and mental turmoil that accompanies that age—the same ones that no doubt accompanied their own experiences during those times. In short, this passage recruits powerful memories by unleashing our own palimpsest of middle school awkwardness. Text might have gotten there, too, but the actual sounds make the words more effective. As Svetlana Boym might argue, the passage functions by using a rhetoric of nostalgia, in this case what Boym termed reflective nostalgia: listeners

thinking back to their own experiences with standardized tests and their own disconnect with them, most likely, though, in an era when teacher and district fates were not so tied to the test results, thereby seeing the composer's side. The pathos in this section is also palpable. The juxtaposition of the staid teacher and test reader voices, not to mention nominative and objective case pronouns, we've encountered is juxtaposed with the passion students feel for other subjects such as Justin Bieber and video games. (And by the way, who said that the Biebster couldn't contribute to an academic argument?) The affordances of audio in this example help illustrate how to connect with a subject in different material fashions. As Collin Brooke argued to complicate Richard Lanham's looking at/through distinction with "looking from," the audio sends us both back inside memory and then outward as we see from inside ourselves and then into the perspective of others. It puts us in the test taker's chair, in that time, in that place.

Audio 9: Context for Student Example: "Nuclear Cacophony"

[Folk speaking] The next student example is an example of what I would call the voiceless student essay. I'm using the idea of voice on purpose since it's such a loaded term in the writing sense, which I have taken to mean a student's unique perspective, original word choice, and inimitable style, and which has often been seen as one of the crowning graces to inculcate in a writing class. This student audio example contains many, many voices (12 presidents just to name a few), but it does not have a trace of the student's actual physical voice though I argue it maintains the other hallmarks of writing voice I just mentioned. The entire example revolves around the composer making a unique, original argument in how source material is selected, arranged, edited, and employed. Some might rightly see this example as a type of remix or mash-up, but I call it a voiceless student essay made possible by the understanding of sonic rhetoric and the affordances of audio editing. The student said he did not want to use his actual voice in the audio essay because he felt it would detract from the ethos of the subject and thus his argument. He felt the voice of those involved with the issues needed to be foregrounded. When you listen, see if you can identify the voice of each president since Truman.

Audio 10: Student Example: "Nuclear Cacophony"

0:00 [elegiac music plays in background]

0:14 [Female newscaster] "A fireball with the explosive power of over 10,000 tons of dynamite"

0:40 [Harry S Truman] "Having found the atomic bomb, we have used it."

1:03 [Robert Oppenheimer] "I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and, to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that, one way or another."

2:20 [Harry S Truman] “They may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this Earth.”

2:42 [John F. Kennedy] Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles...hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness.”

3:21 [Col. Paul Tibbetts] And looking down from thousands of feet over Hiroshima, all I could think of was, “My God, what have we done?”

3:44 [Female Japanese atom bomb survivor] “I had, uh, 30 operations, uh, plastic surgery operations, maybe more.”

4:25 [background music speeds up and gets louder]

[Kennedy] “By action”

[Robert Oppenheimer] “Now I am become death”

[Kennedy] “By Madness”

[Robert Oppenheimer] “The destroyer of worlds”

[Kennedy] “Miscalculation”

[Robert Oppenheimer] “I suppose we all felt that”

[LBJ] Weapons of war

[Richard Nixon] Nuclear war

[Bill Clinton] “Nuclear weapons”

[Ronald Reagan] “Nuclear war”

[George H. W. Bush] “Nuclear force”

[Jimmy Carter] Nuclear testing

[George W. Bush] Nuclear cooperation

[Barack Obama] Nuclear weapons

4:58 [Dwight D. Eisenhower] “The acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.”

[Ronald Reagan] “The only answer to these systems is a comparable threat.”

[Bill Clinton] “Success can mean life instead of death.”

[Robert Oppenheimer] “Become death”

[Gerald Ford] “The agony of war”

[Barack Obama] A hugely dangerous path.

[Gerald Ford] Vast human tragedy.

[Col. Tibbetts] My God, what have we done?

[Ronald Reagan] Threat

[Barack Obama] Dangerous

[Gerald Ford] Tragedy

[Gerald Ford] Agony

[Bill Clinton] Death

[Col. Tibbetts] “What have we done?”

5:30 [Description: voices of all sources so far are blended together and play at once, all jumbled. A few phrases and words such as “let me out,” “let me in,” and “success”

can be heard over the cacophony. The president's voices are blended together and talk over each other, blended together backwards.

5:58-6:00 [Description: a word that sounds like "fascism" echoes out loudly and fades to nothing as track ends.]

Audio 11: Discussion of "Nuclear Cacophony"

[Folk speaking] The music itself, which he tweaked to fit the words, provides its own message in the pace and with the slow, melancholic sound yielding to an unstoppable wall of power. The presidential supercuts add to a type of hyperbole—the accumulation of much talk about nuclear matters which the listeners know did not translate into substantive change over the decades.

The first president's voice used is Truman's, and the employment of his logical, matter-of-fact voice in the audio work is important: even the first president to deal with grave nuclear decisions already seems disengaged from the pathos of the situation. Truman's voice is also eerily mirrored by the Hiroshima survivor's voice, which is also logos-based and quite matter-of-fact in relaying how many surgeries she had. Again, hearing the survivor's voice around 3:40 rather than reading it as a block quote in the middle of print represents the other side of the issue while also juxtaposing the bigger problem the audio work seeks to address—that the pathos of the situation should have had us take strong action against nuclear use and proliferation almost seventy years ago, but instead it's just a vapid talking point for politicians because people have simply accepted it.

In his accompanying rhetorical analysis-cum-reflection on the audio piece, the student noted how hearing Oppenheimer's voice for the first time, which enters at 1:01 of the piece, gave him chills. Again, the Oppenheimer quote would work differently in print than in audio: In print, it flows easily and might even be perceived as arrogant and unquestioning, whereas the actual audio is halting and sounds more genuine, more regretful, thus making a completely different contribution to the ethos and substance of the argument.

Around 4:25, Bryan returns to earlier quotes while introducing new ones and the editing here might be considered a stronger enactment of his voice because it employs a different level of rhetorical savvy, which is extended around 5:30 when he employs a filter to distort the presidential voices, ultimately ending on the echo of "fascism," ironic given the impetus to build and use the bomb emanated from the desire to conquer fascism even though it still affects us. The physical blanketing of the words also mirrors the gravity of the issue surrounding us.

In his reflection on the audio piece, Bryan said he spent way more time on the assignment than he would have had it been a paper because he cared more about the outcome, even though he had never made an audio essay before. He listened to countless hours of presidential speeches looking for material, which he said taught him a lot about our nation's history that he wasn't aware of. In short, the voiceless

audio essay is not simply like cutting-n-pasting a multitude of sources into a research paper, which is often discouraged in writing classrooms because it obscures the author's voice; the voiceless audio essay is a golden opportunity for deep research and learning, a means to explore different methods of persuasion in comparing how ethos, logos, and pathos function within the source material themselves but also how they can be altered by the author's editing voice into new arguments, into new sonic rhetorics.

Audio 12: A Brief (Albeit Sad) Segue Wherein the Author Talks About Eagerly Sharing the Student Example with Colleagues

[background music of drum, bass, and guitar]

Before analyzing this piece, please allow me to take quick detour:

As I mentioned before, pursuing sonic rhetoric in the writing classroom in an age of budget cuts can be a precarious political decision. To make a long story short, the English Department I work in was tasked by our dean with figuring out our direction in the coming years—where to grow, what to cut, how to develop in the current education climate. One person from each of our three areas—literature, professional writing, and composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies—was selected to present to the entire department about what they do and why they do it that way. I was selected to represent the composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies group. In my presentation, I spoke about why I embrace multimodality and digital rhetoric, and I played Bryan's audio work in its entirety as an example of student work. Well, let's just say the overall reaction was not positive. Some people said Bryan's work was the same as cutting-and-pasting a Wikipedia article and handing it in as an essay. In short, they saw such audio work as nothing more than plagiarism or, at best, a type of Howard's patch-writing. One colleague spoke for many others when she told me, "No offense, but I don't see any intellectual merit in any of the work you presented." Again, I am not making this piece to re-inscribe the writing-orality divide or the literature-composition divide, but I am relating this story because it illustrates how the merits of pieces such as Bryan's are quite apparent to those who make sonic texts and assign them while the merits of such pieces will always remain obscured when viewed through the lens of print. The great development surrounding words in our time is the rhetorical flexibility we have in choosing and deploying what mode to use; I hope this piece and others like it open more discussion about the affordances of audio, which in turn points to the affordances of print, and we get to broaden our horizons both ways moving forward.

[music fades out]

Audio 13: Visual Rhetoric, Audio, and Conclusions

[Folk speaking] The images I'm using are from the Audacity interface. While I encourage students to use whatever audio programs they have access to or want to learn, I show them Audacity in class since it's free and cross-platform. In analyzing this program, you could, for example, examine the politics of its interface to recall the Selfe and Selfe, article of that name, which might help you consider how the program's remediated tape player/VCR controls factor into invention and production. I like to bring visual rhetoric into the discussion in order to round out

the sound—just as Kress and Jewett said there is no such thing as monomodal communication, sound is never truly a stand-alone mode, especially when you can actually see it for editing purposes. The two tracks in this window are from the two student examples I showed. The upper track is the teacher’s essay about standardized tests, and the bottom track is Bryan’s piece on nuclear weapons.

The differences between the look of the two tracks is substantial. The bottom track, the nuclear track, has a wider range of peaks and valleys, and it’s evident that space and silence is being employed, and that the argument is backloaded—or that at least a cacophony of sorts happens later when compared with the initial build. The top track, the test track, is much more linear, much more consistent and full of sound from start to finish. I am not suggesting that simply looking at a wave form allows us to discern exactly how a track is built and how experimental it might be, but I think it is important to have students question the overall look of their track because the shape will have an impact on content and reception, just as, say, a 10-page essay written in one giant paragraph is received differently than that same essay delivered piecemeal through Twitter. Similarly, just as it might not be rhetorically savvy to have the same structure for a research paper such as one sentence from the author, then a block quote, then another sentence from the author, then another block quote, etc., having students at least question the visual rhetoric of their wave form could help them break out of the same sonic rhetoric defaults and build savvier texts. We tend to hear the same type of audio essay, a blurb from the composer, then a sound resource, then a blurb from the author, then a sound resource. It’s kind of the model that people find on the news, or perhaps even an NPR-ish model heavy on the snark. The wave form can be used to see if the differences are enough to promote interest, to differentiate the style and pace to avoid lulling an audience with the same rhythm.

2:03 [background music from Audio piece 1 starts] To conclude this piece, sonic rhetoric is at once the most traditional rhetoric and perhaps the one that provides the most futuristic possibilities when we approach it from the lens of synaesthesia, when we approach it from our entire bodies and not just our ears and stomachs: and when we approach it from the past and the future and not through the lens of print, or the traditional written voice. We just need to remain open to the new universes of digital sound.

2:23 [background music stops]

2:24-2:27 [same spaceship sound from Audio 1 rushes in and fades out to the end]