RadioDoc Review

Volume 8 • Issue 1 • 2023

2023-07-20

Body genres, embodiment and engagement: Second Person in Audio Storytelling

Riccardo Giacconi, Tufts University , None

Abstract

In the article, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” (1991), Linda Williams defines as body genres the film genres that are based on stimulating certain physical reactions in the bodies of spectators. These are fear (horror), sexual arousal (pornography), and tears (melodrama). All three genres share, “an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated,” by them. The bodies of whoever watches these films are involved in an “involuntary mimicry” of the body on the screen. During a talk at the 2016 Third Coast Conference, radio producer Eleanor McDowall inquired about the equivalent of body genres in audio storytelling (radio, podcast, and other forms of audio narratives). What are those sound works that engage the bodies of their listeners, not by merely talking about bodily reactions, but by actually provoking them?

Keywords

audio, radio, podcast, sound, storytelling, protagonist, second person, embodiment

Recommended Citation

Giacconi, R., (2023) “Body genres, embodiment and engagement: Second Person in Audio Storytelling”, *RadioDoc Review* 8(1).

Body genres, embodiment and engagement: Second Person in Audio Storytelling

Riccardo Giacconi

In the article, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” (1991), Linda Williams defines as *body genres* the film genres that are based on stimulating certain physical reactions in the bodies of spectators. These are fear (horror), sexual arousal (pornography), and tears (melodrama). All three genres share, “an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated,” by them. The bodies of whoever watches these films are involved in an “involuntary mimicry” of the body on the screen.[1]

During a talk at the 2016 Third Coast Conference, radio producer Eleanor McDowall inquired about the equivalent of *body genres* in audio storytelling (radio, podcast, and other forms of audio narratives). What are those sound works that engage the bodies of their listeners, not by merely talking about bodily reactions, but by actually *provoking* them?

Alongside the trio of reactions to *body genres* mentioned above by Linda Williams, one could add the urge to dance, which inspired McDowall said she was inspired by when she to produce,

A Dancer Dies Twice, her audio documentary about the relationship between dance and aging, “between identity and physicality,”about the “separation of your internal self and its representation outside.” The documentary includes a long sequence in which the voices of various dancers are edited into the beats of fast-paced music, which abruptly ends with the sound of a rip, when one of the protagonists talks about twisting her knee ligaments during a performance. “I wanted the experience of listening to this to be something that feels very physical,” explained McDowall.[2]

---

1 Williams, 1991: 5; 4.

2 https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/under-the-skin-making-audio-visceral.

A journey through audio pieces that act on one's body while overcoming the, "coded articulations of language," might start from the relationship between audio storytelling and choreography.[3] Among the examples mentioned by McDowall is *Everyday Moments,* an audio piece by choreographer Hofesh Shechter created in 2011 for *the Guardian* podcast series. Directly addressing listeners, Shechter's voice describes very precisely a sequence of bodily feelings, connected to the movements we are invited to perform – or imagine:

Think about your body. Don't think about me. Think about your body. Feel your body being very very light, being empty. Like an empty plastic bag. It starts moving, because it's so light and empty. Every little movement of air in the room affects your body because it's so light and empty, like an empty plastic bag. It's rattling, it starts to move around, it floats.[4]

Choreographer Paola Bianchi employs a similar approach in *NoBody*, her 2015 "project of verbal dance." In this case, however, the listening subject is invited to take the audience's position.[5] Bianchi's voice describes meticulously every movement performed by a female body on stage, including costumes, props, and stage lighting:

The figure stops in front of us. Their heels are close, their toes are slightly outwards. They look at us. Their right arm opens laterally, following a low diagonal, showing the palm of their hand. Their right hand shows the number three with their closed fist, stretching their thumb, index finger, and middle finger. Their neck is tense, as are their shoulders and chest. They start to come forward towards the proscenium, walking on tiptoe. It is as if they were walking on a rope hanging in the air.[6]

Bianchi defines this audio piece as a "bodiless choreography in search of listening bodies."[7] The dance solo takes place only in the listener's imagination, concretely evoked through the rhythm and descriptive precision of a voice. As the narration progresses, 'your' position in the audience is increasingly called upon, and the choreography starts to explore the relationship between a moving

---

3 Williams, 1991: 4.

4 https://www.theguardian.com/culture/audio/2011/may/20/everyday-moments-podcast-audio-drama.

5 For more information on this project see Giulia Morucchio, interview with Paola Bianchi: http://paolabianchi-en.blogspot.com/2013/05/nobody.html.

6 https://vimeo.com/115575751.

7 http://paolabianchi-it.blogspot.com/p/elp.html.

body and an observing body (as in the famous introduction to Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, which outlines a degree zero of the act of theatre).[8]

Ghost tapes

Moving beyond the field of audio storytelling, one can mention at least four listening experiences based on physical reactions comparable to *body genres*. On the one hand are ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) sounds, which produce a feeling of relaxation, at times accompanied by tickling sensations on the scalp, the neck, and the spine. These experiences are extensively conveyed and analysed in Laura Nagy's *Pillow Talk* documentary series, which won the 2022 Rose D'Or award in the Audio Entertainment category.

On the other hand is a sound device called "Mosquito" that, according to the company producing it, "works by exploiting a medical condition called presbycusis," based on the fact that, as we age, "our ability to hear higher frequency sounds is reduced."[9] The Mosquito emits a tone that ranges from 16 to 18.5 kilohertz, which is extremely annoying for adolescents, but generally imperceptible by adults. This device is marketed to prevent loitering by adolescents in public spaces. Spanish artist Santiago Sierra used a similar sound in his installation *Los Adultos* (2007), where visitors behaved, "depending on what they could or couldn't hear".

One could also mention, "Havana syndrome," a set of unexplained symptoms experienced by US personnel and diplomats stationed worldwide. Initially reported in 2016 by U.S. and Canadian embassy staff in Havana, Cuba, it has since been reported in other locations as well. The syndrome is associated with various hearing-related issues. Many individuals affected by it have reported hearing strange noises or experiencing auditory sensations, such as a high-pitched sound or a pressure-like sensation in the ears. These symptoms are often described as being localized and directional, leading to speculation that they might be linked to some form of targeted energy exposure. The cause of

8 "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." Brook, 1968: 4. Brook, 1968.

9 https://mosquitoloiteringsolutions.com.

Havana syndrome has been a subject of debate and investigation. A 2023 report by US intelligence agencies deemed it “very unlikely” that the syndrome was caused by a foreign adversary's weapon, but it acknowledged the real experiences and symptoms reported by the affected individuals. The exact nature of these auditory effects remains unclear and is still under investigation.[10]

A fourth, more narrative example regards one of the very reactions mentioned by Williams: fear. It is a psychological warfare technique called ‘Operation Wandering Soul’[11] used from 1969 to 1970 by the US army in Vietnam. It consists of a series of audio recordings conceived to exploit the Vietnamese belief that bodies not buried in their homeland are bound to turn into spirits and wander aimlessly for eternity. By using the voices of allied soldiers alongside sound effects, the Americans created a sort of horror radio play, in which the ghosts of Viet Cong who had died in the battle spoke again. These ‘ghost tapes’ were then broadcast at high volume in the middle of the night, often using speakers mounted on helicopters flying over enemy territory. The intention was that the North Vietnamese soldiers, in fear, would abandon arms. In some cases, the Viet Cong realised the trick and started shooting at the helicopters. In other cases, however, the tapes terrified allied troops and civilians as well.

Existential Overlap

Over precisely the same years, Bruce Nauman created *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968), an artwork that only exists as sound. It is a recorded audio track in which the artist incessantly repeats the title sentence, only varying intonation and timbre. The piece is usually installed in an empty room and seems to be addressing the entering audience directly, ordering them to leave. Through stereophony, Nauman’s voice oscillates from one side to the other of the exhibition room, making the body of whoever experiences it inescapably engaged in it.

10 https://www.vox.com/unexplainable/23629073/havana-syndrome-neurologist-functional-neurological-disorder

11 For more information, listen to the episode ‘Ghost Tape Number Ten” (2016) from the podcast *Here Be Monsters*: https://www.hbmpodcast.com/podcast/hbm055-ghost-tape-number-ten.

Janet Cardiff's *audio walks* (produced since 1991, often in collaboration with George Bures Miller) are a series of pieces conceived to be listened to with headphones, in specific places. Sounds and voices lead the listeners on a walk, providing indications about the path to be followed, while weaving a narrative line that interacts with visual, tactile and olfactory stimuli, as perceived by the walking bodies. In *Villa Medici Walk* (1998), for instance, the track is designed to be experienced during a walk through Rome, leading from a grove of orange trees to an underground cellar full of the heads and arms of broken statues:

> I want you to walk with me. I need to show you something. Try to walk with the sound of my footsteps so that we can stay together. Go through the doorway in the wall to the right, past the iron gate, then go to the left.
>
> [sound of car]
>
> It's a great view of the Villa, the gardens, the statues of the defeated Barbarians. The fountains.
> [sound of water starts. sound changes to fire crackling, bombs, helicopter]
>
> Experiment no 1. Cut 100 snowflakes out of paper. Go to the top of the tower and throw them off, one at a time. […] Let's walk again. Go towards the stone steps.12

Whereas in Nauman's piece a body is addressed within a closed space, Cardiff's audio walks invite you to move, to be engaged in an exploratory way. By using binaural recording techniques (i.e. conceived to reproduce, through headphones, an immersive 3D acoustic perception), the Canadian artist evokes an immersive environment that is parallel to and communicating with the real one.

Both *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room,* and *Villa Medici Walk* use the second person singular, directly addressing the listening subject. Narratologist Monika Fludernik defines second-person narration as a "narrative whose (main) protagonist is referred to by means of an address pronoun (usually *you*)."[13] In literature, the narrating *you* can thus produce an "existential overlap," since it can refer to the protagonist of the story, to a narratee, or to the actual reader. A fluidity of roles ensues, through which, according to Fludernik, "the current reader finds herself addressed but cannot immediately delimit the reference to one specific narrative level." However, this "initial distancing effect – 'Is this me,

12 https://cardiffmiller.com/walks/villa-medici-walk/.

13 Fludernik, 1994: 288.

the reader? Or is this a character?' – can develop into an increased empathy effect," letting us "step into the you protagonist's mind."[14]

Second-person narration is quite unusual in real life: there are only a few occasions when someone recounts someone else's past experiences to them. Fludernik mentions two cases: "eliciting an amnesiac's recollection of their past self" and "the 'courthouse you' – the rendering of the defendant's (or witness's) actions and thoughts in the reconstructive narration addressed to the defendant/witness in the witness box with the aim of eliciting a confession."[15]

Hypnotic Show

Rarely used in audio storytelling (except for self-help and meditation guides, or tracks for foreign language training), the narrating *you* may bring to mind the verbal techniques of hypnotic induction, especially when using the present tense. The connection between radio and suggestion is longstanding: many early radio plays questioned the role and position of listeners, who would be brought to believe, for example, that they were capturing a radio signal coming from a ship in the middle of the sea (*Maremoto*, 1924), telephone interference (*Sorry, Wrong Number*, 1943), or that they were witnessing an extraordinary change of programme (*The War of the Worlds*, 1938).

In its early days, radio was often considered an hypnotic device. Rodolfo Sacchettini defines the Italian radio program *I 4 moschettieri* (1934-1937) as a, "veritable mass phenomenon, on the verge between magic and hypnosis." Hitler's voice, on the radio, was also often defined as hypnotic.[16] In 1964 Marshall McLuhan, after listing radio among the "hot media" (that is, the ones that concentrate on one sensory channel and involve little user participation) stated that "the intensification of one sense by a new medium can hypnotize an entire community."[17] Moreover, a hypnotic suggestion technique (RHIC – Radio

14 Fludernik, 1993: 223; 229; 227; 226-227.

15 Fludernik, 1994: 290; 1993: 236.

16 Sacchettini, 2018: 12-13; Turner, 2013.

17 McLuhan, 1964.

Hypnotic Intracerebral Control) was allegedly developed by the CIA in the 1960s, one that could be triggered at will by radio broadcasting.[18]

A different form of distance hypnosis was devised by US psychologist Lloyd Glauberman, who, by means of music tapes, CDs and mp3s, used his voice in an attempt to influence the listener's body and mind. Among the various hypnosis and meditation techniques based on audio recordings, his had a particular feature called HPP (Hypno-Peripheral Processing). Designed to be experienced through headphones, a voice tells two parallel stories at the same time, one in each ear. At first it is confusing, as the mind struggles to follow both channels. And yet, according to Glauberman, the goal is precisely to induce one's conscience to let go, for it to access a state in which it will seize upon a sort of secret message concealed between the two parallel audio tracks (just like in autostereograms, those seemingly abstract images which, when crossing the eyes in a certain way, lead the observer to perceive a 3D shape).[19]

The link between art and hypnosis has been widely explored by Marcos Lutyens – artist, hypnotist and second-person narrator. One of his most famous art projects only exists in the mind of the audience. It is called *Hypnotic Show* and is led in collaboration with curator Raimundas Malašauskas. It includes a series of exhibitions – of continuously changing scale and nature, featuring works by several artists – that exist only in the mind of the audience by means of hypnosis sessions.[20] The most famous chapter of the project took place at Kassel Documenta in the summer of 2012, when Lutyens led 340 such sessions.[21] Malašauskas defined *Hypnotic Show* as a, "temporary social structure of engaging into creative cognitive acts through shared practices of art and hypnosis."[22]

Another Lutyens project is the *Inductive Audio Museum*, a set of sound works to be experienced with headphones, "inviting the visitor's mind to expand beyond its normal boundaries […] the artwork is formed in the mind rather than

---

18 Guyatt, 2005: 41-57.

19 Please refer to "Mixtape: Help?" (2021), from the podcast *Radiolab*, accessible at the link: https://radiolab.org/episodes/mixtape-help, last access January 30, 2023.

20 A documentation of the project can be found in: Lutyens, 2015.

21 See Lutyens, 2015.

22 See the link to Luytens' one night session "Hypnotic Show" at Kadist Foundation in Paris: https://kadist.org/program/hypnotic-show-2/, last accessed February 18, 2023.

physically, in the gallery space."[23] Lutyens's audio inductions directly address the bodies of listener-visitors, evoking quite detailed sensory experiences:

Whenever you are ready now we are going to slowly begin the journey upwards and as we begin to ascend I'd like your body to begin to feel heavier and heavier, just allowing yourself to sink more and more and deeper and deeper into this very comfortable and almost completely familiar armchair. […] I'd like you now to pay attention to your hands as they are resting there, so heavy and so relaxed and as you focus all your attention now on your hands, and just how incredibly heavy they are.[24]

Embodiment

As opposed to the escapist inclination of formats such as self-help tapes or guided meditation, some recent sound pieces leverage second-person narration to give shape to social as well as political commentary, directly acting on the listening body and stimulating the *body genre*'s catalogue of reactions.

Another example is *Journey*, an audio work produced in 2016 by Jungala Radio, a community radio of the Calais refugee camp. Jamil (not his real name) talks about losing his parents in an attack, fleeing Afghanistan with his family and seeing one of his daughters die during the sea-crossing. The account is told with extreme simplicity, but instead of a narrating *I*, Jamil uses *you*. *Journey* reveals the full potential of second-person storytelling, setting 'you' at the centre of an excruciating experience, and asking, at the start:

> Imagine you were in my shoes. How would you feel? You are 29 years old with a wife, two children and a job. You have enough money and can afford a few nice things. You live in a small house in the city. Suddenly the political situation in your country changes and a few months later soldiers are gathered in front of your house and in front of your neighbour's house. They say that if you don't fight for them, they will shoot you. Your neighbour refuses. One shot, that's it.[25]

---

23 For more information about these works see: https://www.lutyens.com/audioinduction.html, last accessed February 18, 2023.

24 See: https://www.lutyens.com/audioinduction.html.

25 https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/journey, last accessed February 18, 2023.

Another format that directly addresses its audience using the second person singular is the gamebook, also known as a choose your own adventure book, which invites the reader to make choices between different narrative paths, thus influencing the development of the plot. The narrating *you* places the reader in the position of the protagonist, at the heart of action. Writer Carmen Maria Machado, in her memoir *In the Dream House,* traces back her experience of an abusive domestic relationship, and in doing so resorts to a number of literary genres. One of the chapters takes the form of a gamebook, and in 2020 it was included in an episode of the celebrated US radio programme *This American Life*. This radio adaptation is entitled *You Can't Go Your Own Way* and removes the interactive dynamics of the choice between different plots. The second-person narration positions the listening subject in the centre of a situation of domestic abuse, before a series of options over which, however, they have no control:

> Page 1, you wake up, and the air is milky and bright. The room glows with a kind of effervescent contentment, despite the boxes, and clothes, and dishes. You think to yourself, this is the kind of morning you could get used to. When you turn over, she is staring at you. The luminous innocence of the light curdles in your stomach. You don't remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly. "You were moving all night", she says. "Your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake". If you apologize profusely, go to page 2. If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep, go to page 3. If you tell her to calm down, go to page 5.[26]

Monika Fludernik observes that second-person fiction has the, "subversive potential for creating an unsettling effect – that of involving the actual reader of fiction, not only in the tale, but additionally in the world of fiction itself." This effect, Fludernik adds, "can be put to very strategic political use [...] increasing potential empathy values," and forcing (external) readers to an inner awareness of the situation, a point of view they would not have otherwise.[27] *Journey* and *You Can't Go Your Own Way* show that this "subversive potential" can also be detected in non-fiction sound pieces.

Second-person narration is also used in the Prix Italia-winning feature *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* by Jens Jarisch. The documentary portrays Sodom

26 https://www.thisamericanlife.org/703/stuck/act-two-10.

27 Fludernik, 1994: 232-233.

and Gomorrah, a location in Accra, Ghana, where children struggle to sustain themselves amidst a heap of computers discarded by the Western world. The toxic substances contained in the waste gradually poison them, while they dream of escaping to Europe, retracing the path opposite to that of the computers whose parts they sell.

> You only moved around by day and keeping close to as many people as possible. And yet you were often raped. Then you moved into one of those two-story wooden shacks in Sodom and Gomorrah, a children's hotel. [...]
>
> Today a reporter asked about you. He's waiting outside your children's hotel at the entrance to Sodom and Gomorrah. Just there, a teenage boy is being accused by some men of stealing. And as you pass, the men are beating the boy, urged on by a noisy crowd until he is dead. You turn away and walk across the road. You sit beside the reporter on the curb. You exchange a long, silent look. The reporter's look is shattered; yours is only sad.
>
> You both lack the words for the boy's murder.

Alan Hall, reviewing *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, observes that, "the shifting blend of second and third person narration – speaking on behalf of and then directly to the authentic voices we hear – and further sophisticated production devices (the echo voice, dynamic recording perspectives and jump cuts) are intended to enhance the telling of the tale, pulling us into its world. But they just as readily have the effect of distracting us from it, pushing us away."[28]

At the end of her essay on moving-image *body genres*, Linda Williams states that "we may be wrong in our assumption that the bodies of spectators simply reproduce the sensations exhibited by bodies on the screen". The process is significantly more complex, and "identification is neither fixed nor entirely passive".[29]

One last example of how the 'audio second person' can attain political significance is the autobiographical work *How to Remember* by Axel Kacoutié, made for the programme *Short Cuts* on BBC Radio 4 and awarded Best Documentary at the 2020 edition of the prestigious Third Coast International

---

28 Hall, 2014. See also Madsen, 2014.

29 Williams, 1991: 12; 8.

Audio Festival.[30] Kacoutié describes it as “an attempt to reconcile and accept [...] all the parts of me that I’ve either wrongly internalised or intuitively known to be true.”

> You don’t know what it means to be Black because you don’t know what it means to be one thing. Who is when you know you are a brother and a son, a lover and a friend. Sometimes you say you’re Ivorian. And other times you say, “Je suis Ivoirien,” which means you feel more French than British, until you go to France where your French isn’t French enough. When you come back, you feel more British than Ivorian, until you’re offered tea. Or learn something about this country that puts you on the outside again.

Second-person storytelling is used here as a sort of cathartic method, tracing back the conflict between “the historical, racial, familial and personal elements” that informed the identity of the narrator/narratee.[31] The use of sound design and archival material helps give concreteness and spatiality to past experiences, evoking places, emotions, and sensations, as well as inviting the listeners to dive into – to embody – the story.

This exploration has illustrated the diverse ways in which audio storytelling and second-person narration can elicit physical and emotional responses, aiming to address the question: 'Do body genres exist in audio?' Potential future directions for research or reflection could include examining the specific ways in which audio body genres differ from those in film. The examples discussed in this exploration encompass a range of listening experiences that provoke physical reactions in the human body (ASMR sounds, the 'Mosquito' device, 'ghost tapes'), sound works that reference and repurpose standard hypnosis and meditation techniques (Nauman, Cardiff, Lutyens), as well as audio storytelling works that not only challenge and expand our understanding of the listening body but also open up the possibility of embodied engagement on a social and political level (*Journey*, *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, *How to Remember*). Further investigations and experimentation into the relationship between sound, the body, and such engagement will undoubtedly continue to offer new insights and possibilities.

---

30 *How to Remember* was produced and edited by Eleanor McDowall.

31 https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/how-to-remember.

REFERENCES

Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1968).

Fludernik, Monika, "Introduction: Second-person narrative and related issues", in Harold F. Mosher (ed.), *Second-person narrative* (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University, 1994).

Fludernik, Monika, "Second person fiction. Narrative *You* as addressee and/or protagonist", in *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18 (1993).

Guyatt, David, "Anti-Personnel 'Soft-Kill' Em Weaponry", in *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2005).

Hall, Alan, "Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: Review 1", *RadioDoc Review*, 1(1), 2014. doi:10.14453/rdr.v1i1.9

Lutyens, Marcos, *Memoirs of a Hypnotist: 100 Days*, edited by Kari Cwynar (London: Sternberg Press, 2015).

Madsen, Virginia, "Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: a critical reflection", *RadioDoc Review*, 1(1), 2014. doi:10.14453/rdr.v1i1.10

McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

Sacchettini, Rodolfo, Scrittori alla radio Interventi, riviste e radiodrammi per un'arte invisibile (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2018).

Turner, Fred, Democratic Surround. Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Williams, Linda, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", in *Film Quarterly,* Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer, 1991).