

Translating an Academic Text into Sound Art. An Experiment with a Communication Studies’ Text on Participation

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Abstract

This chapter reports on the experimental translation of an academic (written) text into a sound art composition. The starting point of this translation experiment is a 2014 book chapter, entitled *The democratic (media) revolution: a parallel genealogy of political and media participation*, authored by Nico Carpentier, Peter Dahlgren and Francesca Pasquali. The outcome of the experiment – the sound composition – is called “*Audionces*” and can be downloaded at <https://soundcloud.com/buskingsounds/audionces>. In the current chapter, the production process of *Audionces* is analysed, firstly by focussing on the roles of the actors. In a second part, the translation strategies of conceptualisation, selecting sources and ordering sounds are analysed, combining a more theoretical approach with a more practice-based description of the translation process. The last part of this chapter consists of an analysis of the tensions that characterised the translation experiment, and of the ways these tensions were successfully negotiated. The main aims of this translation are 1) to experiment with alternative (non-textual) ways of communicating academic knowledge, and 2) to gain a better understanding of the opportunities that a sonification process offers to both genres.

Keywords Translation Experiment, Academic Writing, Sonification, Sound Art, Participation

“Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” (Kristeva, 1986: 37).

1. Introduction

In the fields of social sciences and humanities, writing is still the dominant mode of communicating academic knowledge. The written text’s structure supports its content, but also efficiently organises the words and their meanings, making use of a standardised representational system. Even if writing is the century-old hegemonic modus for communicating knowledge, alternative models have been developed. There is, for instance, a long history of the use of screen documentaries in science communication, evidenced by the collaboration between the Open University and the BBC in the UK.¹ The photo-essay can also be used to disseminate academic knowledge, and in particular visual sociology and anthropology make use of this genre, as, for instance, discussed by Pink (2001: 134). She uses a definition of the photo-essay that “*is not one of solely photographs*”, but instead consists out of “*an essay (book, article or other text) that is composed predominantly of photographs*” (Pink, 2001: 134). This definition can be extended further by referring to the (photo-)exhibition, with the two “Iconoclastic Controversies” exhibitions on Cypriot commemoration practices and nationalism as examples.²

In his article ‘The scope of visual sociology’, Grady (1996: 18) uses the term “*visual essay*” to refer to the academic use of “*documentary films and photojournalism*”, providing a considerable number of examples. In an earlier article, he defined the visual essay as:

A statement about human affairs that purports to represent reality and is consciously and creatively crafted from non-fictional materials that are, at least in part, directly connected to the affairs thus represented. The primary medium of expression for the statement is some variant of photographic imagery (ibid.: 27).

Interestingly, Grady (ibid.: 27) immediately adds that “[...] *it is quite possible that the visual essay is an art form*”, when he is discussing the many critiques that have been levelled against the (academic) visual essay. It is this statement that allows us to introduce another, probably even more challenging mode of communicating academic knowledge, and that is through its artistic translation. Of course,

1 See http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/choose/bbc?ONEML=mx074&MEDIA=mx074ou_eml10.

2 See <http://nicocarpentier.net/iconroversies>.

in many cases academia has been a source of inspiration for the arts, and there are many liminal spaces where academia and the arts meet.

This chapter looks at a specific less common type of relationship, by reporting on an experiment to communicate academic knowledge through a translation into sound art. One source of inspiration for this experiment is the work done on artistic translations, for instance when discussing the translation of the musical imaginary into sounds (Bailes, 2009), or fictocritical literature into multi-media forms (Smith, 2009). A second source of inspiration, even if it is less directly related, comes from the media studies work on adaptation and translation (Krebs, 2014) and transmediality (Jenkins, 2006; Evans, 2011).

The concept of sound art, as we understand it today, was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century, when Russolo's manifesto entitled *The art of noise* discussed the ways in which the human ear became accustomed to everyday sounds, raising questions about the form and the conventions of music (Russolo, 1967). Since then, and after the invention of ground-breaking sound tools with controversial musical attributes,³ there have been a plethora of theories relating to electro-acoustic sound (Schaeffer, 2009). The re-consideration of silence in musical terms,⁴ but also "clicks" and "clacks", "creaks" and "shooshes", and any other kind of micro- or macro-sounds have been welcomed, not only by sound artists, but also by a generation of music composers. This phenomenon evolved into sound-scape compositions – as they have been called since the 1970 – grounded in the inclusion of "other" sounds (Schafer, 1973) and the exploration of the possibilities of sound art. It has evolved into a field that is still very open to new ideas and translations and representations.

Even if sound art is an open field, a translation from academic writing into sound art poses several challenges, as the organisation of meanings in a sound composition involves procedures that are different from the structures of a written text. Sound art requires sound elements to be organised in time and space, taking into account that these parameters are characterised by fluid boundaries and differentiations (Kahn, 1999; Landy, 2007). The sonification of the knowledge presented in an academic text, following the narrative structures of sound, and the need to still convey (part of) its original meanings to a listener, is a difficult, complex and challenging, though rewarding process. At the same time, this translation experiment offers – at least potentially – the opportunity to reflect on the limitations of both academic writing and sound art. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to think

3 One example is the "theremin", Léon Theremin's revolutionary electronic instrument that he invented in the early 1920s.

4 John Cage's composition/performance "4'33'" (1952), which is as much about silence as it is about un-silence, is a seminal example.

about the communicative possibilities of sound art for representing the meanings, ideas and arguments as they unfold in an academic text. This makes the experiment valuable for the fields of academia *and* the arts.

The starting point of the translation experiment is an already existing academic book chapter, entitled *The democratic (media) revolution: a parallel genealogy of political and media participation* (Carpentier, Dahlgren and Pasquali, 2014), which will be summarised in greater detail in the next part of this article. The outcome of the experiment is a sound composition called “*Audionces*”. It can be listened to at <https://soundcloud.com/buskingsounds/audionces>. In the current chapter, the production process of *Audionces* is described and analysed, to show the complexities of the translation experiment and to contribute to the further development of these experiments.

2. A brief summary of original text⁵ – The democratic (media) revolution

The democratic (media) revolution was written by Nico Carpentier, Peter Dahlgren and Francesca Pasquali. It was published in 2014, in an edited volume entitled *Audience transformations: shifting audience positions in late modernity* (Carpentier, Schröder and Hallett, 2014). *Audience transformations* was one of the many academic publications that came out of the COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies.⁵

Using rough brushstrokes, the chapter produces two genealogies, of political and media participation in the 20th and 21st century Western world, arguing that both interlocking and intersecting social processes are part of what Mouffe (1988: 42) has called the democratic revolution. The genealogy of political participation discusses the development of representative democracy, the changes triggered by the rise of new social movements, the later weakening of these social movements and the current crises of representative democracy, where mature democracies are forced to deal with growing popular dissatisfaction and political projects that attempt to undermine them. At the same time, non-formal ways of participation have continued to function, as evidenced by the alter-globalisation movement and Occupy. The genealogy of media participation describes how the media sphere was institutionally closed off through government monopolies, and the rise of capitalism and private media companies. Also here, the 1960s and 1970s brought an opening-up of the media sphere through civil society initiatives, followed by a second wave of democratisation in the web 2.0 era.

5 See <http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu>.

After discussing the two parallel genealogies separately, *The democratic (media) revolution* looks at their intersections. Through the workings of these media organisations and networks – including journalism, popular media and internet – (minimalist) forms of participation in mainstream politics were enabled. Even if, for instance, the web facilitates civic communication, and political participation does occur through the web, these democratising (inter)actions are contextualised by representative democracy’s difficulties and continuing power inequalities. The chapter’s conclusion again emphasises the need to avoid a linear-historical narrative, and is embedded in a mood of cautious and qualified optimism, given the intensification of democracy that we have witnessed in the past 200 years, despite the many setbacks and counter-movements. Still, the conclusion ends with a warning, arguing that “*democracy is always unfinished, but it is also always threatened*” (Carpentier, Dahlgren and Pasquali, 2014: 137).

3. Actors and roles in the translation experiment

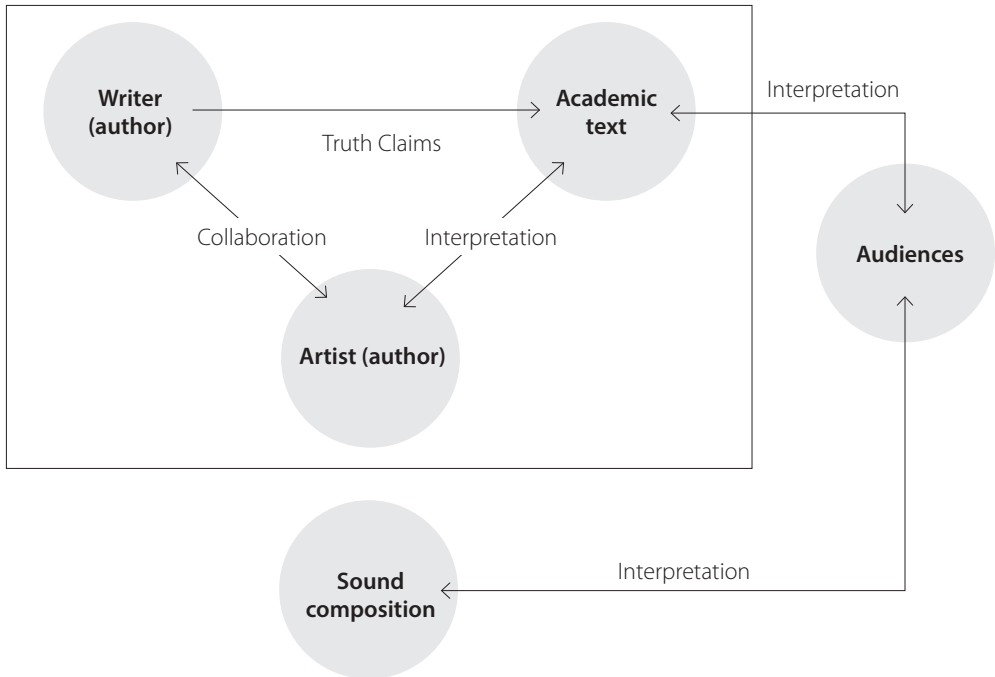
The translation experiment consisted of bringing two worlds – academia and the arts – together, whilst respecting both of their logics. This implies, in the case of sound art, the need to respect the idea that its meanings are “*fragile and full of doubt, as a tentative transfer of sensorial experience between sonic subjects*” (Voegelin, 2010: 87), while academic writing very much entails particular (and strong) truth claims grounded in scientific procedure and paradigms (see Figure 1). Academic research, according to Gooding (2001: 121), actually depends on writing, as the “*results are further constituted as public facts through the process of writing and publishing experimental narratives, so their existence depends on institutionalized publication practices*”.

Moreover, the translation process is grounded in different roles, which could potentially coincide with one and the same person, but which, in our experiment, have remained separated. The notion of translation immediately implies that there is an original-to-be-translated, with the above-mentioned truth claims embedded in it. This original text has been produced by an academic author (or writer, as s/he will be called here). Moreover, a translation implies that there is also a person in the role of the translator: the sound artist (or the sound composer), who is (normally) not involved in the writing of the original text. The sound composer freely interprets the academic text, and produces, in collaboration with the writer of the original text, a sonic interpretation of this document (see again Figure 1).

If we turn to our experiment, the *The democratic (media) revolution* book chapter was not written with its potential translation into sound art in mind. Only a year after its publication, it was selected for this experiment, as its structure

(with the parallel genealogies) and its content (with the emphasis on participation) seemed able to offer ample opportunities for such a translation project. The sound composer (Yiannis Christidis), together with one of the authors of *The democratic (media) revolution* (Nico Carpentier) jointly selected the chapter.⁶

Figure 1: actors and sub-processes in the sound art translation process



Audiences also perform a key role in this process, as Figure 1 shows as well. There are several, potentially overlapping, audiences: readers of the original text and listeners of the sound composition. Both types of audiences engage in their own interpretative processes, resulting in different decoding. Hegarty's (2009: 170) argument, that sound art "*sets up the listener as self-contained, in order to challenge not sufficiency, but only the way in which that has been constructed*", can be used for both sound art and academic writing.

6 The other two chapter authors, Peter Dahlgren and Francesca Pasquali, agreed to the project.

4. Translational strategies

The translation process and the collaboration between the writer and the sound composer were enabled by a set of translation strategies, which were jointly developed by the two actors. The main strategies were conceptualisation, the selection of sounds and their ordering into a composition.

4.1. *Conceptualisation: from text to keywords*

When translating the written text into the sound art composition, it turned out to be crucial to condense the core meanings of the text, in order to make them manageable for sonification. In this process, keywords were used, which were either supplied by the author – included those explicitly present in the text – or by the composer. Keywords capture the meanings to be translated into sound, and function as sources of inspiration for the composer's work. They condense the basic meanings, ideas and arguments of the text, which implies that their signification changes, from referring to particular signifieds (however instable that connection may be anyhow) to referring to analyses, paragraphs, arguments or structures.

The abstract nature of keywords may appear to be problematic, but it is not, as these keywords are used creatively. When thinking about their immediate translation into sound, the signifier “audience”, for instance, obviously provokes different challenges than a word like “dog” does. An open signifier such as “audience” – with all its possibilities and interpretations – needs the academic text to clarify which particular position in academic discourse is taken.⁷ When it gains the status of keyword, it is – at least partially – extracted from the context that the academic text provides, whilst still taking some of that context and specificity with it, as it is transferred into the hands of the sound artist for translation. The composer then may add (an)other layer(s) of (artistic) interpretation to the different keywords, by morphing them into sound.

In our case, full sentences also functioned as keywords. For example, a keyword phrase like “media constantly find ways to affirm their power over people” is a unique combination of words, which can be translated into sound in various ways – the translator's aesthetics, background or attitude decides on the exact way. In this example, “media” can be mimetically translated into a TV white noise signal, a sound of pressing a button of an old TV set or the continuous drone that is reminiscent of the sound of the modem in the late nineties. But less mimetic translations also remain possible. Thanks to its intertextuality, a well-selected citation

7 This is not to argue that the signifier “dog” is autonomous.

from a film, as, for instance, the chant *Be exited, be be exited* from *Requiem for a dream*, can be invoked to critically refer to an entire genre, such as reality TV in this particular case. The same logic can be applied to every word of this key-word-sentence.⁸

However, no matter how abstract such conceptualisations can be, the tool of conceptualisation is very necessary and opens up a pathway for the production process of the sound composition. This process allows the piece of sound art to express the sound artist's subjective and creative interpretation, without abandoning the intentions of the author of the original text, a balance protected by their collaboration. Equally important are the material components of this process, namely the condensation of the ideas of the author in the academic text and the sounds that are selected, created or modified to sonify the academic text. In this sense, the translation process is a double dialogue, between academic text and sounds, and between author-writer and author-composer, with the first dialogue organised through the principle of conceptualisation and the second through collaboration and negotiation.

4.2. Selecting sources and ordering sounds: from keywords to sounds and their composition

The second translation strategy is grounded in the translation of concepts into sounds, which, first of all, implies a selection of sound sources. Any material movement, of objects or subjects, is a potentially useful sound source. Moreover, as the sound composition does not mimetically represent the analysis, but instead provides an artistic interpretation that develops according to its own patterns, a composer working on such a representation is quite free to experiment. This freedom also translates into the selection of sources, whether s/he has recorded them, or whether already recorded sound is used. In addition, the sources can be different, as natural sounds, human voice and its many variations, musical instruments and electronic/technological sounds are all possible options.

Natural sounds are easily recognizable and feed the listeners' ears with something that is perceived as being close to nature. Strategically, it recreates an already familiar environment and places it in an artificial time and space. Musical instruments are culturally privileged generators of sound and have a long history of being used not only for music compositions, but also for sound compositions. Electronically generated sounds are also easily and frequently morphed. Their flexibility regarding their (non)recognisability, having also been the reference for electroacoustic compositions, make them helpful instruments for this type of trans-

8 Obviously, we should not forget that sound art is also related to media.

lation. Music, as a combination of acoustic instruments, digitally generated sounds and the human voice, is a highly utile sound in its own right. Moreover, the recorded voice of the writer (or the composer) could function as a sound source for the composition. Other voices, such as crowds or singers, can also feature in the sound art composition. Human voice has a great potential for, and a long history in sound compositions: from pieces that have common elements with radio documentary-style texts to granular synthesis audio work, the human voice as sound wave has proven a highly utile sound source to work and experiment with.

These different sources generate the sounds that are, in turn, the building blocks for the sound composition. Even though one type of sound source can be used exclusively – and be recognized as such – combinations are also possible (and often used). These sounds are then ordered and integrated into the composition, where the discrete sounds become morphed, superimposed and/or juxtaposed, and where these sounds work on and with each other. This ordering process is the third translation strategy. Sound needs time to evolve. In order for a sound composition to be described/created, a duration and then a based-on-time structure are needed. The dimension of time thus becomes integrated in this third strategy, as it forms a fixed, important, restrictive and still defining element for any sound composition.

Even if the academic text and the sound composition are structurally different, they are both characterised by this linearity, which facilitates the translation. In a way, the linear structure of the text reflects the time factor of the sound composition. In the translation process, this also implies a conscious organisation of the distribution of meanings in (time) phases, even in cases where the structure of the original text is not blindly copied, but interpreted as well. These phases are then represented in time, which gives the composer the opportunity to generate an outline of the sound composition, according to the structure of the text, or more precisely, according to the artistic interpretation of the structure of the text.

5. The translation process more in detail

These three translation strategies were used to create *Audionces* in a collaboration between its two authors. In practice, these strategies overlapped, and a more parallel and sometimes cyclical *modus operandi* was used. This way of working still implied that in the first stage a time structure was decided upon, then the keywords were selected and “coded” into sounds. These sounds were then integrated in the time-based structure, making use of the multi-layeredness that characterises a sound composition and that allows combining sounds at the same time intervals. What seems to be a straightforward process turned out to be quite challenging, and merits a more detailed description.

5.1. *Conceptualisation in practice*

The basic meanings, ideas and arguments of the text were translated into sound as respectfully as possible. Words/thematic issues which were representative for each paragraph or (sub)part of the original text formed the basis of the conceptualisation process. The centrality of a keyword for the text (in representing its meanings), but also the sonic associations that a word triggered, were used as criteria in a negotiated selection process. This close connection between concepts and sounds can be illustrated, using four keywords as example:

Mainstream media – This keyword was sonically associated with the music of TV advertisements, radio station IDs and muzak style music structures. Their sonic “destruction”, related with audience resistance and rejection, lead to the addition of sound effects and distortive elements.

Alternative media – Even though alternative media have a long history, the concept was sonically reduced to sources related to the electronic. This representation of alternative media included the use of internet-related sounds and of computer or mobile electronic devices sounds.

Political hegemony – Translating this keyword involved using the music that is often used by political parties during their campaigns, but was also related to the sounds that mainstream media use, as these are often connected to political objectives.

Political contestation – Here, music that has become a symbol for (particular eras of) protest, and the sounds of manifestations or conflictuous events were morphed to sonify this concept.

The conceptualisation strategy also allowed outlining the relations between the pairs of mainstream media / political hegemony, and alternative media / political contestations, throughout the sound art composition.

5.2. *Sound sources*

As the above-rendered example on conceptualisation and sonification already illustrates, a wide variety of sound sources were used in the sonification process, which lead to the creation of *Audionces*. These (combined) sources included soundscapes, music, noise and silence.

Soundscapes

The whole composition forms a constructed soundscape, where smaller bits of it intervene and present themselves as separate soundscapes. For instance, the soundscapes created by combining the sounds of machinery and digital communication, and combinations of the sound of a Molotov cocktail with the sounds of demonstrations, were key elements in the composition.

Music

The composition also uses music, including parts of the CNN station ID, a chanting choir, and Joan Baez's song *We shall overcome*. The latter functions as a symbol of the civil rights movement, with its increased levels of citizen participation. These sounds have been subjected to transformations and/or distortions, in order to integrate them in the sound composition and its soundscapes. These sonic manipulations have been designed to retain the sources' significations but also to simultaneously alter these significations for the sake of their integration into the sound composition.

Intertextuality plays a particularly strong role when music is used, as these musical texts are linked to a wide variety of other texts that, together, have come to symbolise particular processes or eras. The use of *We shall overcome*, and the counter-culture of the 1960s it symbolises, is one illustration. In the sound composition, the last syllables of *We shall overcome* have been altered by being stretched over time, creating a subverted citation arguing that this particular musical citation stands for the past.

Noise

TV noise, radio noise, electronic noise, information noise, but also human noise coming from political manifestations is frequently used. Especially, when the sound composition reflects about the audience (and its participation), the element of "unwanted sound" is used to represent the "conceptual noise" which refers to the complex combination of non-participation, minimalist participation and (some) maximalist participation. White or pink noise works as a noisy element to establish (a limited degree of) annoyance for the listener's ear, similar to audience's unease generated by the mainstream media. Noisy elements are also sparsely used in the composition to interrupt a narrative structure, in order to avoid that the listener settles in too comfortably during the listening experience, and to communicate the many different hurdles that participation still evokes.

Silence

Silence, as the moment where sounds are absent, has been regarded as a "*basic condition of an aesthetics and philosophy of sound art*" (Voegelin, 2010: 82). Silence

contributes to the identity of the sound composition, and, because of the context of the composition, remains a vital part of its communicative dimension. In *Audionces* silence was used as a compositional device, creating its own space (Dyson, 2009) and following a strategy of concept-based silent intervals. But also semi-silence has been used, by including inconspicuous sounds and minimal sound bits which were based on granular synthesis, reminiscent of electronic media. These almost-silent elements also enhance the presence of non-silence, as something that is there, playing, but not really.

Moreover, silences are used in the composition to establish a passage from one thematic area to another or to offer some rest to the ear. Elements of the aforementioned categories were creatively combined to create audio “establishing shots”: the choir, the CNN music theme, or Baez’s song, and, of course, the dominant sounds of television. In every section of the composition, there is an element of one of these that dominates the soundscape, and something that is used to interrupt it and change it, using rough or smooth cuts.

5.3. *The Audionces time structure*

The different sounds were then integrated in the sound composition. The following overview (Figure 2) has been included to help the reader understand the sound composition’s structure, in relation to time.

Figure 2: the sound structure over time

	0-30	30-1.00	1-1.30	1.30-2.00	2.00-2.30	2.30-3.00	3.00-3.30	3.30-4.00	
SOUNDS	TV on	Distant voices (audiences)							
	Frequency alterations			Hollywood style choir	Frequency noise		"The revolution will not be televised"		
	White Noise (back and forth) - Wave representation								
		Frequency- A wave			Radio station/shows ID	20th Century Fox Music modified	TV elements (Clean & altered)	TV on-channel browsing	
	White noise			White noise	Choir & "clean" Hollywood music		"No such thing as public money"	Televisonal silence	
			Crowd coming		"Silence, please" Modulation	"The revolution starts now"		Artificial applause and laughter	
KEYWORDS (selection)									
			Actors			Hollywood / cultural industry	Media power	Muteness/people	
						Centralised governance			
	Mainstream Media								

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4.00-4.30	4.30-5.00	5.00-5.30	5.30-6.00	6.00-6.30	6.30-7.00	7.00-7.30	7.30-8.00	8.00-8.30
Molotov cocktail sound	Distant people, explosions & fiesta							
			"Be, be excited"	TV Ad prompts				
Distorted Revolution ("We shall overcome")			Stock exchange market					
Distant CNN ID					Machinery			
Siren-like sound		Telephone dial (altered)	TV zapping		Protest			"We will not be silenced?"
New social movements	Actors	Analogue-digital/digitized communication	Guided participation/ actors		Public sphere			
	Political Hegemony	Alternative Media			Strong interventions / political participation			
Political Contestation	Mainstream Media				Mainstream Media			

6. Tensions and synergies

When reflecting about the translation process after its completion, a series of tensions can be identified. These tensions originate from the respectful reconciliation of academic writing and sound art, and from the collaboration between two (and potentially more) people in different roles, with different identities. These tensions are not necessarily problematic, and the synergies of these positions are constructive and constitutive for the outcome(s) of the process. Nevertheless, they remain important for understanding the process and its opportunities, and thus need to be discussed.

6.1. Authorship

The creation of this sonic composition, based on an original academic text, was mainly enabled by the teamwork of two individuals and their (re-)interpretations of the written work. Even if their positions are distinct, this collaboration was grounded in a respectful and balanced dialogue, where both participants shared their thoughts about the text and discussed its audio-translatable aspects. This collaboration has produced a shared authorship of the sound composition.

Still, the distinctness of the two roles produces a significant tension. The writer has produced the original text without the sound composer present, and there is the risk of the sacralisation of the original text, which would place the composer in a merely executive role. Even if the latter acquires the role of the phonograph, as Crawford (2012: 83) puts it, *“to select sounds in bounded time”*, a certain degree of composer autonomy remains a necessary condition for a successful translation. Inversely, the autonomy of the writer is also important, as a disconnection of the

translation process from the writer would shift the focus away from a (respectful) translation, and would produce a very different outcome, exclusively grounded in artistic inspiration.

6.2. *Communicational structures*

A second tension is related to the differences in the ways that academic writing and sound art are structured, even though the narrative structures of both are linear. An academic text is defined by pages, subparts and paragraphs, in which letters and numbers are all placed in a formalised order so that they can represent the desired meanings. The dominant model of academic writing is still based on a mono-layered structure (although exceptions exist – see the introduction of this text). The dominant format, however, imposes a linear way of rendering thoughts and of letting arguments evolve. Sound is also linear, in terms of time, as it develops through this dimension; however, what constitutes a sound composition is the result of a *tapestry* of sonic elements, which are positioned in various layers in time, and often in space, as is the case for an exhibition or multi-channel oriented compositions.

This different form of linearity produces a challenge for the translation, as it raises questions about to what degree the mono-layered structure of the original text needs to be maintained, and how much multi-layeredness can be used without severing all connections with the original text. In this experiment, for instance, a choice was made to keep the main structuring elements of the original text and to use multi-layered sonic elements within these main elements. Obviously, other possibilities exist, but, arguably, also then, the tension between mono- and multi-layeredness needs to be negotiated.

6.3. *Mimetic representation, interpretation and disconnection*

As the original text has been created before the translation, the risk (or the temptation) exists that the sonic translation becomes a “mere” mimetic representation of the original academic text, which would imply abandoning the idea of the translation and reverting to the copy. In (an extreme version of) this scenario, the sound composer could simply record the writer reading the academic text aloud, turning it into an audio book (chapter). On the other hand, the sound composer could also produce a sound composition, still inspired by the original text, but too disconnected from it, which would again makes us shift outside the realm of the translation.

This tension is mostly a matter of degree. We can find comfort in Benjamin’s (1991: 78) words, when he wrote that “[...] *a mimetic presentation within both the*

visual arts and literature, by definition, is always going to be unable to present the 'reality', or 'essential being' of the represented". In other words, no copy will ever be the perfect copy, as the performative force of iterability (Derrida, 1988; Butler, 1997) produces change. On the other side of the spectrum we find contingency, as the notion of being "too disconnected" from the original text is again a matter of degree.

Moreover, there is always a process of interpretation, even when it comes to the writer that is revisiting the academic text, as this text becomes revisited in the dialogue between writer and sound composer. Here, encoding and decoding – as described by Hall (1980) – touch each other in the sub-processes of re-reading, re-interpretation and negotiation, which all form part of the main process of translation. The sound composer also interprets the original text, as part of the translation, and the writer then interprets the (different versions of) the sound composition. In this sense, when the risks of the copy and the disconnection are averted, the chain of interpretations provides opportunities for a creative, constructive and respectful dialogue. This chain also demonstrates the fluidity of meaning in relation to both academic writing and sound art.

6.4. *Truth claim diversity*

A fourth and final tension is the (possibly) different position towards the truth claims embedded in the analysis. Both communicative environments have particular relationships with the notion of truth, even though the relationship between truth and art is more contested. But here, it is important to refer to Groys's (2016: 01/11) words: "[...] *if art cannot be a medium of truth then art is only a matter of taste*". Nevertheless, the strong connection between academia and truth, regulated and solidified by the genre of academic writing but also by the procedures of argumentation and analysis, and the more contested (and open) relationship between arts and truth, with less strict regulatory frameworks,⁹ creates a tension. Here, in particular, the weakening of the truth claims of the academic text through the translation into sound art might raise concerns.

At the same time, the translation process does not necessarily undermine the truth claims of both formats. The translation process, and its explicit labelling as such, prevents the ties with the (truth claims of the) academic text being severed and thus protects both writer and sound artist against the weakening of these truth claims. In this sense, the academic text and the sound composition become non-identical twins, similar, but still very different, which allows embedding the

9 Even though there are still regulatory frameworks produced by the art worlds (Becker, 1982). Moreover, there are also ethical considerations, for instance, in the case of sound art, in relation to inflicting pain on listeners by using high sound levels.

truth claims of the academic text within the sound composition. Moreover, this connection of the sound composition also strengthens the articulation of (sound) art with truth claims and the political, which is a position we would like to defend anyhow. Even more interestingly, the articulation of the academic truth claims with the fluidity of sound art also shows the contingency of the academic truth claims embedded in the academic text that is being translated, and in academic texts in general, subtly reminding the listener and the reader that academic knowledge is contingent and political as well.

7. Conclusion: evaluating an acousmatic-academic experience

When evaluating its process and the outcome, the translation experiment – however challenging it has proven to be – demonstrated several advantages. Firstly, the translation into a sound composition acted as a multiplier, allowing several and very different audiences to be targeted. Sound art and academic writing share a desire for communication, which also implies the presence of an audience, even if this is not necessarily a mass audience. Translating the *The democratic (media) revolution* book chapter into a different genre allowed the circulation of the ideas embedded in the original text, and in the sound composition, in very different societal fields. These increased opportunities for the communication of knowledge diverge from traditional forms of science communication, in the sense that not society at large is targeted, but a societal field that is often deemed to be as inaccessible as academia itself (namely sound art). We would like to argue that this transfer, from one field that tackles societal complexity to another one, is equally important, and actually illustrates the need for a diversification or pluralisation of science communication.

Secondly, the experiment has also produced a fundamental enrichment of the original text, as the writer and the sound composer were both forced to go back to the very basics of academic and artistic knowledge production, in order to produce this hybrid narrative. In particular, the combined processes of conceptualisation and sonification led to new questions about the analysis being asked, identifying the core ideas but also considering their symbolisation through the selection of sound sources and their integration into a sound composition, with the many opportunities and restrictions this brought about. Intertextuality played an important role here, as it generated a bridge between concepts and sounds, providing the multiple layers of meanings to (at least some of) the selected sounds which produced a much better fit with the concepts that were being sonified.

Finally, the experiment also constructively challenged both academic writing and sound art. The experiment demonstrated that it is an incredible luxury to be able to communicate different things at the same time (because of the multi-layer-

ered nature of the sonic), which is very difficult to realise in academic writing. On the other hand, the sonification process consumed a considerable amount of intellectual energy, which contrasted with the ease of deploying written language to communicate academic knowledge. The process of faithfully dealing with an original, without the sound composition becoming a copy, also turned out to be a challenge for both academic writing and sound art, articulating the difficulties of both fields in giving up some of their autonomy. Still, the experiment also demonstrated that a respectful dialogue, resulting in a state of non-autonomous autonomy, is feasible and enriching.

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