

---

## Soundtracks to Reality

---

### **Paper presentation by: Walter Siegfried**

Hynes Convention Center, Boston

18-22 November, 1996

MULTIMEDIA `96

The Fourth ACM International Multimedia Conference

---

### **"... as if one was walking inside a film"**

Whenever I am flying, such as just now when coming to Boston, I feel torn between two worlds of experience: on the one hand, there is the more or less convincing supply of films and audio material, on the other hand, the view from the window. If I watch the films, I immerse myself in a world of fiction. In a sense, I am doubly in flight: In the airplane and in the realm of the story being told. In the best possible case, the realm of the story being told produces such a strong slipstream that it makes me forget my being up in the air, I am then completely immersed in the fictitious space of the film. If, on the other hand, I look out of the window, I discover a pictorial world of river courses, cities, agrarian structures, which reach me from the realistically existing space. While looking, I construct for myself an axis for relating to the actual region flown over. My imagination is now connected to the network of reality, it rushes across the surface of the planet there below. But the earth is far away and looking down on it is connected with physical efforts and thus my attention fades and soon I am beginning to doze amidst the soft shaking and jolting of the flight.

I have been asking myself how it would be possible to strengthen this view down to the distant earth, how, so to speak, the earth could be brought closer to my imagination, and I remembered that in two instances already sound served as a glue to bind distances together: in opera and in film - without sound, the stage and the film image quickly disappear and the slipstream into the story lessens. I therefore suggested to SWISSAIR to design a sound program for specific flight routes. The sound program was to be exactly related to the areas flown over and should thereby form a connection to the ground: hence the title of this project: "Stories are Landing". For several reasons, the project could not be carried out.

One of the reasons was that the entertainment program is identical for several flight routes and that therefore the passenger would for example have looked down on Berlin while out of the headset our story-pilot would have raved about the beautiful canals of Amsterdam. Enticing as well and maybe poetic, but not exactly what I had in mind.

The airplane anecdote shows two fundamentally opposed possibilities of storytelling: one, where the listener/spectator is led inside the story in order to be increasingly surrounded by the fictitious objects, buildings, events and finally is totally immersed in this artificial world; and the other, where the recipient through his or her imagination opens up to the world about while the story develops from the objects and events of the world actually covered and travelled.

In the cinema as well as in the traditional book, we find ourselves in the category of "inside stories", "cocoon-stories". I am interested in the other category: stories whose threads lead outwards into the world presently surrounding me: situational stories.

I listen to what a place, a zone, a terrain has to tell and then I try to develop various forms

to pass on what I heard to a wider audience. These may be traditional installations (fragments of the way home/ cable soul) but also actions (city dance, situative images, Loccum), performances (plugged-unplugged, news hour) or lectures (small implantology, echotope, synchronization and coordination).

The principle of having a story of a place told becomes especially clear when taking a walk. While walking, we cover the exterior space and thereby get into various unexpected zones which each have something to tell. Such as the sounds and noises typical for the individual place - but how to draw a potential audience's attention to it?

In the beginning, I tried it with the "city dancers" for several years - later, by demonstrating to the audience the typical sound-atmosphere of a place in that same place artificially (via headphones) and in a condensed way (having processed the original sounds in the studio). The first and programmatic composition for walks - as in retrospect I call these installations of original sounds to be experienced while walking - I developed in 1991 for a symposium on the topic of "space" organized by the Goethe-Institut in Bombay. What did the space there tell me and how did I pass it on?

The first task was to define the terrain where I wanted to work. Then, I listened closely on countless walks and recorded everything that was to be heard. Thus successively a precise stocktaking of the sounds and noises was made. Every walk was noted on a transparency map so that by superimposing the maps it soon became manifest which acoustic atmospheres dominated where. Into this field of sounds cartographically made visible I then drew a route which was to become the connecting thread for the composition. I now followed this route in the grounds outside and this exactly at the same speed I later wanted to walk with the audience. On top of the thereby gained time-structure (A to B: 4 sec's/ B to C: 21 sec's etc.), I was able to impose my original sounds and make a montage of them in a condensed way so they later reached the stroller exactly at the time he or she entered the corresponding zone of the route. After completion of the studio phase, synchronous sound copies were produced in order to put them - in several walkmen - at the disposal of groups of visitors. Together with me, they walked over the grounds with the artificial sound in their ears which mixed with sounds of the present situation. That much regarding the production.

When I am now going to show some slides and play some sounds, we will find ourselves in a totally inadequate situation because what is most decisive is missing: the place for which the sounds have been processed and which through its real sounds and its program of pictures makes up the other, more important half of the work. But all the same:

(Insert dias and sound example - not available with this paper)

I would like to talk now about what may happen to the perception of the recipient on such a walk: We are crossing a parking lot. In the optical field, a car appears from the left and gets into a parking space immediately on our right. We hear the corresponding acoustic information: a slow crescendo from the left via the middle to the right. From the headset, however, the noise of the engine sounds from the right to the left. Since it is louder than the real noise penetrating from the outside via the semi-permeable headphones, our brain has to process two contradicting information. This situation causes a high degree of alertness which I like very much.

It is about novel experiences for our brain since in everyday situations the objects we see have their own sound so that image and sound evolve together in time and space. With the "Sound-Tracks to Reality", I let the two worlds slightly drift apart and rejoice in the situatively new combinations emerging on every walk. In one instance, the two worlds coincide: the

pigeons really fly off at that very moment when they flap their wings on the tape. Then again, the strollers have to add everything in their imagination, such as when the fishing boat engines chug only in their ears and the sea is completely empty.

That several sensory impressions have to be processed at the same time in the visitors is, after all, nothing new to the organism. As multi-sensory beings we are permanently busy centrally processing the most varied information from the sensory channels and interpreting them as a total situation. As an example, let us think of Italian cooking: Mama's sense of smell dwells in the realm of the sugo (tomato sauce), her hearing is geared to the news on the radio, her touch tests the well-being of the baby and her eyes feast on the world of the love-scene on the TV. screen.

The "Sound-Tracks" make use of this multi-sensuousness by keeping the optical channel free for the viewing of the material-concrete environment while playing to the ear an artificial soundtrack which although it has been produced from the environment yet is not identical with the momentary sounds of what is seen. This creates a specific artificiality which penetrates the material-concrete environment and in the end makes this itself appear artificial to a certain degree. In order to do this, the connection between the soundtrack and the environment has to be so close that the listener/strollers may let their attention wander again and again between the outside space and the composition in order to let the game between the two worlds play in their perception. The one world has been artificially condensed from the past (in the pre-produced sound-track), the other is the world situatively emerging right at the time of the walk.

The "work", if we can still use this term for such an ephemeral art form, is defined anew with every walk since the interaction between the two realms is unpredictable. Reality does not play along with the same intensity every time. Sometimes it is so far away from the soundtrack that the thread linking the worlds breaks. In this case, the typical changing alertness cannot be built up in the strollers. They are either only outside with the objects or only inside the composition and then the work in its overall effect cannot come about. Only if fiction and reality merge can that specific fascinating alertness be created which one of the strollers has described as: "It felt as if one was walking inside a film". I am particularly fond of this formulation not only because it builds a bridge to Cyber Space and the New Media but especially because it appears to restore to reality the affection and poetry which threatened to be banned into the ghetto of art.

Supported by PRO HELVETIA Arts Council of Switzerland