

Aesthetics Of The Virtual

Exploring The Peripheries Of Perception

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Abstract:

The concern of this article is to make the dimension of sonic virtuality as periphery of human auditory perception examinable. This endeavour is supported by Steve Goodman's concept of unsound as developed in *Sonic Warfare* (Goodman 2010). His concept helps to define the connection between sonic phenomena and the virtual. Core statements of virtuality theories by Henri Bergson and Brian Massumi amongst others will be presented shortly in this context. Concretely, Burial's song *Archangel* will serve as an example of how a conventional method of analysis can be enriched with a philosophical approach to produce additional knowledge that helps us to understand our sonic culture in a better way. By this means this article will dip into the peripheries of perception and explore the potential of a wider understanding of legitimate truth.

„Unsound – the not yet audible. Refers to the fuzzy periphery of auditory perception, where sound is inaudible but still produces neuroaffects or physiological resonances. Refers also to the untapped potential of audible bandwidths and the immanent futurity of music. Sonic virtuality.“

STEVE GOODMAN, GLOSSAR Sonic Warfare

„The fuzzy periphery of auditory perception“ is how Steve Goodman recently defined the area under investigation in his concept of unsound (Goodman 2010: Glossar) and these fuzzy peripheries of our contemporary sonic culture will be further explored in this article. Why our traditional analysis methods of sound do not suffice anymore might have various reasons, one being for sure that our understanding of what is included by the term sound has significantly widened in the last couple of decades.

The other day I asked my father what he thought was meant by „sound“ and he answered quickly: music. However for quite some time it means much more than just music, it is even about more than sound, we are talking about the sonic now. By now a new dimension of perception has become important in such way that it is necessary to develop tools and methods that are capable of making a new form of knowledge analysable and discussible. I am referring to the dimension of sonic virtuality.

The german Wikipedia article about musical aesthetics offers an appropriate historical overview over the different aesthetic concepts of music but it is ending with the description of the twentieth century. (As well does the english article which only provides an additional brief abstract about the philosophical aesthetics of pop music.) But what do we know about the musical aesthetics of the twenty-first century? And again, what about the aesthetics of sound, what about sonic aesthetics?

To find out more about that, this article will have a look at the field of music again, more particular the field of Dubstep, a genre that requires a more encompassing understanding of sound and can thus especially be called on as an example for sonic virtuality. A hybrid analysis of Burial's Archangel which offers a traditional description of the song as well as an exceeding philosophical view at the virtual realm of perception will show that in our current cyberculture we have to deal with virtual aesthetics, more so with the aesthetics of the virtual which must not be neglected in the discourse of the sonic any longer. There is a new world in which we are acting. A world that we affect and that affects and changes us in return. It is about time to explore its mechanisms and connect its truths with the ones of our old world.

Goodman's concept of unsound may now help to get access to the virtual world in which our perception will have to orientate itself more and more. If it is possible to make experiences in a new

world than there can also be found knowledge and a legitimate truth. To be able to identify this, it is necessary to upgrade our contemporary view on the truth by its virtual dimension. For a better understanding of the concept of unsound I will briefly sum up which understanding of virtuality Goodman is referring to.

It is founded on the theories of Henri Bergson which, having been published in 1896 for the first time, are still relevant for all theoretical approaches to virtuality as a temporal dimension of memory. He drafts the idea of a process of actualisation which transforms the virtual located in the past into an actual remembrance which is perceptible in the present. With the appeal (french: appel) of a memory in the present a leap into the past takes place. There, in the ontological unconscious, lies the pure memory. The uptake (french: rappel) of the memory is effected by means of the actualisation process. During this process past and present merge into one another and the completion carries out by the corporeal manifestation of the memory: sensation and movement (Bergson 1991: 133-134). This means that the virtual can only be felt in its effects. What is special about the pure memory is its attachment to a certain kind of spirituality. The creational momentum immanent to the virtual is crucial for Gilles Deleuze as well as Alfred North Whitehead (Deleuze 1968, Whitehead 1933). This potentiality is one of the most important parts of Goodman's understanding of virtuality just as Whitehead's micro-temporality, the immanence of future and past in the present. Goodman also draws on more recent theories of the virtual such as the ones depicted by Brian Massumi or Pierre Lévy. Massumi's philosophy becomes important for the concept of unsound in pointing at the autonomization of effects from their sources. Massumi inventively describes the virtual as „felt thought“ and „quasi-cause“. The reading of Lévy helps to create references to the virtualizing world by building a bridge between the theoretical discourse and the effects of the virtual in our society (Lévy 1997, 1998).

In *Sonic Warfare* Goodman describes his concept of unsound in numerous different ways: the not yet audible, the not yet heard, the untouched potential of audible bandwidths, as well as infra- and ultrasound within inaudible bandwidths, inaudible tones, the dimension of sonic virtuality, the periphery of human audibility, the unactualized nexus of frequencies, the potential of a sonic body, the music immanent future, the future of sonic warfare (Goodman 2010). As this illustrates the concept of unsound seems to be a rather complex one. Following Goodman the term unsound is supposed to help describing and understanding events and operating modes of sonic warfare in their military and medial-capitalist deployment. In the introduction of *Sonic Warfare* Goodman pictures unsound as a concept that relates to the peripheries of auditive perception as well as to the unactualized nexus of rhythms and frequencies within audible bandwidths. These are tones or frequencies within an audible

spectrum which may exist in their potentiality but have not yet been actualized.

This basically is the definition of virtuality as developed by Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead. Goodman explains: „ ... unsound also names that which is not yet audible within the normal bandwidth of hearing—new rhythms, resonances, textures, and syntheses“ (Goodman 2010: 191). This is where unsound reveals its potential to become a new mode of speaking about and analyzing sonic events. According to Goodman sonic virtuality has so far been understood in relation to the concepts of silence and noise. This has helped to constitute and confine the field of sonic power. Thus, since John Cage, silence has been connected to the virtual by being the shadow of hearing as an unconscious background. In this case silence stands for the unactualized potential of sound that can only be felt in its absence. However noise has been interpreted as the potential of every possible sound to destroy and to pierce prevailing musical conventions ever since Futurism.

By now, both concepts, silence as well as noise, might fall short in entirely encompassing the principle of sonic warfare. It is not only about loud or quiet anymore. Overcoming the limits of silence and noise unsound represents a sound event that has not occurred yet but nonetheless has the power to affect the body and to set it in motion. This „quasi-cause“, as Brian Massumi calls it, does have real effects. John Carpenter's *Halloween* offers an easily understandable example. The killer's breath is heard numerous times throughout the film. Even though the sound announces the immediate appearance of Michael Myers, the audience doesn't get to see him. Neither does the victim. While the threat remains virtual the fear becomes reality and causes a corresponding bodily reaction.

One can also watch the deployment of unsound as sonic weapon in acoustic brand management. Desires of a potential consumer are manipulated by implanting a fake memory, an audio memory of an event that has not occurred yet and might never do. A sonic trigger is used to evoke for example a familiar feeling so that the customer is unconsciously forced to regain that feeling by purchasing the advertised product. Again, this refers to Bergson's and Whitehead's definition of the virtual. According to Baudrillard we are experiencing a total virtualization of the being and a world in which virtual pleasure is sufficient for our happiness. The virtual sensation comes to be the drive of the present mechanisms of the world and thus needs to be included in our epistemology.

The Burial example will show how Goodman's concept of unsound can be of use for our current culture and the search for the truth in the peripheries of perception. Archangel, the first real track on the 2007 album *Untrue*, is introduced by 46 seconds tagged as *Untitled*. *Untitled* merely consists of the street noises of passing cars, the obligatory crackling of old vinyl records in Burial's tracks and two samples. The first sample is a voice from David Lynch's 2006 movie *Inland Empire* which says „I'll show you light now. It burns forever.“

The second sample is an unsettling, overtone-rich, flat sound from Agnus Die on Elliot Goldenthal's soundtrack for Alien 3, David Fincher's 1992 science fiction horror movie. Untitled ends fading out the looped Alien 3 sample, accompanied by the vinyl-crackling which is seamlessly transforming into the crackling that forms the beginning of Archangel. After a few seconds a stumbling, oddly broken beat starts (0:05) and holds, almost unchanged, the whole track.

Burial's beats are collages of his favourite samples: Vin Diesel's rattling car keys in The Fast And The Furious (2001), the sound of shell casings hitting concrete in Metal Gear Solid for PlayStation and the sound of his brother's lighter sparking (Burial in The Guardian 2007). At 0:13 the vocal sample which will be present throughout the whole track, just like the beat, is introduced. Burial samples several vocal parts of the American R&B artist Ray J's 2005 single One Wish. While Burial adjusts the samples in a way that makes the listener hear the words „Holding you – couldn't be alone. Loving you – couldn't be alone. Kissing you – tell me I belong“ and „If I trust you“ these lines do not exist in the original song. Furthermore by pitchshifting and timestretching Burial intensely modulates the vocals. He points out that at one point in his track the sample sounds as if it was saying „archangel“ (Burial in The Wire 2007). This call is name-giving for the song even though there is not a similar word in the original. Immense modulation of vocals by miscellaneous effects thus is one of the core elements of the typical Burial-sound. He describes his associations with the sound of the vocals: „I like whale songs [...]. I like vocals to be like that, like a night cry, an angel animal. Old hardcore tunes would throw these sounds in, anything to create the rush, descent into another world“ (Burial in The Wire 2007).

Anew prefaced by the meanwhile known crackling at 0:34 the second striking sample of the song is installed. Used as harmony-producing instrument a short instrumental part from the intro of the PlayStation game Metal Gear Solid 2 (2001) with music written by Harry Gregson-Williams is looped eight times. For about one and a half minutes this interaction of beats and both samples carries on until the vocal samples are superseded by the allegedly heard „archangel“ for the first time (1:23). From this moment on that call is emerging like a signal time and again until the end of the song. A slight alteration of the beat to a wafting bass sound takes place before the beat then drops for ten seconds at 1:40. When it returns at 1:50 the original combination of beats and samples is enriched with the „archangel“-calls as well as further echoing vocal fragments. During another break at 2:50 the line „If I trust you“ is repeated several times. At this point the beat is modulated in an even more muffled manner. For one last time the complex symbiosis of these core elements begins until a clinking sound is heard which heralds the end of the song (3:31). Accompanied merely by occasional vocal samples the beat leads the track to its ending in a crackling and the final appearance of the „archangel“-call (3:53).

To what extent are these illustrated elements of Burial's song of importance for virtual spaces coming into being, for a virtual perception or a virtual memory? In Archangel the meaning of the nexus past-present-future is emphasized by the crackling that creates the impression of an old vinyl record playing. Thus Burial points to forms of sound carriers and playback devices that basically have only nostalgic value in the current cyberculture. The sound itself sounds like past and future at the same time in an idiosyncratic way. The past-oriented crackling thereby contrasts the metallic sound of the sampled drums and pitched vocals, that seem like a cry from the future. The cranky, rugged beats appear as being broken and repulsed by the city's architecture to the streets of night-time London, eternally convoluted, time- and spaceless, without a source. The listener experiences an arising time continuum that evades a clear location and can thereby be defined as virtual momentum. This phenomenon of acoustic time anomaly is quite common in a sample-based music culture (Goodman 2010: 150). The vocal sample also creates virtuality in uniting past, present and future.

By implementing R&B vocals Burial refers back to the style of UK Jungle and Garage, genres out of which Dubstep arose. On another level virtuality is produced by the intensive manipulation of vocals with effects. The modulation of the voice makes a conclusive gender determination almost impossible, the voice becomes detached from its bodily origin. Burial is fascinated by this effect and describes „I like pitching down female vocals so they sound male, and pitching up male vocals so they sound like a girl singing. It can sound sexy as fuck“ (Burial in *The Wire* 2007). Listeners agree: „The people on the album seem like wounded or mutilated angels: angels whose wings have been clipped, or who have been trapped or betrayed“ (*The Wire* 2007). The angel motif can thereby be understood as the archetype form of a virtual appearance. Not man or woman, sublime to the human and free of any limitations whether in space or time the angel is not a person we could understand in any rational way. By the sample choice, the voice modulation with sound effects and the recombination of vocal fragments lyrics result that are not the ones of the original song. Thus the listener perceives language he cannot clearly understand and consequently attempts to read meaning into the lyrics (Augoyard & Torgue 2006: XIV). What is heard concerning the content thereby depends on the individual listener.

Accordingly the sample constitutes a potential for wide-ranging associations of meaning, that underlie innumerable influences. This is the reason why it is not predictable how the listener will interpret and understand the song. So the virtual can definitely be found on the textual level of the vocal samples too even though Gilbert and Pearson consider these as parts of the sound more than as meaningful statements (Gilbert & Pearson 1999: 38). A close connection to the virtual is also represented by the instrumental sample of the Metal Gear Solid 2 soundtrack. Even before the internet processed from an information-supplying to a world-generating medium, imagining virtual realities and acting in them

has been common praxis. For decades gamers have immersed into other worlds to become one with the heroes of their games and experience adventures. Many times they have lost and still lose track of time while fighting the deciding quest, sweating and trembling in front of their screens. It is questionable if these adventures are even virtual being programmed and by this predetermined to their very extent but it is obvious that the felt tension or threat has real bodily effects meaning that it is actualized in the present situation despite its cause being nothing but virtual.

Moreover with his hero the gamer can rise above his physical limitations as a human. It becomes possible to win Wimbledon without ever having held a tennis racket before. In the course of technical advancement and refinement of the video games the simulations of these worlds and possibilities seem more and more real. The immersion potential has substantially increased. It is not surprising that Lévy defines video game designers in their role as creators of other worlds as the crucial artists of the twenty-first century with a cyberculture in which virtual worlds become the dominant genre.

Regarding this the Metal Gear Solid 2 sample in Archangel refers in its source to virtual reality. Given that the listener recognizes the sample, knowingly or unknowingly, a remembrance of several parallel temporal and spatial coordinates occurs. The gameplay itself like crucial scenes or final battles might be relived mentally. The gamer's feeling of a certain time of his life long gone can be refelt, the room of his youth and his former friends remembered. One can see that we are following Bergson's theory of virtuality right now. It has to be admitted that such a perception is only possible under the premise that the listener has some kind of experience with medial environments like these. The same applies to the artist who knowingly provokes the effect described by implementing samples with a potential like that. The importance of technological advancement in the range of musical production plays a crucial role. Almost every consumer can also become a music producer nowadays which is the foundation of Burial's work. Producing his first tunes on the PlayStation he was able to create music without playing any instruments. Thus a convergence of different individual media can be observed under the artists of the cyberculture.

Burial says that he wants to bring a dose of real life into his tunes that people can relate with (Burial in *The Wire* 2007). He clearly presupposes his own subjective view on what real life is. In his daily routine video games are a central and influential part and hence belong to his reality without doubt. As Lévy describes we are dealing with a preceding virtualization of a reality controlled by ubiquitous media and through the phenomenon of media convergence this virtuality follows up further in the music itself (Lévy 1998). Burial's Archangel serves as a good example for this process. To include a piece of reality in his songs at the same time means to include a piece of virtual reality. So in a medially shaped and determined society an increasing virtual awareness can be assumed. Thereby the

actual corporeal experience is pushed into the background as Baudrillard explains brilliantly with his example of the video recorder (Baudrillard 1994: 16). Following his argument the transformation of media is the starting point for a thorough substitution of reality by a general virtuality.

Which concept of truth is required when the real world gets digitally penetrated more and more and then flows back into music in a modified form? A clear demarcation between virtual and actual reality is difficult to define since a constant disintegration of all borders takes place. The consumer becomes the producer, music as collage produces mutated space and time systems and technology invalidates former limits. More is possible. More abilities, more space and time sensations, more memories, more truth. In taking advantage of this space of possibilities by going beyond mere potentials, aesthetics of the virtual are taking shape. Additionally more access to already existing sonic material evolves so that with virtuality more potential in the actual reality gets visible.

Our present mediatized cyber society is used to affectively responding to virtual sensation so as the body too becomes dispensable. The meaning of corporeality presents itself in an ambivalent relation. On the one hand there is a disentanglement of the physical life in its previous form and on the other hand more attention is paid to the possible effects of sound on the body as for example Goodman explores in *Sonic Warfare*. These two positions may at first seem to be dialectical but they do not necessarily have to be mutually contradictory. Maybe the dependence on a bodily experience decreases to the extent the possibilities to manipulate the body by implementing a virtual memory via sound is realized and applied.

Burial's dark Dubstep portrays a dystopian future. Creating both fascination about the possibilities of technology and irritation about the power of technology to control men, virtuality manifests itself in Archangel through its piercing unpredictable effects. Crackling rain, the sound of bullet casings hitting the ground, vocal fragments appearing from nowhere and a skippy broken beat sound just like the intro [video](#) of Metal Gear Solid 2 presents itself optically (4:43-7:42). The fuzziness of the virtual Massumi is talking about can be found in these images (Massumi 2002: 134).

But since Snake, the hero of the game, jumps from the bridge headfirst like an archangel to save the world a cooperation and interaction of virtual and actual worlds should definitely become imaginable, as long as we accept and integrate the new truths we will be facing. In the field of sonic research investigating virtual perceptions or perceptions of the virtual is unavoidable by any means. To close this article with the words of Brian Massumi: „new thoughts may be thought, new feelings felt“ (Massumi 2002: 141).

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