



Narrative as Genealogy: *Sound Sense in an Era of Hypertext*

by Larry Wendt

In the late nineteen sixties, a group of Swedish artists working as 'The Language Group' of a recently re-organized chamber music society, known as Fylkingen along with members from the Literary Unit of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation, began producing a new kind of literary work for the tape recorder. It was a form of language art realized solely for the audio domain -- either projected from a loudspeaker, from the radio or in some similar sonic performance venue. In the early nineteen sixties, Fylkingen began to introduce Sweden to all kinds of artistic experimentation contemporary to the times such as concrete poetry, FLUXUS, electro-acoustic music, what eventually became known as performance art, and ways of working which were called 'borderline transgressors' since they were not easily categorized as being in any one particular field of art. After returning from a meeting of contemporary radio producers in Holland in 1967, two members of the Fylkingen group, Bengt Emil Johnson and Lars-Gunnar Bodin, coined a term to both separate what they were doing from some of the similar material which they had been hearing, as well as to give their material a descriptive flourish and cohesive identity. Their term was *text-ljudkomposition*, or *text-sound composition*

In 1968, Fylkingen organized a three-day event which they called the *International Festival of Text-Sound Composition*. François Dufrane and Bernard Heidsieck from France and Bob Cobbing from England were invited to come to Stockholm to use the recording and electronic music facilities along with the Swedish practitioners, to produce new pieces, as well as to perform and discuss their works. These individuals had been using the tape recorder, since the fifties, to produce works for the spoken voice. The Text-Sound Festival was expanded and held for at least a dozen more times in various places in the world. However by 1975, it had changed its name to the *International Festival of Sound Poetry*, with the term sound poetry being much more widely known and to include an acoustic, 'unplugged' version of the art.

In its originally conceived form, what was unique about text-sound composition besides it being a type of electro-acoustic literature conceived to be presented in a sonic environment, was that it could allow a writer or poet to explore an expressive space which was quite a bit different than the printed word on the page. By replacing paper with magnetic tape, a whole inventory of manipulatory techniques became known that before could only be achieved (if at all) on a very rudimentary level with previous technologies. With the flexibility of tape, vocal sounds and effects could be produced which were unique and largely unheard of before this time.

Besides temporal and sequenced-based distortion effects, tape allowed the individual speaker to have a dialogue with multiple copies of their own voice. A unique timbre which does not exist between different individuals in a group could be explored among several simultaneous narrative flows. Dialogs between the flows ranging from one layer accenting or underscoring the effects of another, to a 'call and response' kind of structure, on up to a fully responsive, conversation between the layers, could be produced. Such layers or narrative flows could also be presented as continuous or discontinuous derivatives of the flows adjacent to them. The parsing out and recognition of a specific, single narrative line could be arbitrary, though its perception as a sub-entity within the piece could be enhanced if there were something unique or 'strange' exhibited in terms of its acoustical characteristics.

The availability of recording technology, like any other technology, changed the way in which information was transmitted and received and in the process changed information itself. Each technological 'innovation' in communication beginning with writing, can be depicted by a finite number of dimensional representations which are modulated into the degree of expressivity which the new media has. These can be conceived of as a whole in the form of topological manifold of possibilities. Generally, a specific venue will only partially articulate the several directions of freedom that a new manifold of expressivity can represent. A presentation venue can therefore be seen as a kind of plane which cuts through this manifold of expressivity, and the untouched dimensions can only be implied or imagined.

The first impulse towards the use of a new media, is to present 'old wine in new bottles' -- the forms and models for its manifestation are just copied from the previous media's art. In the case of recording technology, it allowed the voice of a poet or a writer to be distributed over the airwaves or through the sales of recordings, with the same kind of gestures that are used in private and public poetry readings and book sales. Considering that the promotion and wide scale acceptance of any new innovation in media is largely controlled by economic/political concerns, only a partition (the size of which is dependent upon the stability of the supporting economic/political system) is available for experimental or progressive work, since the rest is required to support the system that created it. Often, a gap has to be pried open and maintained for any new form of expression to survive. This partition is generally marginalized and ghettoized, so that only those elements which support the overall stability of the system are co-opted from it.

By existing on the borderlines and within that compartmentalized space grudgingly allocated to it, text-sound composition is outside of the 'accepted' forms of communications. Its isolation reminds us of other experiments both present and past and harks back to the discarded form of what we imagine to be as preliterate, oral traditional poetry. If one could compress the simultaneous narrative flows of a text-sound piece and represent it as a semantic and serial voice, a singular kind of articulatory line would result -- one which would traverse an area of description in one direction and eventually snap back to its originating point of declaration and then begin another digression, to repeat the process until exhaustion. It is the kind of narrative reminiscent of someone attempting to recount some event that they barely remember -- they will go over pieces of the event several times, focusing on some different aspect with each reiteration.

As one peels back the onion skin abstractions of media technology, voice as sound is revealed as the forgotten memory of a culture steeped in vision. If recollection is too vague (which it is fated to be), the snap-backs and digressions are only partially implied, then the line-of-sight connective tissue between logical movement deteriorates. A fragmentary and 'noisy' structure is strung together in an arbitrary serial fashion -- a genetic code gone nuts, composed of repetitive and episodic anecdotes, where a particular sign might be reversed, exchanged, or confused with another. We are forever lost

in a maze of signs which erases our remembrance of the actual event.

This is a characteristic we often observe in the recounting of a myth. There is no linear beginning, middle, and end. Rather the story exists at the interface between the receding, imagined past and an ever-changing, incomprehensible present -- its historicity can now only exist as the mirror of the present. It is a form of narrative which hypertext is attempting to inherit as it replaces print culture-- a rhizomic structure in which linear hierarchy implodes upon itself to become the point from which all logical movement is directed by frenzied spurts that constantly disassembles and reassembles partial and random inventories. It is narrative as genealogy.



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Last Modified 20 March 2002