

sound as social structure

chris wood, 2017

We have been so concerned with language that we have forgotten how sound flows through space and occupies it.

Alvin Lucier
Careful Listening is More Important than Making Sounds Happen, 1979

Humans have a psychological need for emotional experience. Neuroscientist and musician Manfred Clynes wrote two cornerstone Space Age articles, *Cyborgs and Space* (1960) and *Cyborg II: Sentic Space Travel* (1970) in which he coined the term “cyborg” and hypothesized the importance of “self-regulated man-machine systems” for future generations of astronauts. In *Cyborgs and Space* he laid a conceptual ground on the physiological additions that could help humans adapt and thrive in extraterrestrial conditions. What provoked him to revisit the subject a decade later in *Cyborg II* was a lack of conversation in the field about human’s *psychological* needs in space. He proposes that humankind has a need to be “creative” or “authentic” - something achieved through psychological satisfaction via emotional experience. This came from a developing study (led by Clynes) called Sentic—a branch of science studying the communication of emotions in the present moment. Emotional experience is ordinarily directed at a specific person and/or situation—resources which are not readily available in space. He conceived the “sentic state” as a solution for this, which is the transient pressure of a single finger corresponding to an emotional state. “Through repeated expression of a sentic state, the state itself is generated.”¹ The repetitive mental association of an emotion to a unique physical manifestation induces an authentic

¹ Manfred Clynes. *Sentics: The Touch of Emotions*. (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977).

experience of the emotion itself.

Also a musician, Clynes applied this concept to musical experience. "Music as auto- and cross-communication is capable of generating and discharging emotional states through its vibratory touch forms, which we call sound."² The physical vibrations of sound serve as a platform (much like the transient pressure of a sentic state) for our emotional experiences. At moments when we find ourselves immersed in these vibrations, we don't need an external experience to provoke a certain emotion but instead can constitute a unique emotional experience through that sound. By repeatedly hearing the sung words "I'm crying" paired with the composite vibrations of Smokey Robinson & The Miracles' *Ooo Baby Baby* and repeatedly thinking "I'm sad", after time we will feel a tangible sadness.

Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead write bluntly about the social effects of this physical location of sound in their book *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde*. "Vibrations through their veritable movement generated a structured space and situated bodies and objects in that space. This process of situating did not outwardly transform the bodies or objects themselves, however, it just placed them in an ever-dependent relation within a larger system."³ Not only are we provided a physical platform for constituting auto-emotional experience but in an audience setting we are sharing this platform, constituting emotional experience simultaneously with those around us; the same bass vibration that triggers *that* person's loneliness is

² Manfred Clynes. "Cyborg II: Sentic Space Travel." In *The Cyborg Handbook*. Edited by Chris Hables Gray. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

³ Douglas Kahn, and Gregory Whitehead. *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-garde*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994).

simultaneously triggering *my* elation. I notice their closed-off posture, morose expression, and hesitant swaying, they notice my smile and sincere upper-body dancing...then what?

Philosopher Thomas Fuchs describes how our physicality effects those around us through empathy. "The rhythmic movements of the human body in space were capable of infecting other people with the same or similar rhythmic vibrations, putting them in a state of ecstasy."⁴ Though the individual emotional experiences of everyone in the dance club may be diverse, we are effecting each other in a sort of empathic feedback loop. We each embody our emotions and respond physically (i.e. through posture, gesture, dancing) and if these responses are made visible, those around notice and repeat the process of embodiment and response. (As therapist, communications theorist, and philosopher Paul Watzlawick said: "One cannot *not* communicate.") This is an example of what Erika Fischer-Lichte would call an "auto-poetic feedback loop"⁵ - a circular system of self-generation wherein all parties are simultaneously producers and products.

sound is movement : we are moved : we move each other : we are moved : we move each other : sound is movement : we are moved : we move each other : we are moved : sound is movement : we move each other : we are moved : we move each other : we are moved : we move each other : sound is movement : we are moved : we move each other : we move each other

⁴ Fuchs, Georg. *Der Tanz*. (Stuttgart: Verlag von Stecker & Schroeder, 1906).

⁵ Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. (London: Routledge, 2008).