

Audile Telepresence: a sonic phenomenology of mobile phones

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the relation between embodiment and telepresence in the context of mobile media interfaces, focusing specifically on the aural aspects of mobile phones, their effects upon the urban soundscape, and the impact of audile telepresence on the ways of being embodied in contemporary culture. In particular, I argue that attending to the 'soundings' of mobile media can provide critical insights into the relational ontology of bodies and mobile phones. Firstly, I suggest how attention to sound can effectively de-privilege the primacy of vision or ocularcentrism embedded in much analysis of our experience of contemporary media. In turn, this leads us to re-think the phenomenology of screen media and mobile small screen interfaces in particular. Secondly, I consider the resonant effects of mobile phones upon the urban soundscape, and the important differences between mobile phones and mp3 players in terms of what Michael Bull (2004) calls the "auditory privatisation of public space". My analysis, then, endeavours to offer a more nuanced interpretation of telepresence via a 'sonic phenomenology' of mobile phone use, revealing modes of contemporary embodiment not adequately captured by the visual primacy frequently given to the relation between screen-based media and embodied (tele)presence.

Keywords

mobile phone, mobile media, sound, telepresence, embodiment, phenomenology.

Introduction

[A]ural space is both tactile and ephemeral: it cannot be contained within fixed boundaries. Sound objects can be electronically magnified, replicated and scattered like dust over an entire cityscape. Aural space should be celebrated as the most liquid of spaces, offering a model for the kind of fluidity that a whole range of other disciplines aspire to (Arquette, 2004: 167).

... the order of listening which any telephonic communication inaugurates invites the other to collect his whole body in his voice and announces that I am collecting all of myself in my ear (Barthes cited in Connor, 2004: 171).

In this paper I aim to discuss the relation between embodiment and telepresence in the context of mobile media interfaces, focusing specifically on this embodiment-telepresence relation in terms of the *aural* effects afforded by mobile phone technologies. I will suggest that attending to the 'soundings' of mobile phone use reveals complexities and modes of contemporary embodiment not adequately captured by the visual primacy frequently given to the relation between screen-based media and embodied (tele)presence. Moreover, while the telepresent effects of digital communications technologies have been much discussed, telepresence is often used as a generic term that covers a wide range of interfaces and mediated communication such as the telephone, television, radio and web-based interaction; in contrast, in this paper I begin with the premise that each of these media educes a particular telepresent modality, and a particular way of being embodied and in-the-world.

In previous work (Richardson, 2008; MacColl and Richardson, 2008), I have explored the materiality and phenomenology of mobile communication and media use, and the embodiment of handheld small screens, by considering how various modalities of use, such as videophoning and mobile blogging, afford a range of different attitudes, postures, motilities and body-space relations. In its phenomenological focus, my approach to mobile media is framed by the premise that every human-technology relation is a body-technology relation, invoking certain kinds of being-in-the-world, and ways of knowing and making that world. In particular, I use the work of phenomenologists Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) and Don Ihde (1990, 1993), both theorists who consider embodiment to be under continuous modification by artifacts, tools and technologies. The cultural or post-phenomenology of Don Ihde most usefully resituates embodiment and materiality within socio-cultural contexts (e.g. to identify collective user-interaction habits and culturally specific body-technology relations). As Heidegger (1977) suggests, our being is always-already within domains of

equipment — so there is a direct and implicatory relation between the tools/technologies we use, the *contexts* in which we use them, and the way we ‘have’ a body.

Televisual and audiovisual technologies, and tele-technologies more generally, then, are not simply perceptual extensions of our sensorium, but tools which impact upon our body-image or corporeal schema, shifting the variable boundaries of embodiment, and altering our sense of having a body: they evoke altered ‘involvements’ of the soma. Indeed, all media combine sensory magnification with sensory diminishment – every medium is a means of sensory filtering. In my research I have focused on the spatial ontologies and corporeal schematics particular to our use of mobile phone media, exploring the mobile-body relation in terms of *somatic involvement*, a concept which recognises the medium-specificity of our corporeal schema in relation to technologies-in-use. To date, however, in considering the mobile phone as a screen medium, I’ve given limited attention to the aural aspects of mobile phones, their effects upon the urban soundscape, and the impact of audile telepresence on the ways of being embodied in contemporary culture. In this context, I what follows I outline some of the ways that attending to sound can provide critical insights into the relational ontology of bodies and mobile phones. Firstly, I suggest how attention to sound can effectively de-privilege the primacy of vision or oculo-centrism embedded in much analysis of our experience of contemporary media. In turn, this leads us to re-think the phenomenology of screen media and mobile small screen interfaces in particular. Secondly, I consider the resonant effects of mobile phones upon the urban soundscape, and the important differences between mobile phones and mp3 players in terms of what Michael Bull (2004) calls the auditory privatisation of public space. Finally, all of these factors come together to offer a more nuanced interpretation of audile telepresence.

Intersensoriality and the mobile screen

The window-on-the-world, a common metaphor used to describe screen technologies, is a trope emergent from linear perspective. In the space of linear perspective, that is, the observer looks at the world as if through a window or gridded frame. The tropological or metaphorical effect of linear perspectival vision and the ‘window-on-the-world’ can be characterised by the way visibility and light have come to stand for truth, belief and knowability. The corporeal effect here is clearly one which elevates visual perception and the eyes as those organs which can most accurately deliver the veracity of something. As Robert Romanyshyn argues, this put the hegemony of the eye firmly in place, such that “Alberti’s window, which begins as an artistic device, thus becomes a style of thought, a cultural perception, a way of imagining the world... The window as membrane becomes the boundary, the place where the world is

divided into exterior and interior domains” (Romanyshyn, 1989: 69). Romanyshyn insists, then, that the window of perspectival vision set up an ontological *boundary* and *distance* between the space of the observer and the space of the observed:

When the window of linear perspective vision has become the primary cultural metaphor, a habit of the mind, the world has become primarily a matter for the eye alone. It has become primarily a visible matter, well on the way toward becoming a bit of observable, measurable, analyzable data, readable as a computer print-out, for example, or perhaps as a blip on a radar screen. Indeed, so many of our technological instruments emphasise this feature of visibility — microscope, telescope, camera, television — we might venture to say that our sense of reality has nearly become identical with our ability to render something visible (Romanyshyn, 1989: 184).

The ocularcentric paradigm is most often referred to as the hegemony of vision (Levin, 1993), a phrase which points to both the marginalisation of the other senses, and the consequent insignificance of perceptual domains marked out by these subordinate senses. Thus, knowledge is described as illuminating or enlightening, and the process of coming-to-know becomes synonymous with using one’s eyes. The co-articulation of vision, light and knowledge is so embedded, in fact, that we often forget that it is not a universal perceptual reality, but a very powerful metaphor with particular perceptual biases.

Yet as many theorists have noted, although the presumed consonance between knowledge and vision may seem elemental and irrevocable, it is in fact historically and culturally specific, leading us to ask: “How might a conception based on another metaphor differ?” (Keller and Grontkowski, 1983: 221). Such a question is in itself revealing, suggesting the possibility of *variable* epistemologies and ontologies (or ways of knowing and being), and more significantly situating the very source of ‘the knowable’ — its realm of possibility — in the perceptual body. In their seminal paper *The Mind’s Eye*, Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Grontkowski end their critique of ocularcentrism by contemplating the possible consequences of alternative perceptual metaphors. An aural metaphor, they suggest, “could not have made the same claims to atemporality, and might well lend itself more readily to a process view of reality” (221). A tactile metaphor, on the other hand, could not support the disembodiment of ‘objective’ vision, and “at the very least would have necessitated a more mediate ontology” (221). Such ponderings imply that there is a plasticity to our perceptual soma, and might point to the possibility of collectively re-learning a non-visualist sensorial engagement with the world, perhaps a “tactile epistemology” or alternative configuration of the sensorium against the cultural importance given to vision (Marks, 2000: 203). That such a change to our

sensorium might occur seems unlikely, however, as cultural variations to sensory organisation have significant historical density behind them. As Laura Marks (2000) argues, a new configuration of the senses would be meaningless without the sensory and collective memory to accompany them.

As a number of theorists have claimed, however, the privileging of one sense (or sense-couplet, such as sight and sound) over other perceptual modalities is inherently flawed, as sense perception is always-already a whole-of-body experience. As Steven Connor notes, we do not experience the senses discretely; rather sensory perception involves “synaesthetic spillings and minglings” (Connor, 2004: 153). He writes:

The sense we make of any one sense is always mixed with and mediated by that of others. The senses form an indefinite series of integrations and transformations: they form a complexion... The senses communicate with each other in cooperations and conjugations that are complex, irregular, and multilateral (2004: 156).

And, of crucial importance in understanding the effect and cultural context of mediating technologies upon sense perception:

This complexion of the senses knits itself anew with each new configuration... [W]hat a culture offers is not just a static consortium of the senses, disposed like a molecular structure in a particular configuration, but rather a field of possibility, a repertoire of forms... Intersensoriality is the means by which this is enacted (Connor, 2004: 156).

Thus, in his early work “On Hearing Shapes, Surfaces and Interiors”, Ihde (1982) documents the intersensoriality involved in ‘hearing’ the various textures, shapes and angularity of objects, while sound proximity (such as that detected through reverberation and echo) has a kinaesthetic significance. He recounts how his young son was able to quite accurately ‘hear’ the six-sidedness and length of a ball-point pen rolling in a box, and most of us are familiar with the action of ‘knocking’ to ascertain density or hollowness. Both Connor (2004) and Jonathan Sterne (2006) have also commented on the way Thomas Edison used his teeth to ‘hear’ by biting on the wood of the gramophone to detect faint overtones: “Teeth seem to be involved in the transition from the touched sound of a prerecording era to the untouched sound of a postrecording era. This is because teeth represent an alternative route into the ear or even a way of short-circuiting the ear” (Connor, 2004: 168-169). Here, the perceptual body

‘conjugates’ the senses, and is rendered a membrane or filtering medium as opposed to an ocular apex or point of perspectival origin.

So, how does this intersensoriality lead us to think differently about our experience of screens, and small mobile screens in particular, in ways that skew the visual primacy usually afforded to the screen medium? It is often argued that we have a ‘frontal ontology’ with regard to screen; in most if not all cases the screen is a frame of limited dimensions within our own physical space, while the body’s attentive and frontal relationship with the apparatus varies between media depending on what Lev Manovich calls “viewing regimes” (2001: 96). In the case of cinema, for example, the viewer dedicatedly faces the screen to the exclusion of all diversions. Yet of course front-to-front orientations are not achieved by vision alone; in many situations, when facing a moving image we would expect that sound would also approach us from this direction, but the effect of surround or stereophonic sound is to embrace the body in such a way that the frontal relationship with the screen is at least partially compromised; indeed, immersion – the experience of being ‘in’ rather than ‘in front of’ an interface – is largely attributable to stereo sound.

The mobile media interface compromises this frontal orientation and visual primacy even further, as it enacts both separately and combined visual, haptic and acoustic incursions into our corporeal schema, and demands variable and oscillating modes of somatic involvement. The mobile phone is an object of corporeal intimacy that far exceeds our visual attachment to the screen. As Leopoldina Fortunati suggests, the mobile is both multiform and multifunctional, an “open work” requiring a complex range of hermeneutic visual, aural and haptic skills on the part of the user, and is also highly mutable because “it is held very close to the body or stays on the body surface”. Even when in ‘silent’ or ‘vibrate’ mode the mobile needs to be in particular visual, tactile and/or aural proximity, demanding small but constant cross-sensory accommodations and choreographies of the body. Amparo Lasen insightfully comments on how people will often hold and ‘handle’ their phones even when not in use:

The way mobile phones are held and touched is one of the aspects that make this relationship different to other ICT devices. The attachment to mobile phones is revealed by the transformation from being an object always at hand to being almost always in the hand and close to the body (Lasen, 2004).

In becoming an incorporative aspect of the hand, the mobile phone thus enters into an intimate and habitual relationship with a body-part that is in itself of some consequence as a communicative and world-shaping tool. Indeed, a notable aspect of the intersensorial

embodiment of mobile phones is the manner in which what is seen on the screen is tangibly and contingently dependent on the hand's movement and dexterity. In her work on the biomechanical relationship between the hand and mobile screen device, for example, Heidi Rae Cooley (2004) describes the tactile vision demanded by mobile screens as a "material and dynamic seeing" which is collaborative effect of the eyes, hands and device. Thus the mobile media screen radically skews the stationary and often dedicated relationship which is typical of our engagement with other media screens. Moreover, the 'eyes' and 'ears' of the mobile media device are constantly distracted by the surrounding clamour and moving objects on the street or sidewalk, by the latent, lateral but ever-ready possibilities of incoming messages, and by the mobility of one's own body in the complex negotiation of urban space. Mobile connectivity is thus rarely a 'dedicated' practice — it is always-already surrounded by other objects, activities and sounds within the spatial topography and dynamics of the built environment. In what follows I will consider how the mobile phone has become itself an aspect of the urban soundscape, and the particular modality of audile telepresence it affords.

Mobile soundscapes and nomadic telepresence

In *The Tuning of the World* (1977) Murray Schafer examined the cultural specificity of contemporary sound and its effect on our collective behaviour; he used the term soundscape "to describe the total experienced acoustic environment. This included all noises, musical, natural and technological" (cited in Bull, 2004: 189). As Michael Bull convincingly argues in *Sound Moves* (2007), portable sound-based technologies such as the Walkman, mobile phone, iPod and mp3 player have contributed (along with the automobile) to the transformation of the urban soundscape by way of an "auditory privatisation of public space". That is, such devices allow the user to control sound – "to manage and orchestrate their spaces of habitation". Bull writes:

Technology has empowered the ears – it has turned the ears from the most democratic of the senses... to the most exclusive. This empowerment is embodied in earphones, which supplant the uncontrollable and chaotic noise of the street with the chosen sounds of the individual consumer. The price of technologically mediated empowerment is privatisation (Bull, 2007: 21).

Yet though it can be argued that handheld and attachable technologies such as mobile phones and mp3 players have both effected a kind of privatisation and transformation of the acoustic environment, their sensory and communicative impact diverges considerably. For while the iPod or mp3 player provides a continuous sound-bubble or "sonorous envelope" that

effectively allows the user to deny the contingencies of the outside world (Bull, 2004: 185, 189), the mobile phone is experientially discontinuous, “puncturing” time and space via the sporadic and unpredictable contingency of unexpected calls and text messages. The mobile music player is thus discrete and cocooned, whereas the mobile phone user “colonises” urban space, intermittently carving out a space of communication and telepresent intimacy, temporarily interrupting their immediate soundscape with personal ringtones, bleeps and one-sided conversations. This colonisation often requires a complex negotiation of public and private physical and auditory space; our pedestrian trajectories can be quite radically revised and re-possibilised by the interruption of a mobile phone call or text message, by the beep of one’s PDA warning of an impending meeting or deadline, or by those telepresent on the other end of the phone becoming ‘virtually’ integrated into or effecting a change to one’s route (“can you pick up some milk on your way?”). Nigel Helyer (2007) makes the interesting distinction between “intrusive” and “implosive” audio, the former describing (for example) the invasive sound of a beat-box, and the latter describing the “micro-acoustic-ecologies” of the mp3 player and the mobile phone. Yet it is perhaps more accurate to consider the mobile phone as both intrusive (ringtones, conversations) and implosive (when using a headset), and also more than this (text messaging while on ‘silent’ is neither aurally intrusive or implosive).

Nevertheless, it is the case that both music players and mobile phones are transforming (and continue to transform) our co-proximate or co-present behaviour in public places, and the way we inhabit and negotiate urban spaces. Indeed, Bull insightfully observes that in mobile privatization there is a desire for proximity, for “mediated presence that shrinks space into something manageable and habitable”(Bull, 2004: 177). The mobile phone in particular offers us the possibility of proximity with familiar others while on-the-move, and frequently this is via an aural communicative telepresence (though this is complexified by video-phoning, image/text messaging, and increasingly, the proliferation of web-based made-for-mobile applications). In what follows I will consider some of the properties of telepresence, and how the particular conditions of audile telepresence might provide a more complete yet nuanced understanding of this much-used term.

There is no doubt that digital media and communication technologies have irretrievably altered our normalised sense of embodied ‘location’ and ‘presence.’ In 21st century teleculture it is no longer possible to consider space in terms of the dichotomised categories of here/there, near/far, personal/private, inner/outer or even nowhere/everywhere, dialectics which dominated our understanding at the beginning of the 20th century. Technological developments ranging from the telephone through to television, cinema, video games and web-based social networking systems have created quasi-spaces where a sense of presence

can be felt beyond the location of the physical body. As numerous theorists and philosophers have suggested over the past decade or so, our increasing remote interaction with the world — the possibility of extended intervals of telepresence or telematic perception — indicates a need to rearticulate our collective embodiments, to think through other ontologies, other ways of being-in-the-world, and in a Heideggerian (1977) sense, of being-with-equipment. Although telepresence has often been described as a state of quasi-disembodiment — we're often all 'hands, ears and eyes' — in a phenomenological sense it is nevertheless still a way of having a body. In general, the body-telemedia relation modifies spatial and sensory perception, by changing what is 'proximal', or the relation between 'here' and 'there', into a kind of 'distant presence' that becomes part of the 'as if' structure of our awareness (*pace* Heidegger).

As noted above, the phenomenological body literally apprehends and appropriates technologies-in-use into an adaptive corporeal schema, and we could argue that it is precisely our capacity for ontic dispersion beyond the physical limits of the body that leaves us open to the embodied or perceptual distraction of telepresencing media interfaces. The term *distraction* – originating from *distrahere*, or to pull in different directions – aptly describes how our attention becomes divided when we speak on the phone. It suggests that the locus of our perception is distributed between the 'here' and 'there,' such that we can *know* different times and spaces simultaneously, an effect which shifts the boundaries of what 'immediacy' is, and how it is defined and experienced. Indeed, if the condition of embodiment is *defined* in terms of the immediacy and locatedness of sensory experience, then such tele-media mutate “any simple unity of body and sensation towards its capacity to gather up several locations at once” (Waldby, 1998). Thus we experience at the very least a tripled or para-ontology, residing *in* our tangible locales (lounges, bedrooms, kitchens, chairs, cars), *in* the space of the other, and somewhere *in-between* (the non-space where in Margaret Morse's (1998) terms people talking on the telephone 'meet').

Despite the close relation between the telephone and the experience of telepresence – Morse (1998) suggested over a decade ago that talking on the telephone described the archetypal moment of telepresence – the latter has more commonly been described by way of metaphors of vision and seeing. In his analysis of the telepresent landscape, for example, Campanella (2000) suggests: “[t]elepresence is reciprocal, involving both the observer and the observed. In other words, the observer is telepresent in the remote environment, and the observed environment is telepresent in the physical space in which the observer is viewing the scene” (27). Yet telepresence can be used to explain the adaptive and reciprocal interaction with any media where we experience visual, aural, and/or multi-sensory presence at a place where we

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are not physically located, when we *extend* our senses *into* a remote location, and simultaneously seize the remote location into our own immediacy. Nevertheless, this very general understanding of telepresence needs further distinction – televisual telepresence is not perceptually or spatially the same as audile telepresence, and neither is the immersive telepresence of video games analogous to communicative telepresence.

As Connor notes, the distinctive feature of auditory experience is its capacity to “disintegrate and reconfigure space” (2004a: 58). In their study of listening, corporeality and presence in real and artificial environments, Turner et al (2007) also comment on the unique qualities of auditory space. Unlike pictorial or televisual space, they argue, auditory space is not “boxed-in” or framed as a window-on-the-world; instead, it is fluid and dynamic, and filtered rather than contained or ‘stopped’ by material obstacles such as walls and corners. Thus it is not enclosed or ‘held’ in place, but creates “its own dimensions moment by moment” (Carpenter cited in Turner et al, 2007). It is this elasticity and pervasiveness ascribable to sound, that in turn educed a particular way of experiencing the audile telepresence and sense perception of landline telephony. As it came into common usage, the early landline telephone, Connor argues, allowed our interior body – the inner ear – to be pervaded “*almost without mediation*” by the “vocal body of the other” (Connor, 2004a: 56, italics mine). Thus with telephonic telepresence we were afforded the impression of being corporeally tethered to another’s body in real time, and thus paradoxically co-present at-a-distance. Connor writes:

The telephone uses the principle of electromagnetic induction to translate sound vibrations into fluctuations of electrical charge, which are then translated back into movement at the other end. It is the capacity of electrical impulses to be transmitted at long distances without significant degradation by and into noise that accounts for the illusion of bodily presence, the sense that the voice that arrived at the other end of the line had not been transported so much as stretched out (Connor, 2004: 159).

As Andrea Hammer comments, early in the development of landline telephony it was thought that the device could act as an instrument of medical diagnosis, somewhat like a stethoscope stretched along a very long wire (Hammer, 2007).

Yet although the fixed landline telephone was one of our earliest experiences of what Helyer (2007) calls “schizophonic” audio, allowing us as it were to hear non-present voices, it was still the case that each correspondent was fixed in a particular geo-spatial location – so “the telephonic act became a sonic bridge between familiar sites” (Helyer, 2007). With the mobile phone, because the location of the caller is often unknown, shifting, or unpredictable,

communication becomes “de-territorialised”. That is, the particular consequence of the mobile phone upon aural telepresence was an unfixing from place – effecting the emergence of a kind of *nomadic telepresence* (Helyer, 2007) that is only partially overcome by asking that most common of questions in mobile communication – “Where are you?” Paradoxically, or perhaps in spite of, this unhinging of the one’s geo-spatial location, the itinerant attributes of mobile phone conversation often results in a sense of discomfiture or ill fit between the conversation-context and the very public spaces (buses, trains, sidewalks, etc.) wherein we find ourselves ‘on the mobile’. Sadie Plant contends:

Certain conversations can induce emotional and bodily responses which may be quite incompatible with [mobile users’] perceptions of their physical location. Their participants often look as though they don’t quite know what to do with themselves, how to reconfigure the tones of voice and postures which would normally accompany such conversations. The mobile requires its users to manage the intersection of the real present and the conversational present in a manner that is mindful of both (Plant, 2003: 50).

This awkwardness is perhaps a result of engaging in telepresent communication in public places, of having to negotiate between ‘presents’ (that is, both telepresence and co-presence), because mobile phone communication when one is on-the-move and on-the-street is rarely immersive and private, but demands an awareness of both others and one’s immediate surroundings. Thus, mobile media require us to adeptly shift between actual and telepresent space and to ‘behave’ in ways that accord with (or deviate from) conventional modes of being-on-the-phone. Plant (2003) developed a typology of mobile phone behaviours, including the sometimes tricky footwork involved in stopping or diverting one’s pedestrian trajectory, and the ‘space-making’ practices of bowing the head, or shielding one’s mouth or face with the hand to mark out a temporarily private aural space. The body thus undergoes aural and spatial disciplining required by the device, the collective mobile-user habits of a culture, and the demands of telepresent communication in public places. What has emerged over the last decade, then, is a dynamic corporeal schematics of mobile phone use, and an ongoing and adaptive management of aural telepresence in the urban soundscape.

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As I have suggested throughout this paper, the ‘sensing’ of mobile phone communication elicits an intimately audio, visual, sometimes haptic, ‘handy’ and visceral awareness, a mode of embodiment which demands the ontological coincidence of distance and closeness, and presence and telepresence. In particular, I aimed to disassemble the visual primacy often

afforded to screen interfaces, and to consequently re-think the phenomenology of the mobile screen. I have argued that by considering the intersensorial condition of our being-in-the-world, discerning the sensory ‘complexion’ of mobile phone use, and specifically attending to the corporealisation of sound and aural perception in the context of mobile media, we are equipped with a more ‘full-bodied’ and extensive interpretation of the embodiment-telepresence relation in contemporary urban spaces.

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