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Sound Arguments: Composing Words and Music

Considering the commercial success of textbooks like *Writing in a Visual Age* (Odell, Katz), *Beyond Words* (Ruszkiewicz, Anderson, Friend), and *Picturing Texts* (Faigley, George, Palchik, Selfe),¹ the impact of visual rhetoric on first-year writing pedagogy is undeniable. Because most visually-oriented technologies also have audio components (television broadcasts, the internet, video games, movies), our discussion of visual rhetoric in the classroom should logically extend to an examination of sound. But how can this be accomplished? The following addendum to my first-year writing syllabus—developed for my honours students—offers one answer to that question:

Because this course is designated an honors section of first-year writing, we are privileged to have a smaller, enriched class that allows us to do some extra learning together. So, in addition to all the research and writing I've discussed on the previous pages of this syllabus, we will be doing something a little out of the ordinary.

Before letting you in on the secret, let me give you some personal background. In addition to my training as a writing teacher, I also have an interest in making music; I've had two CDs of electronic music published under the name The Joy Project² and have been making music for over 15 years now in a variety of bands and on my own. Some of my research as a teacher has explored the connections between writing essays and writing music. In the past, students and I have found that there are some interesting parallels between writing essays and recording music; after all, both of them are “creative” processes, and both mediums provide artists with the opportunity to express their ideas, views, and feelings on a variety of subjects. I'm sure you have some experience

composing essays already—but how would feel about doing a different kind of composing as well?

This semester I've constructed a digital recording studio space in the room right next door. It contains a microphone; a digital drum machine (that can produce about 300 different drum sounds and can be programmed or played freehand); a keyboard synthesizer (that produces about 300 distinct sounds); and a sampler (that allows you to capture pre-recorded sound from CDs or tapes, or sound through a microphone, and use that sound in many different ways). There is also a computer-based, multitrack recorder (that allows individual tracks of sound to be recorded separately and then mixed together) and a bank of "sound processors" (that can create special effects, like echoes).

Here's what I'm hoping we can do: After we work on researching, writing, and revising our essays in our regular class, we will meet in the studio next door to experiment with sound (and hopefully we will be able to record some music). Don't worry: no music-making or music-playing experience is required; all I ask is that the sounds you create must in some way be connected to the essays you are writing. For example, if you write a persuasive essay arguing that forced volunteerism as a high school graduation requirement is hypocritical or oxymoronic, in the studio you will be trying to represent those same arguments in sound. While the studio is primarily set up to create experimental electronic music, if you have an instrument you want to bring in to record, you may do that as well.

Lastly, if you think the idea of writing essays and recording music seems like a strange concoction, I believe you'll be surprised how much the two can be closely connected. As a writer and musician, I personally have discovered how much the two mirror one another (and how much one activity has taught me about the other). By asking you to engage in both of these processes, I hope you will learn how to harness the emotional and intellectual power of music (or sound) to better understand the rhetorical (or persuasive) power of a well written, well researched argument—and vice versa. Melding these two modes of expression is a challenge, but with my help in the studio, I think you will come to understand how artists might construct effective persuasive arguments on controversial issues in multiple mediums. Trust me, it'll be fun; this is a no-stress situation, but it will require your dedication and openness to the process.

Faced with this course requirement, some students immediately start looking for the exit. I'd be lying if I didn't say that even honours students initially have difficulty comprehending this cross-pollination. The rhetoric of words and the rhetoric of...sound? What could the two possibly have in common? Fortunately, once I assure everyone the only requirement is a healthy sense of exploration, most students settle in. To orient ourselves to the connections between written rhetoric and sound rhetoric, the students and I begin our experimental first-year writing class by discussing—in general terms—how

rhetoric manifests itself in a multitude of forms. Using excerpts from the aforementioned textbooks, and other sources like Bronwyn Williams' *Tuned In*,³ we explore the visual, oral, textual, gestural, and aural aspects of rhetoric. Since our focus is primarily on the aural (and since students eventually create electronic musical scores that correspond to their written texts), we focus our exploration by listening to and making notes on a variety of compositions (most of them experimental) recorded by electronic artists who explicitly approach their art in rhetorical ways.

One of these artists is Terre Thaemlitz, whose recent CD release is titled “Coutre Cosmetique: Fragmented Electroacoustique Symptomatic of the Need for a Cultural Makeover.” Thaemlitz is a good example of a contemporary electronic artist whose music is infused with an agenda. As a self-prescribed “transgendered, non-spiritual, socio-materialist,” Thaemlitz’s electronic and electroacoustic compositions tackle a variety of controversial issues, including the commodification of sex and gender, the erosive forces of capitalism, and the questionable purposes of conventions and social standards.⁴ At the beginning of our class, students and I also analyse the experimental recordings of John Duncan, an artist who has a long history of “transgressive research in the name of art.”⁵ His release titled “The Crackling”—a meditation on the relationship between science and religion—is composed from digitally edited and treated segments of recordings made on location at the Stanford Linear Accelerator in California (SLAC). According to Duncan, the clattering blips and the subharmonic sinewaves (all captured with carefully placed contact microphones and manipulated digitally in post-production) represent his inquiry “into the nature of humanity’s view of its place in the cosmos, in light of new discoveries about the behavior of particles. Science has become as trusted as

a religion,” says Duncan. “But putting faith in science to provide all the answers to all questions is a howling, tragic mistake.”⁶

Although this basic orientation to the rhetorical elements of contemporary electronic music is crucial in making the class work, the point of my pedagogy is not to simply talk or write about sound—but to MAKE it. Fortunately for me, the majority of students quickly grasp the idea of exploring the rhetoricity of both words and sound, and most of them want the keys to the recording studio post-haste. Emily, a student in my honors section of first-year writing, was one of those excited individuals. Like all others in the class, Emily initially worked at researching, writing, and revising her essays in our rather typical peer-centred, process-oriented classroom. But this is not where her process ended. After developing a solid written product, she took her ideas into the music studio and attempted to represent them in sound as well. (Note: While I understand this process may seem terribly linear, the learning objectives for this first-year writing course are set by the university—any “enrichment” work we do, such as creating musical compositions, cannot take precedence over the practice of writing traditional academic essays.)

For one piece of persuasive writing, Emily decided to investigate the subject of bilingual education. She had spent most of her life feeling underprepared for schools where the dominant spoken language was English because she had been forced to attend what she considered to be a flawed high school Spanish-English bilingual programme. As part of her written argument, Emily cited a number of problems that she experienced firsthand, including teachers who were non-native speakers and were not conversant enough in English to prepare Spanish-speaking students. She also argued that the bilingual system fuelled separatist attitudes by isolating Spanish students from their

English-speaking counterparts. To support her claims, Emily utilised and documented a variety of print sources, particularly a series of *New York Times* articles. In her research, she discovered that a paltry 11 per cent of teenagers who enter the ninth grade actually leave bilingual programmes successfully, while the rest do not.

Because of her personal experience, Emily felt very strongly about this issue. So, I was not surprised when she entered the recording studio with a sense of determination and an eagerness to see how her rhetoric might also be represented using sound. Like most of the students in the experimental course, Emily opted to create an abstract electronic piece, one that did not rely on traditional notation or rhythmic structures. My experience had taught me that the “open canvas,” arrhythmic, atonal, aleatoric approach used by some contemporary electronic abstractionists allows room for students to experiment. Additionally, the lack of formal training in music becomes less of an issue for students when they feel free to work in an unconstrained environment where they can focus on the *ideas* that sound can represent, rather than on technique, chord arrangements, or time signatures. Those few who do possess some musical training are more than welcome to use that knowledge in creating their compositions; but those who lack such an education can have an equal chance at creating some stunning pieces.

Sitting down with me in the digital recording studio to begin her session, Emily unfurled the paper bag she had brought with her. Inside was a handful of English-Spanish language cassette tapes she had unearthed in the school library; for her, these tapes represented the complexity of her feelings about having attended a bilingual educational programme. She explained that she wanted to sample-and-cut the English and Spanish voices on the tapes at alternating speeds, while morphing the sounds through the sampler.

After a basic orientation to the studio equipment and a few sessions of grubbing around (which, I've noticed with most students, often mimics the prewriting stage in written composition), Emily decided to begin her short, three-minute composition with a tiny wisp of white noise which steadily increases in volume over the duration of the composition and eventually becomes an overwhelming roar. To me, it sounded like an alien wind blowing through space—or across an inhospitable landscape. She argued this menacing sound represented how she and her peers felt when first introduced to the U.S. educational system—she was lost in a vast, faceless institutional system. As the hissing sound grows incrementally louder, chopped fragments and slivers of people talking are slowly introduced onto the canvas. Nanoseconds in length, the fragments are purposefully not sustained enough for the listener to understand complete words or phrases; the voices are meaningless. In fact, it is difficult, at first, to distinguish whether the voices are speaking in any identifiable language; in such a shortened clip, simply identifying them as human voices is a challenge. She achieved this effect by using granular synthesis software on the computer which allows the composer to sample any piece of prerecorded material and reduce it to microscopic pieces and rearrange it with the click of a mouse.

Stuttering along at a steady clip, the fragmented voices grow incrementally louder, and they also grow more sustained so that a few isolated words can be understood at random. Although they are almost imperceptible, English and Spanish voices—shrouded in a delayed echo effect—suddenly rise from the chatter, creating a nonsense of words and sentences. She claimed this jumbled mixture of vocal sounds represented the confusion she felt having to navigate an educational system that kept her mired in one

language, while claiming to give her access to the language of power. Next, she added a factory-like grinding noise (representing the idea of a monolithic educational institution) and more sustained voices, and she slowly increased the volume of all the elements to the point of digital distortion. The composition, which took five one-hour sessions to complete, comes to a halting close just as it threatens to push the listener to the brink of physical pain. This chaotic, shrieking musical composition shares the same title as her written essay: “A Superfluous System.” (Example 1).

In one sense, Emily managed to achieve something remarkable. She took her well-crafted, carefully researched written argument and translated it into sound. Emily claimed that her abstract musical composition represented her arguments against bilingual education as it is typically practised in the United States. On the other hand, it is important to note that her musical score is considerably less nuanced than her written essay: her experimental musical piece cannot possibly incorporate opponents’ viewpoints; nor can it cite authorities on this issue as support. The very immediacy of sound as a medium required Emily to reduce her argument down to basic (maybe even strictly pathetic) elements; students are often quick to point out this and other material differences between the two mediums. However, students also note that their audio compositions sometimes have an advantage in capturing a more emotional, personal, and immediate response to various issues than their written essays.

As I’ve detailed in other articles,⁷ a number of interesting and useful conversations arise from these parallel activities. For example, students are often surprised at the similarities of citing sources in a written text and sampling / manipulating pre-recorded audio sources for use in a musical composition (such as Emily’s use of the

English-Spanish language tapes). Referencing sources in either instance requires a certain finesse if the cited or sampled material is to fit smoothly within the composition; issues of fair use, documentation and copyright permission, and the vagaries of misrepresentation are relevant in both situations; citing written sources and sampling audio sources equally highlight the complexity of building directly upon the pre-existing work of other scholars and artists.

Beyond the realm of sampling, I've noticed that the recursive creative processes students naturally use while composing music are strikingly similar to the processes they utilise while writing their essays; all nonlinear stages of the writing process—from prewriting to publication (when we create a compilation CD at semester's end)—are present in the recording studio as well as the writing classroom. Similarly, students and I discuss the effects a written or musical composition may equally have on an audience. Technical and stylistic issues also extend into both kinds of composing: students discover how the length and organisation of a written or musical composition should relate to its purpose; how themes or theses in written texts are similar to musical motifs or particular repeating sounds in music; how the effects of punctuation, like exclamation-marks or commas, can be accomplished by using silence or suddenly increasing volume in a musical piece. Additionally, the technology driving both word processing and sound processing have almost identical user interfaces that students tend to grasp quickly. These include: functions to create new documents, edit existing documents, and import elements from external sources. Both also have “special effects” options. In word processing, there are “visual effects” like numerous types and sizes of fonts, as well as typeface effects (bold, italics, shadow, outline, animation); in music processing, there are

many “sound effects” options (reverb, echo, phasing, reversing, pitchshifting, and harmonizing). In both kinds of compositions, students discover how such effects might be used for rhetorical purposes.

As you can see, similarities between both mediums are so numerous that a comprehensive discussion is nearly impossible. Generally speaking, I prefer not to hold prescribed discussions with students about these theoretical and practical connections when we are in the recording studio together. This way, I hope the student experiences the studio as not simply an extension of the academic writing classroom (which is often steeped in a student-teacher hierarchy), but as an almost sacred place of relatively pure experimentation. Accordingly, there is one facet of this pedagogy I’ve tended to downplay in the articles I’ve written on this topic, and I’d like to correct it. To be honest, the most powerful effect of this pedagogy has been the fun-factor. After teaching writing at the secondary and post-secondary levels for over a dozen years, I have honestly to admit that my classroom gets a little stale from time to time—this is a perennial challenge for us all. Being able to reinvent my writing classroom by immersing students in the rhetorical aspects of sound—and by spending hours with them as they discover this new “compositional space” in the recording studio—has been a great boon to me professionally. Certainly, learning is a serious endeavour, but having fun is equally serious. Upon reflection, I realised that my classroom had been lacking a lighthearted spirit of exploration that it once possessed, and this pedagogy has changed that.

Students are not shy about admitting their sense of fulfilment and enjoyment, and their musical compositions often reflect those feelings. As my syllabus above states, writing students are supposed to connect their musical compositions rhetorically to their

essays in some fashion. On occasion they purposefully bend that rule in their desire to explore the world of sound, and the “essay-music connection” can be tentative at best. In one case, three students—Lisa, Jessica, and John—decided to co-author a musical composition called “Walking on Water in Two Notes.” (Example 2) This composition was tangentially connected to an essay written by only one of the students, Lisa. Her written essay, titled “Taking Attendance,” examined the pros and cons of mandatory attendance policies in college courses. I allowed this musical collaboration because I thought the chemistry between the three students in the studio might make for an interesting product. Deciding to “co-author” a musical piece was a bold move on their parts; although I may be stating the obvious, these students encountered many of the same challenges and complexities that also accompany the co-authoring of written texts. They had to navigate differences in voice, overall style, opinions, personal musical preferences, and even schedules. Additionally, since only Lisa had completed actual research on the topic of mandatory attendance policies in college, she needed to act as a guide for the other two students in the studio by teaching them what she had learned about the topic—and having, ultimately, to articulate her ambivalence about the issue. In her essay, Lisa contended that college students were often caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood and that some, but not all, needed the motivation that attendance policies could provide. At the same time, she concluded that such policies could seem condescending to students who were indeed self-starters. For research, she examined the rationale for attendance policies that were enforced on different college campuses around the country and compared policies enacted by a number of her own professors. After Lisa shared her research and perspective with her peers, the trio’s conversation turned to the

broader topic of stress in college—how prevalent it was, how students dealt with stress, and the overall seriousness that seemed to characterise their college-level learning. As a group, they lamented the loss of the fun which learning used to provide when they were younger, and they wondered aloud what had happened to that lighthearted sense of exploration.

Discovering this shared sentiment, they decided to begin recording their musical composition. The mood in the studio was very receptive, and the group managed well as they explored various sounds and effects—collectively and individually. The energy between them—and the spirit of invention—is apparent in the funny, quirky, and lively composition itself, which took three one-hour sessions to complete. The bubbling, syncopated keyboard sound (which they claimed represented the hectic, fractured feeling that punctuated their lives as college students) is peppered with irreverent vocalisations (some of which were planned and others improvised), and the herky-jerky nature of the piece is playfully off-kilter. The menacing, robotic “voice of authority” which tells listeners to “study more,” “study harder,” and “study all night,” is undercut by the overall jovial quality of the piece. In a reflective essay students wrote at the end of the course, they admitted that their time in the studio was an opportunity to shed temporarily the burden of tests and midterm projects and to try and rediscover the fun of learning—while also meditating on their ambivalence towards mandatory attendance policies in college classes. All of them said they were feeling particularly overwhelmed at being college students during the recording sessions, and that their time composing together was a healthy way to commiserate and let off steam. Again, having fun is a serious business,

and Lisa, Jessica, and John managed to have fun, express themselves, and learn something about rhetoric at the same time.

While almost every one of my students has responded positively to this pedagogical experiment, the same cannot be said for all of my colleagues. While I have heartily enjoyed implementing this pedagogy, I am compelled, as a professional, to offer two caveats to any writing teachers—especially untenured ones—who might try to reproduce it. On several occasions over the last three years, a number of my peers have been critical, rightly or wrongly, of my pedagogical explorations. First, I've been reminded that any claims I make regarding student success are strictly anecdotal. This is true; I've not conducted a quantitative or qualitative study regarding the work students complete in the writing classroom and the recording studio. Although this pedagogy is still in its tentative, formative stages, I suspect such a study—especially focusing on the attitudes and perceptions of first-year writers engaged in this enterprise—would prove useful and interesting. I think future research into this area would be beneficial. A second caveat involves the hoary tenet of “publish or perish.” As a writing professional who is interested in the rhetoricity of electronic music and its production, I've listed my own original music (published by a variety of record labels on CD and distributed to national record franchises and online venues) as evidence of “publishing activity” on my professional dossier. Unfortunately, I've been reminded by tenure committees (at more than one university where I've been employed) that this creative work lacks scholarly relevance to the field of rhetoric and writing and that such works are unlikely to have significant impact regarding tenure. The privileging of traditional written texts over alternative forms of scholarship and the simplistic, binary thinking that drives the

arbitrary separation of scholarly work and creative work are topics that lie outside the scope of this article. They nevertheless highlight the fact that, regardless of how mature and open-minded we are as scholars, there is always room to grow.

Spending time in the writing classroom and recording studio with students has helped me grow in many ways. I am continually exposed to new music through my students; their ideas and opinions about music have helped me grow as a musician. This learning experience has also shown me, in concrete terms, how connected and analogous various creative processes are. Additionally, it has expanded my notions of rhetoric as it exists beyond the line of sight, so to speak. As it turns out, rhetoric is more pervasive than I ever imagined.

¹ Lee Odell and Susan Katz, *Writing in a Visual Age* (New York: Bedford St. Martin's, 2005); John Ruskiewicz, Daniel Anderson and Christy Friend, *Beyond Words: Reading and Writing in a Visual Age* (New York: Longman, 2005); Lester Faigley, Diana George, Anna Palchik and Cynthia Selfe, *Picturing Texts* (New York: Norton, 2004).

² The Joy Project, *Way Out Here* (Miami: Neurodisc/EMI Priority Records, 2001); *ibid.*, *Trip to Style City* (New York: Bar-None Records, 2004).

³ Bronwyn T. Williams, *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2002).

⁴ Yew Sun, "Dropping the Lovebomb: An Interview with Terre Thaemlitz" (*Liquid Architecture*, 13 July 2004; 15 August 2004 <http://www.liquidarchitecture.org.au/terre.html>), 2.

⁵ Rob Young, "Worship the Glitch" (*The Wire: Adventures in Modern Music*, January 2000), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ W. Keith Duffy, "A Pedagogy of Composing: The Rhetoric of Electronic Music in the Writing Class" (*Inventio*, 29 September 2005, 1 October 2005 <http://www.doiiiit.gmu.edu/inventio/>); *ibid.*, "Digital Recording Technology in the Writing Classroom: Sampling As Citing" (*The Writing Instructor*, 1 February 2004, 27 September 2005 <http://www.writinginstructor.com/essays/duffy-all.html>).