

Audiofiction: no time for deep thoughts and feelings?

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My talk began with a small unreliable experiment:

- Half the audience received a handout (turned over) with the opening paragraphs of Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain" printed on it. They were told: "Don't read it yet! You are group A."
- Half the audience did not receive a handout: "You are group B."

I told the groups:

On my signal, I want group A to stop (or plug) their ears, and **read** the Wolff passage. At the same signal I want group B to **listen** carefully to an audio-text which I will play to them—but to take no written notes... The reading/listening will take just over 1 minute...

Outline of my talk

- To review some main contrasts between reading and hearing a story
- To report of testing/questionnaire with readers/listeners
- To offer some speculations about story-reading vs audiofiction

Writer Colm Toibin has recently re-asserted that literature is special by virtue of being art with a private impact...one person at a time

The business of reading and writing are done alone...There is a lovely privacy and power about that...You are affecting someone when they are alone, probably the most powerful time to affect people [unlike making movies, writing rock songs]. With fiction you are hitting one person at a time...

(KCRW Bookworm interview with Michael Silverblatt, first aired 17 April 2008)

But how private and intimate is reading a story, or listening to a story, e.g., on a bus or a train? Does the story have your "undivided attention"?

1. Reading a story, attention may be distracted by sounds, especially (plus smells, tastes, touch, *other* visual information)
2. Listening to a story, your attention may be distracted by your visual environment (plus smells, tastes, touch, *other* sounds).

Distractors have more impact when they vary/change... (this remains *generally* true despite 'change blindness' phenomena, interesting exceptions to the norm)

The i-pod generation

In this ipod era, audio versions of novels and short stories are becoming commonplace... arguably to the point where the audio version of a literary short story may reach more addressees than the written counterpart. Might the short story genre then change, as writers adjust the conventions and forms to suit better works that are to be heard and not read? If so, how?

Listening vs reading a literary short story

What ideational and emotional *differences* might there be, between the experience of *reading* a Munro or Wolff or Foster Wallace story and *listening* to it?

Hearing the spoken vs reading the read

Listening (like speech) is inescapably 'timed' or 'in' time. By contrast, reading permits us to stretch time, and even (to a degree) to impose our own timing on this timed activity.

We associate a 'pause button' with forms of reproduced sounds, moving images, and speech, as received by us via one or another playing and recording mechanism: we associate the pause button with certain forms of speech and film, but not with traditional reading. And yet, in everyday conditions, there is no 'pause button' we can apply to others' speaking and our listening; whereas in writing and reading there is. We can halt the read message at will; often we cannot halt the heard message.

It will be pointed out that these claims seem to discount the ease with which, on an ipod or mp3 player or old-technology car cassette deck, one can pause the flow of audiofiction and even replay the last few seconds of the audiotext. Granted, we *can* do these things; but my question is whether ordinary story-listeners *do* do these things. I believe not. Even if we do or where we do, the audio pause is different from the reading pause, in that the former is normally a 'repair' pause (halting the flow because of some external interruption, or in order to catch a phrase or development that one has missed) while the latter has the potential to be a 'reflection' pause. By a 'reflection' pause I am thinking of the situation, in story-reading, where we lift our eyes from the text, or dwell on the words just read, in order to think again, or further, about the relevance and the implications of what has just been expressed. I can see no evidence of 'reflection' pauses of this kind in the typical consumption of audiofiction.

Writing is static, with 'temporal duration' and normally allows a range of kinds of re-processing (exploiting order, duration and frequency) in the course of reading. Speech (even recorded speech) is kinetic, and the possibilities of re-

processing are much reduced, where possible at all.

In practical terms, and technological terms, it is really difficult for the audio-user to s-l-o-w the listening down, e.g. so as to savour each word or phrase....whereas in reading, we can at will choose to loiter on one word, or rush on past several:

A lonely
impulse
of delight
drove
to
this
tumult
in the skies

The ipod-delivered short story differs at least in the way the pace and flow of the discourse is essentially under the performer's (or performers') control, and by virtue of the presence (intrusion?) of the performer's voice(s). Do such factors render the audio story 'easier to consume' but less cognitively and emotionally rich than the same story encountered in written form?

Consumers' responses

An MA student at Birmingham, James Bailly (diss., 2007), studied readers' and listeners' responses to two modern stories, one by E B White (story A), the other by Donald Barthelme (story B), which they received in EITHER written OR audio form.

Bailly, James. 2007. Emotional responses to printed format and audio format stories.

Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Birmingham.

Bailly's methodology, in summary:

- 20 Informants in total, roughly balanced for gender, young educated adults... readers but not all 'big' readers of literature..
- 10 informants given story A in the print condition and story B in the audio condition; 10 informants given story A in the audio version and B in the print version.
- All 20 given a 30-item questionnaire, to complete in their own time
- The questionnaire probed informants as to whether they 'liked' the audio or the print story more, remembered more of the a or the p story, found one or other more emotionally involving or challenging to their thinking or

view of the world.

Bailly's Main Findings:

1. \Printed stories seemed to be somewhat more enjoyable/ pleasurable than those in audio format.

Comment: Was this to do with reader 'control', and/or familiarity with written story consumption?

2. Stories in audio format seem to be less demanding.

Comment: listening to a story you don't have to create the narrative voice, merely to attend to it; there is "no work for the eyes". Is reading—generally--more demanding than listening?

3. Audio stories seem to engender more emotional responses, mainly 'fresh' ones, to the scenes/episodes described

4. Printed/read stories seemed to elicit far more 'emotional *memories*'.

Comment: an emotional response to a memory involves contemplation of that memory and contemplation takes time, time that a reader of a story has but time that is denied to the listener of an audio format story.)

Most other findings were mixed and inconclusive. One tentative one was that:

5. Audio stories were able to (or were perceived to) generate more mental images than read stories.

This may be because the listener is relieved of the duty of creating the narrative voice and of having to take in words visually, allowing more time for 'the mind's eye' to be more active.

So far, so speculative, but how can we test for these claimed differences (slight or large)? At this point in my talk I turned back to the passage from the Tobias Wolff story, "Bullet in the Brain", that the audience had 'consumed' (half by reading, half by listening) at the opening of my talk. Without giving any of the group the opportunity to read or listen to the text again, I asked them to respond to a few simple questions intended to probe the extent of their recall and even their deeper engagement with the story. Answers were elicited quite informally and orally, and members of the audience giving their answers simply self-identified as a 'Reader' or a 'Hearer' of the story extract. The questions I asked included the following:

How often was Anders in an excellent mood?
Always/ mostly/ half the time/ infrequently/ never?

What does Anders do for a living?
Academic/ runs a bookshop/ lawyer/ book reviewer

Why does Anders assure one of the women waiting in line for a teller that "Heaven will take note"? What is his point?

Why, towards the end of the passage read/heard, does Anders say "Oh, bravo. Dead meat."?

These questions were posed with no particular expectation of demonstrating any marked trends or differences, but simply with a view to suggesting that, in principle, there may be significant differences in our ability easily to recall the detail and become immersed in the situation of a literary story we hear, by contrast with a literary story we read. And in light of the demonstrable growth in audiofiction as an increasingly available cultural practice, a stylistic examination of many aspects of audiofiction vis a vis written/read fiction (including contextual frame-maintenance, cohesive chains, and foregrounding resources) was well worth undertaking.

Final Speculations (particularly geared to the conference's theme, of Time and Texts).

After much more investigation, I speculated, it might emerge that the kinds of answers given in the responses to audio-encountered stories might differ sufficiently consistently from those given in response to the read stories for some contrasts in the consumer's experience to be describable.

Since in audio stories the consumer has 'less time', it may be that some of the things in stories which arguably need more time--reconsideration, intertextual evoking and analogizing, 'liberty' of the consumer to 'take' the given words in different ways--will tend to be curtailed.

Alternatively, or additionally, the textual style of audio stories might change to better suit audio consumption. For example, if one way of 'delaying time' or 'giving the listener the kind of time the reader can take to process a message' would be to use more repetition, then possibly certain kinds of repetition, reiteration and recapitulation might be deployed, over and above the kinds of disambiguating repetition we find quite normally in written stories. It is possible that forms of such reiteration are already developed in such formats as the radio story and radio play.

Final Caveats

The speculation (about consumers of audio stories having 'less time' than those of read stories) concerns audio versions of otherwise-readable stories. It is not suggesting that all 'timed' art forms—plays, music, etc.—thwart the possibility of deeper thoughts and reflections because there is no consumer control of processing speed. It is particularly in *stories*, I would tentatively suggest (not novels, not plays, not even poetry, all of which *can* be and are produced and marketed in an audioformat controllable by the individual consumer) that, today, there is a degree of real rivalry between the read and heard modes of consumption. It is especially in the genre of the short story that the modern artist might be tempted to pause and ask themselves: do I want to produce this story to be heard, or to be read?