A Cinema for the Ears: Imagining the Audio-Cinematic through Podcasting

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Abstract:
Podcasts have been described as “a cinema for the ears” and this application of a visual rhetoric to describe an audio-only experience results in an attempt to define what is still a relatively new medium. I argue that it is possible to consider something cinematic without the presence of moving images. Assertions in favour of the cinematic nature of podcasts often employ the visual imagination of listeners evoked by heightened audio characteristics that a particular podcast may possess. By focusing on film-centred podcasts specifically, which, in terms of content and form, are implicitly and often explicitly concerned with properties of the cinematic, I argue for a more conceptual analysis of the idea of a visual form of audio. While many film-oriented podcasts provide a supplementary celebration of cinema culture rather than manifesting a unique cinematic experience of their own, there are examples of film-centred podcasts that attempt to actualise what I will call an “audio-cinematic” experience, deploying the creative potential of the podcast to manifest an experiential aura that evokes a cinematic imagination. I analyse the sonic dimensions of audio-cinematic podcasts including my work with Neil Fox on The Cinematologists Podcast.

Keywords: Podcasts; Imagination; Audio-cinematic; Sound; Speech; Phenomenology.

As part of the submission criteria for the BBC’s 2019 commissioning call for audio programming, a list of “commandments” defined the “dos” and “don’ts” of podcasting (BBC, 2019). One of the points asserts that
Podcasts are “a visually powerful form of audio, they can be a cinema for the ears”. This claim is, on the surface, opaque and counter-intuitive. Even if we accept that sound is intrinsic to the concept of “the cinematic”, surely images must be deemed essential to any understanding of a cinematic ontology. The technological transformations of the digital turn are forcing a re-evaluation, not only of our multi-faceted engagements with the audio-visual, but of the theoretical language we employ to make sense of these changes. Such a process is underway in many aspects of film-philosophy and Film Studies. Francesco Casetti, for example, asserts that, rather than a fixed set of technological and spatial conditions, the cinematic should be thought of as mode of experience: “[it] is first and foremost a mode of seeing, feeling, reflecting and reacting […], a particular way of relating with the world” (2015, p. 5). Even within Casetti’s metamorphic list, the visual remains the axiomatic component defining the cinematic, yet his opening up of the cinematic experience as an embodied, perceptual and imaginary subjectivity, provides a conceptual framework through which we might unpack the notion of a “cinema for the ears”.

Although verbal analysis and discussion of cinema and film culture is the underpinning of film podcasting, most podcasts also interweave sonic elements using modes of aural production that directly call to a listener’s cinematic imagination. The use of audio film clips, trailers, film scores and sonic effects are obvious examples. However, in most film podcasts, the artefact of the film itself, and by implication the process of film watching, is implicitly sanctified as a separate medium, and practice of mediation. Podcasting is simply a secondary platform whereby sound properties are utilised to affirm the primary experience of cinema. Drawing on Girish Shambu (2014), podcasting is understood as an “elsewhere” to cinema’s “there”. However, there are also examples of podcasts that attempt to actualize an audio-cinematic experience. This idea draws on a conceptual lineage spanning Sound & Radio Studies, sound arts practices and sound-focused Film Studies. Such disciplines theorise sonic experiences in terms of their capacity to shape the spatial recognition of sound through the materialisation of an environment via technological apparatus, and the semiotic instigation of the combinations of sounds that create a cinematic aurality. The possibility of an audio-only experience that evokes intensity, scope and figurative power, such that the experience is deemed cinematic, is counter to what Clive Cazeaux (2005) instead suggests is a discourse of “lack” associated with non-visual artforms. Analysing the experiential qualities of radio drama, he reframes sound-only art as possessing a “positive invitational quality” and a “calling
for completeness” (p. 158) where listener engagement requires a cognitive process of active imagining.

In this article, I explore how podcasting has created the potential for audio-cinematic experiences that utilise the imaginative space created by this posited lack of an image, playing on a listener’s memories, interpretations and emotions associated with cinematic engagement. I conceptualise podcasting as audio-cinematic through two interrelated conceptual strands. First, I explore a parallel between podcasting and cinema in terms of how technological and spatial configurations are associated with the nature of the experience they create; there are practices of engagement with both types of media that orient the listener/watcher, thus structuring, shaping or perhaps even determining a specific cognitive experience. For this, I utilise Casetti’s concept of assemblage to explore how, in the digital context, two seemingly very different media are defined by processes in which users (re)create the conditions of experience in contingent circumstances facilitated by technological expediency. Secondly, I explore the use of sound aesthetics as a form of sonic reimagining which recalls a listener’s intellectual or emotional sensibilities and memories associated with cinema.

By differentiating between podcasts that are about cinema and podcasts that manifest an audio-cinematic experience, I argue that voice, not just in terms of speech content, but through texture and tone and through integration with film music and sound effects, evokes our cinematic memories. But, more than this, I examine how recording, editing and sound design are utilised to create sonic aesthetics that invite listeners to immerse themselves in a process of active imagining. Audio-cinematic experiences, in this sense, offer an idea of the cinematic beyond conceptions bounded by apparatus and content, beyond hierarchies of image and sound, and towards a dynamic subjectivity that can emerge in many media-sensory-cognitive contexts.

From Technological Dispositif to Audio-Cinematic Experience

Applications of the term “cinematic” are often somewhat abstract. Anything of, or pertaining to cinema, can be deemed cinematic, and its use in broad parlance often implies a rather tenuous frame of reference. However, it is perhaps most often deployed in terms of aesthetics; cinematic language, for example, points to the semiology of the visual artefact and how meaning is created through representations constructed by the film image itself. Yet, the notion of a film (or any media) being cinematic functions to demarcate a certain idea of quality, grandeur, mood, or spectacle, that transcends mere representation. The term cinematic also denotes an overarching system – when we say “cinema”
instead of “film” or “movie” – the cinematic alludes to the product of an industrial history, and, in turn, to a social and economic context for the viewing of moving images. This emphasises the very situation of watching; “going to the cinema” implies entry into a specific set of technological and spatial conditions within which a unique, mediated experience is on offer. We then seem to come full circle, as the cinematic film is specifically created with this kind of viewing situation in mind. When thinking about podcasting in these terms, not only does one have to acknowledge the conceptual slipperiness of the cinematic, but also the fundamental differences between the two media in terms of basic form, historical development, socio-cultural context, and apparatus of engagement.

When thinking about podcasting in a cinematic framework, I want to start by examining how questions regarding conditions of consumption, particularly in the context of digital technologies and digital culture, have opened up new practices and modes of thought as to what constitutes the cinematic. My entry point, drawing on the work of Francesco Casetti, is the notion of “cinematic experience”. “Experience” itself is conceptually nebulous, but, for Casetti, it allows for a re-articulation of the vast complexities of process and interaction with regards to cinema, in the light of digital technological transformations. Casetti posits experience as an activation of the senses in a given situation, constituted by a recognised process of perception induced through sensory phenomena. In this sense, we can think about experience as something that we are objectively constantly immersed within; an addendum to our being in the world and our very consciousness of it. One’s recognition of their own subjective situation leads us to the notion of having “had an experience”, and “being experienced”. The conditions of any specific experience may be set in place for us through environmental and technological apparatus, or indeed as we see more and more in today’s world, we can cultivate our own individualised experiences as technologies are designed for the creation of autonomous practices. For Casetti, experience is:

not only a matter of perception but also implies a reflexivity and a number of individual or social practices. It is a perceiving, a consideration of what is perceived and of ourselves, and a way of dealing with the context...In this sense, it is a cognitive act, but one that is always rooted in, and affects, a body (it is “embodied”), a culture (it is “embedded”), and a situation (it is “grounded”). (2015, p. 5)

The foregrounding of experience in the context of how we understand cinema is a move that is designed to free Casetti from a rigid grounding of the cinematic in the traditional, culturally ingrained and technologically
specific apparatus of the movie theatre. He asserts that such “reflexivity of perception” and the possibility of “dealing with the context” provides a sense that the cinematic is a mode of experience that has moved beyond, or transmuted out of, a set of unified, ingrained conditions that mediate our relation to the world. The sensory resonances that are associated with cinematic experience find form in so many situations that aligning such experience to a rigid set of prescribed conditions is no longer tenable.

One of Casetti’s primary aims, then, is to challenge the legacy of apparatus theory and the notion that the cinematic experience is only truly available through an idealised configuration of film spectatorship: the cinematic dispositif. In the context of film theory, Jean-Louis Baudry (1975) defines the dispositif as the specific technological and spatial apparatus of spectatorship which gives rise to a unique subjective perceptual experience.¹ Baudry draws upon the Platonic questioning of the relationship between knowledge and perception in the Cave allegory to suggest that the dispositif is an interpolative structure between the two, which establishes an illusory subjectivity. The apparatus of physical space, screen and projected image serves to channel the spectator into the pseudo-reality of the film world. Some strands of film theory assert the ideologically negative outcomes of such a passive experience, and it provides the structural grounding for Metz’s psychoanalytic film theory. Indeed, the implication of the dispositif as describing the uniqueness of the cinema auditorium experience, up until very recently drove both the economic structuring and cultural sentiment of the film industry along with both popular and academic discourses of idealisation about how film should best be viewed.

Conceptual critiques of a rigid, apparatus-centred approach to defining the cinematic experience are part of the phenomenological turn in Film Studies that foreground the embodied subject and her material situatedness in relation to cinema (Sobchack, 1992; Marks, 2000). Related to this are historical studies of cinema that challenge the assumed stability of the cinematic dispositif by examining non-conformist cultural practices (Keply, 1996; Farmer 2000). Furthermore, there are contestations and hybridisations positing a multitude of dispositifs that structure spectatorship practices across many contexts of moving image exhibition (Parante & Calvalho, 2008) along with discussions around expanded, extended and post-cinema (Atkinson, 2014; Denson & Leyda, 2016).

¹ As Bryukhovetska (2010) points out there is no specific translation Baudry’s intended meaning of dispositif, with terms “apparatus”, “device”, “mechanism”, “arrangement” and “situation” often inadequately substituted.
Casetti suggests that the digital transformation represents a category change necessitating a new theoretical language in order to accommodate contemporary multifaceted, unfixed, mobile, hybridised modes of audio-visual engagement. Developing a concept by Agamben (2009) and Deleuze (1992), Casetti forwards the idea that:

The cinematic dispositif no longer appears to be a predetermined, closed, and binding structure, but rather an open and flexible set of elements; it is no longer an apparatus, but rather an assemblage. And it is not the “machine” that determines the cinematic experience; rather, it is the cinematic experience that finds – or even configures the “machine”. (2015, p. 69)

This concept of “assemblage” suggests a reconfiguring of technological and environmental components that may be constructed by the subject herself (home screening, or watching a film on a laptop with earphones), or be partly found in a particular circumstance (watching a film on a long-haul flight). Such heterogeneous situations are termed “strategies of repair” (p. 70 ff.) by Casetti: a cinematic experience is assembled by the subject in order to negotiate imperfect conditions. For Casetti, the process of assemblage possesses four characteristics: (1) The presence of image and sound, (2) a definitive practice of consumption, (3) a “reterritorialization” (pp. 29–30) of experience, and (4) the creation of “symbolic” (p. 84) connections to the cinematic. The very idea of assemblage as a “strategy of repair” is open to critique if resultant experiences are ultimately always perceived as lacking (i.e. they are never truly “repaired”), but the concept invariably opens avenues of thought in terms of how we might broaden the experiential criteria of the cinematic.

Akin to the early history of cinema (or any new medium that obtains cultural relevance), analyses of podcasting’s emergence, change, embryonic industrial structure and aesthetic criteria are informed by arguments about how the technological determines the social, and vice versa. I have described podcasting as a hybrid, flexible and liminal medium (Llinares, 2019) because its ontology is based on a collection of technologies and practices that are associated with other media contexts. For instance, the distribution technology Really Simple Syndication (RSS), originally a mechanism for blog sharing, was adapted for audio and is often understood as an essential component of podcasting, particularly in terms of separating it from radio (Berry, 2006). Podcasts were added to Apple’s iTunes in 2005 (Apple Podcasts since 2020) and this brought another key element to podcasting’s functionality: “the first service to offer what scholars note as a ‘platform’ service for podcasting, in that it
provided a centralized repository of podcasts for ease of discovery, while also enabling podcasters to easily reach audiences by bundling their respective RSS feeds into a seamless digital interface” (Sullivan, 2019, p. 4). iTunes created an open source infrastructure for producers to distribute, and consumers to download, audio content for free (after purchase of hardware), and sorted shows into specific categories, creating podcast charts and themed lists that aided discovery.

Another vital component of podcast consumption was synchronisation with the Apple iPod (2001–2017), which freed the consumer from a stationary access point, thus facilitating the temporal and spatial mobility of listening practices. Because the podcast experience is imageless, facilitated by mobile technologies, and synchronisable across devices, the medium has been called “time-shifting” and “space-shifting” (McElearney and Middleton, 2013). Even though cinema can be experienced outside of the cinema, the focus on the projected audio-visual image means a cinematic assemblage necessitates a fixing of physical position in a different way to podcasting. A podcast experience is one of fundamental mutability in a phenomenological sense; what the eye sees and the ear hears are decoupled, meaning attention to the outside world can be maintained in parallel to an inner world shaped by the podcast. The autonomy of podcasting practices of consumption changed again when smartphones became ubiquitous. WiFi enabled podcasts to be downloaded directly to the Apple iPhone, bypassing computers altogether, and in 2014 the iOS 9 podcasting app made this a more efficient and integrated process. With smartphones came an explosion of podcast clients (all still reliant on the iTunes directory for RSS feeds) which are now the primary distribution platforms and consumer interfaces that allow users to subscribe, download, search, review and share podcast content. For Morris and Paterson, such “podcatcher” apps are “mobile cultural intermediaries that create audiences, shape listener experiences, and encourage engagement through the digital features that allow greater control and personalisation over a user’s audio environment” (2015, p. 225). There is the implication here of an apparatus that orients the conditions of listening, but, rather than a fixed set of conditions, flexible configurations stress autonomy over the engagement process, offering a highly personalised user experience (Boling & Hull, 2018).

Podcast assemblage is not a “reterritorialization of experience” (pp. 29–30) in the way that Casetti formulates it, where the conditions of consumption are in need of a spatial fixing that repairs the cinematic, but is instead built around integrated technological functions that create an autonomous, mobile experience. However, even in the
podcasting context, many assert the notion of an idealised dispositif which amalgamates technology, environment and embodiedness, to create a unique experiential outcome of intimacy. The idea that podcasting is an intimate medium is omnipresent in podcasting research. Berry (2006) suggests intimacy is a product of a certain type of address that offers listeners a more personal sense of connection to host and subject, an idea echoed by Meserko (2015) in his analysis of podcasting adoption by comedians both live and pre-recorded. Łukasz Swiatek defines podcasting as an “intimate bridging mechanism” (2019, p. 174) which facilitates connectivity inside and outside of interest and expertise, and across geographical and socio-cultural boundaries.

Despite these claims, the connection between podcasting and intimacy still remains somewhat amorphous. Spinelli and Dann offer the most concrete analysis, characterising podcasting’s intimacy as a combination of particular kinds of aesthetic production (sound forms that are tailored to an implied individual rather than mass audience), personal and emotional address, and “the physicality and aural mechanics of podcast listening” (2019, p. 84). Drawing upon research analysing the phenomenology of earbud listening (Bull, 2007; Stankievech, 2007), Spinelli and Dann argue that in-ear headphones (differentiating between earbuds, over-ear headphones, and room speakers) function to create an embodied and cognitive barrier that blocks out the outside world, alongside an interiorisation of the podcast audio:

> With earbuds the sound enters directly into the body, the external architecture of the torso, shoulders, head, and ears do not filter the sound [...] thus any acoustic sense of distance, exteriority, and even otherness becomes impossible [...] earbuds allow for a hyper-intimacy in which the voice you hear is in no way external, but present inside you. (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, pp. 84–85)

Their assumption that hyper-intimacy is derived from the sonic experience embodied by listening with earbuds is supported by statements from the producers they interview. For a podcast dispositif, the visual would be unimportant. It would instead be the earbud earphones, which collapse the cognitive into the physical and embodied, that would be the crucial apparatus of experience through which an emotionally layered sound aesthetic and personalised mode of address can be delivered, thereby manifesting a possibly uniquely intimate experience of podcast listening.

Using earphones to create a personal space is not only a form of media environment but reflects a social practice that is possibly as culturally
ingrained at the beginning of the 21st century as cinema-going and family television-viewing has been in different periods of the 20th. Sherry Turkle has called this the “pilot in the cockpit phenomenon” (2016, p. 28) and, indeed, it is highlighted by Casetti as an aspect of cinematic assemblage underpinning immersion and intimacy as part of the strategy of repair:

The truly decisive element is for the user to succeed in constructing a bubble in which to seek refuge and to find a personal space in which to manoeuvre [...] when I nestle into it, I abolish my surroundings, and I recreate a sense of intimacy. (Casetti, 2015, p. 71)

Thus there are parallels between podcasting and cinematic assemblage in that both reorient the conditions of the embodied subject (how one hears and sees) so that a listener becomes immersed in an experiential cognitive space. The insertion of earphones is analogous to the moment the lights dim in a cinema auditorium. As with the cinematic dispositif, there are fundamental caveats for any ideal apparatus of podcast consumption. There are myriad complexities and variations of engagement in terms of the technologies and the spatial and temporal choices available to listeners. Spinelli and Dann’s assertions draw from podcast producers’ speculations around an implied audience rather than on any empirical data regarding actual listening practices, which Nyre (2015) suggests are highly variable. Experiences are felt in a multitude of ways depending on listening conditions, technologies, and practices of the individual listener. Indeed, concepts like intimacy and immersion may be understood as fundamental to podcasting, but are also associated with many other mediated processes and forms of content. It remains a rather abstract, subjective phenomena used to describe an ephemeral media effect that is not exclusive to podcasting.

Reflecting on Casetti’s four characteristics of assemblage, what I have outlined above relates to a practice of consumption and a reterritorialization of experience. Podcasting has its own set of elements related to these two aspects of a specific experience, but there are certain affinities with cinema as a process of assemblage rather than specific apparatus-based dispositif. The notion of a strategy of repair is less apposite to podcasting however. When experiencing a podcast we are not repairing imperfect conditions of listening, since the decision as to how, where and when one listens is intrinsic to the medium. Indeed, the concept of a strategy of repair is the most problematic aspect of Casetti’s arguments, as the very terminology implies the possibly futile reassertion of an ideal dispositif; one that can never be fully reconstructed in a digital format and is an entirely socially-constructed phenomenon.
in the first place. The ontology of the podcast is one of assembling a number of technologies to produce an experience through phenomenological, socio-cultural and cognitive components. This brings us to the elements 1 and 4 of Casetti’s assemblage; the presence of image and sound and the creation of symbolic connections to the cinematic. I will examine the podcast as a sound artefact in itself, and explore properties that could engender an experience understood as a “cinema for the ears”.

**Film-Centred Podcasts as Cinematic Elsewhere**

At the time of writing, there are over one million podcasts in Apple’s directory (Anon., 2020). However, a straightforward taxonomy is difficult since fluidity and hybridisation define podcasting as a form. Apple podcasts reorganised its genre taxonomy in an attempt to help listeners navigate the expansion of content (Miller, 2019). TV & Movies is one of the headline categories with a further subdivision into five sections: After Shows, Film History, Film Interviews, Film Reviews and TV Reviews. Yet, this list still cannot cover the diversity of cinema related podcasts, including cross-genre approaches and idiosyncratic production forms aimed at an atomised audience whose niche interests may fall into varying sensibilities: casual filmgoer, cinephile, fan, industry insider, aspiring filmmaker or academic.

The first obvious aspect of film-centred podcasting is that most shows are structured around spoken word commentary and analysis of either specific films, filmmaking or cinema culture more broadly. Themes and structure of the content differ greatly, as does rhetorical style and vocal tone, but film-centric speech content is a core element. I foreground this point because it reflects how the podcast medium functions as a platform for the discursive expansion of film knowledge, appreciation and culture. Film-centred podcasts contribute to what Girish Shambu defines as the “new cinephilia” (2014) exemplifying a “deep engagement with cinema’s richness” online. This has, Shambu claims, expanded cinema’s “elsewhere” beyond a specific “there” of film watching, where “the imagination and labour of reflection, discussion, criticism and theorisation – all the work done ‘elsewhere’ – [is used] to create and bring this engagement into being” (2014, p. 90). In demarcating a “there” and an “elsewhere” of cinema, Shambu refers to Catherine Fowler (2012) and visual artist Pierre Huyghe who, in a similar vein to Casetti, recognise the requirement of expanding how we conceive of cinematic experience in a digital age. The “there” is the moment of encounter with film images, in whatever form that might be, whilst the “elsewhere” is an augmentation of, or supplementa to, such an idealised and putatively
objective encounter, often derived from imagination and memory, and which can “become an active and generative part of one’s cinephilia” (2014, p. 90).

Across film-centred podcasts there are hybrid subgenres that manifest this “elsewhere” in many different forms. *Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo’s Film Review* (BBC Radio 5 Live, 2001 [radio], 2005– [radio and podcast]), *The Guardian Film Show* (2006–2016), *The Empire Film Podcast* (2012–) and *Truth & Movies* (Little White Lies, 2017–) are examples of the magazine review format. Built around familiar elements, such as a box office top ten countdown, new release reviews and star interviews, they are generally aimed at broad audiences, amalgamating elements of popular print magazines, television review and chat shows, and cinema-focused segments found in entertainment and arts radio. Produced under the umbrella of larger media institutions, they establish brand quality by association and have familiar presenters with contributors adding professional and critical authority. Cinema chains themselves have also moved into podcast production: *The Curzon Film Podcast* (2016–), *Picturehouse Podcast* (2018–) and *The Bigger Picture* (BFI, 2016–). These are often hosted by company staff, with varying formats, themes and production values. Such examples often utilise recorded content from exhibition events, curated seasons and post-screening interviews. Many film podcasts, such as *Filmspotting* (2015–), *Mad About Movies* (2016–) and */Film Daily* (2012–), also reflect the radio magazine format but are independently produced. Another variation is exemplified by podcasts that self-consciously aim for a more cinephilic or academic approach to analysis. Podcast shows such as *Film Comment Podcast* (2015–), *The Cinephilacs* (2012–), *The Projection Booth* (2011–) and *Projections Podcast* (2018–) often explore particular modes of critique and conceptual frameworks which presuppose a certain degree of theoretical and historical knowledge of cinema.

One of the intrinsic differences between podcasting and radio broadcasting is the lack of temporal boundaries that define the broadcast flow. Freedom from scheduling and length constraints has given podcasting an informal, conversational tone, revitalising the format of the long-form interview. *WTF with Marc Maron* (2009–), *Kevin Pollak’s Chat Show Podcast* (2009–2019), *The Film Scene with Ileana Douglas* (2015–) and *Talk Easy*...

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2 *Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo’s Film Review* is broadcast first as a weekly radio programme and subsequently posted as a podcast online with extra content added. This points back to a the key question of podcasting’s relationship to radio and particularly how it is utilised as a “catch-up” or “listen again” platform for traditional broadcast radio content (Berry, 2016).
with Sam Fragoso (2016–) are podcasts that reflect a renewed willingness of filmmakers and stars to engage in more in-depth personal discussions moving beyond orchestrated press junkets. The film production company A24 (2012–) has taken advantage of this freedom with its own podcast of conversations between filmmakers without a host acting as intermediary. Other strains of film-centred podcasts include those that focus on filmmaking craft (Scriptnotes [2011–], Curious about Filmmaking Podcast [2014–], No Film School Podcast [2017–]), industry insider news (Indie Film Hustle [2017–], Film Trooper Podcast [2013–]), and of course, the large number of shows, often short-lived, that indulge fan obsessiveness (Inside Star Wars [2019–2020], The Nerdist [2010–], Weekly Planet [2013–]). There are also podcasts that take a more ideological approach and provide gender, ethnic and class perspectives on cinephile culture such as The Bechdel Cast (2016–), Black Men Can’t Jump [In Hollywood] (2015–), Girls on Film (2018–) and Black Girl Film Club (2018–).

Many film-centred podcasts also indulge the medium’s potential for addressing obscure subjects or reaching niche audiences. The Worst Idea of All Time (2014–) podcast features hosts who pick what they consider to be a terrible film and then watch and review the same film every week for a year. How Did This Get Made (2010–) revels in the pleasures of watching supposedly bad films. Denzel Washington is the Greatest Actor of All Time Period (2014–) is for those obsessed with the American actor but also addresses issues around black actors in Hollywood, and Wi ging Out (2016–) is dedicated to actor Kristin Wi g’s wigs. The seriality and length-independent nature of podcasting often allows podcasts to indulge in exhaustively detailed discussions. Star Wars Minute (2013–) and One Heat Minute (2017–2020) revolve around one-minute excerpts from individual films, played sequentially in each episode as an audio clip until the entire film is covered.

All these podcasts are discussion-oriented and therefore it is voice and dialogue that articulates the podcast as cinema. Voices articulate the aesthetics of podcasting, its storytelling function, and its political or cultural currency. The popularity of film podcasts draws on the pleasures of discussing, sharing, arguing, and giving opinions about films. Various forms of engagement with cinema – pre-film anticipation, post-film analysis, pub arguments, mentoring sessions, university seminars – inform podcasts in their creative fashioning of the cinephilic elsewhere.

But the question remains: can simply listening to people talk about film activate a cinematic experience or be considered cinematic at all. One suggestion is that audio recorded discussions of film could be considered symbolic of the cinematic. A presenter may be particularly effective in
describing a scene from a film which recalls a memory or provokes the imagination of a listener. In film-oriented podcasts, one often hears the voices associated with the cinema. Interviews with actors are recognisable aurally, as well as visually, and hearing a recognisable voice from film signals the cinematic. This is augmented even more when the actor speaks in character in an audio clip from a film accompanied by additional diegetic sounds, suggesting that film-centred podcasts utilise cinematic sound more generally to provide an experience. Film trailers and clips are often woven into the sonic fabric of a podcast: they may be part of a podcast’s introduction, a precursor to an interview, the subject of review, or can be embedded into a critic’s argument as a sonic quotation. Aural environments in podcasts are facilitated by editing and sound design thus utilising the implied symbolic associations with cinematic experiences. If a podcast used the theme from Jaws, there would be an intention to elicit a specific response or recognition in the listener and we might consider this experience cinematic.

In both form and mode of address, podcasts preserve the “there” and “elsewhere” dichotomy. They act as a secondary platform through which cinema, as the primary medium of interest, is affirmed and simultaneously undermined. Furthermore, many film-centred podcasts refer to an explicit lack of image. It is a prerequisite of all film podcasts that they refer to something that has been seen or needs to be seen. It is, however, assumed and accepted in the very act of listening that there will be no images present, so this lack does not automatically result in dissatisfaction. Indeed, the examples cited above are cinematic in that the spoken discourse and sonic structures evoke thematic, intellectual and emotional cues that resonate with the listener’s cinematic sensibility. Furthermore, there are podcasts in which the dearth of images is not perceived as a lack, but as a positive space in which sound is able to materialise the cinematic through engaging a listener’s imagination. This is how I conceptualise the audio-cinematic experience, which dissolves the there/elsewhere dichotomy, reconciles the idea of seeing without images, and opens up the possibility of a “cinema for the ears”.

**Sound Aesthetics and the Audio-Cinematic**

There are several theoretical and philosophical avenues that support the possibility of an imageless audio-cinematic experience. The first focusses on film sound itself. Michel Chion’s work is paradigmatic of holistic approaches to the relationship between sound and the moving image. He asserts that sound and image should be understood as integrated elements in terms of signification and emotional effect. Chion conceives of “audio-vision” as a “perceptive process”, where sound is considered as
an “added value” that modifies the image and shapes its meaning: “This value – be it sensorial, informative, semantic, narrative, structural, or expressive – which a sound heard in a scene leads us to project onto the image, can create the impression that we view what in fact we ‘audio-view’” (Chion, 2000, p. 202). Audio-viewing implies the vitality of sound in creating an “impression” that is as much sonic as visual. Yet, the use of the phrase “added value” implies that sound is still the secondary, and even unnecessary, component in the hierarchy of the cinematic. However, Chion points to an imageless cinematic experience in the concept of “acousmêtre”. Drawing upon Pierre Schaeffer, the composer, sound engineer and musicologist, acousmêtre (usually translated as the “acousmatic”) refers to sounds heard without seeing their originating phenomena. Podcasts, like radio and the telephone, are fundamentally acousmatic media, the opposite of what Chion calls visualised sound (when image and sound are synchronised), and his work – particularly on the voice in cinema – explores the complexity of onscreen and offscreen, diegetic and non-diegetic sound as part of the language of cinematic creativity (Chion, 1999).

Vivian Sobchack uses the idea of the acousmatic to challenge the image-sound hierarchy further, using an analysis of a series of promotional trailers produced by Dolby in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These trailers were shown before features, to advertise the technological capabilities of new multiplex theatres and the three-dimensional, immersive sound mixes that they produced. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard, Sobchack calls the trailers “purposefully oneiric ‘dream devices’” whose animated sound spatialisation serves to visualise the shape of environmental acoustics:

The paradox of the Dolby trailers is that – as Cinema – they must promote an attention to listening not only by sounding the invisible but also by visualising it. In this regard the invisible (and offscreen) “acousmatic imagination” of the Dolby trailers provides a compelling and compressed onscreen visual glossary of what are acoustically perceived to be sound shapes, sound aspects and sound effects. (Sobchack, 2005, p. 4: my emphasis)

Sobchack suggests that the aural design, semiotically and spatially materialised by the surround sound system, is the primary driver of the visual effect. This points to a way of seeing sound and that the “onscreen visual glossary” – a CGI train arriving at a station, in something of a homage to the Lumière brothers – is an example of dynamic sonic creation. Sobchack, following the phenomenologist Don Ihde, argues that
these trailers offer a decentering of visual dominance, encouraging the audience to attend actively to listening as the primary function of audio-visual engagement.

Ihde’s concept of the “auditory field” is pertinent here. Like Chion’s audio-vision, this suggests an “intimate relation between animation, motion, and sound [that] lies at the threshold of the inner secret of auditory experience” or, “the timefullness of sound” (2007, p. 83). Even in the silent cinema era, the notion of an “auditory field” was as an essential part of the ontology of film. But more than this, and particularly relevant to the emergence of podcasting, Ihde’s elaboration of the “auditory imagination” points to the cognitive possibilities that sound actuates in situating our experience beyond merely visual perception. Just as with images, we tend to think of sounds as perceptual cues that are linked to a causal origin. We use sound to orient ourselves in relation to what we perceive as the objective world. This process is utilised in film when what we see on screen corresponds to what we hear. Yet, similar to Chion’s acousmître, Ihde examines the level to which we deploy auditory imaginings to structure our experiences. He states: “I turn to ‘inner’ experience in the mode of the imaginary, I note that these experiences may ‘echo,’ ‘mimic,’ or ‘re-present’ any ‘outer’ experience. Imagination presentifies ‘external experience’” (Ihde, 2007, p. 119). Along with this “presentification” of what we perceive aurally, Ihde suggests that our auditory imagination has “polymorphic capacity” and is “susceptible to further and further refinements, discriminations, and enrichments” (2007, p. 119), and that this orients a subjective experience in highly complex ways.

For Ihde, these inner imaginings can work alongside perception to give a holistic coherence to the self, but auditory imagination always has the potential for moving subjectivity into the realm of memory, fantasy or other emotional, or even physical resonances. Our sonic experience is complex, and there is rarely a simple causal link between what we hear and where it comes from. This opens up fascinating questions both about the connection between image and sound, but also how an experience such as listening to a film-centred podcast may invoke the auditory imagination in a cinematic way. I suggest that audio has the capacity to engage or produce the visual in the mind.

Sound and Radio Studies explicitly focus on how the acousmatic dimensions of sound constitute the primary mode of mediated experience, and such approaches deploy the language of both the visual, and even more specifically, the cinematic, to grapple with sonic meaning-making. Tim Crook argues that radio drama spatialises thought and that sound aesthetics provoke a visual sort of cognition, wholly independent
of the eye. Radio drama is “auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension” (1999, pp. 7–8). Alan Beck reframes radio’s blindness not as a “lack” (as is often the default), but as a freeing of the possibility for a “listening-in” that acts synaesthetically. The absence of the visual is filled in through the cognitive activity of the listener: “The ongoing mystery is how radio offers us aural data which seem to have materiality – surfaces, three-dimensionality and a dynamic (performers in movement), a materiality that has been shaped or processed so as to exhibit information for more than just sound itself” (2007, p. 14).

Clive Cazeaux echoes Beck in his phenomenological challenge to the rhetoric of “blindness” and “lack” and uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s embodied interaction account of human epistemology to argue that all art is expressive rather than directly representational. Visual arts can be considered distinct, however, as they possess a coherence; their direct reference point can bypass the intermediaries of artist and form. Photographed and moving images in particular are often considered objective rather than representational, since the images correlate directly to reality. For Cazeaux, “the apparent incompleteness of a form of representation, for example, ‘blind’ radio drama, is not an incompleteness at all but instead the gap or opening wherein invitational relationships constitutive of a work’s expressive potential can be constructed” (2005, pp. 166–167). Sound breaks the correlation inherent, at least according to Cazeaux, in the photographic image.

The notion of an audio-cinematic experience without images would undoubtedly require the imaginative labour that is implied in Crook’s “listening-in” and Cazeaux’s “invitation to imagine”. These conceptions can be equated to the acousmatic processes of imageless media to which radio and, of course, podcasts belong. However, a visualisation process that is instigated by sound does not necessarily have to be perceived as cinematic. A “cinema for the ears” could simply be a popular catchphrase that highlights the way we foreground vision to make sense of our experience. this is the folk-philosophical conception of a mind’s eye. Yet, there are podcasts that, circling back to Casetti’s assemblage, explicitly symbolise the cinematic in their content, and through their invitation to sonic imagining, fashion a particular audio-cinematic experience.

**Audio-Cinematic Performance**

I now propose to engage with a number of specific podcasts, including my own, in more detail to highlight the way in which these series use particular techniques and styles to perform the cinematic.
You Must Remember This (2014–present)

Written, produced and narrated by Karina Longworth, You Must Remember This is a podcast that is derived from its host’s obsession with the “forgotten and/or hidden history of old Hollywood”. Longworth’s voice-over narration offers a storytelling style that is playful and insightful, recalling famous scenes, moments of dialogue and iconic images that interpellate cinematic memories. The dynamics of stardom are at the centre of the discourse, and critical reflections on the seminal films of actors like Audrey Hepburn are suffused with comprehensively researched information that is simultaneously historically literate, analytical, but also gossipy. Stories of scandal, tragedy and triumph are presented in an arch tone that unapologetically celebrates the mythos of Hollywood’s golden age. Spoken content is further augmented, particularly in the opening sequence, using a sonic tableau that incorporates echoes, fades and balance shifts that deliberately utilises a spatial phenomenology.

Longworth does not use film clips, recorded interviews, or any other found spoken audio, relying instead on her own descriptions, interpretations and storytelling, though the occasional referencing of an academic or critic underpins some of her more subjective assertions. In one episode, Longworth refers to the academic Molly Haskell to support an argument for the feminist influence of Audrey Hepburn as an accessible star in comparison to the unattainable movie goddesses of post-war Hollywood. The digitally distorted and fractured sound of Dooley Wilson’s As Time Goes By, as if played on a scratched and dusty gramophone record, serves as the theme for the podcast, and throughout each episode Longworth’s monologue is underscored by music from relevant films.

In an interview in 2015, Longworth outlines her show’s sensibility:

I knew I wanted to be having this conversation about old movies in a cinematic way without using images. I knew I wanted to have it feel sort of like a cocktail party conversation where you might be telling anecdote and then you sort of do a voice... When you’re reading a magazine article and you read a great quote you sort of hear it in your head. And then when you tell your friend over drinks about the magazine article you do a little voice. And then I had this idea that it has got to feel something like a dream, and it should feel like old radio but it shouldn’t actually sound like old radio, it shouldn’t have that affectation in the voice, but it can have an affectation where it is like a lullaby. (Longform Podcast interview Oct 7, 2015) (20:13–21:20).

Longworth’s description of You Must Remember This employs a rhetoric that is highly symbolic of cinematic experience, but one that is cultural,
nostalgic and dreamlike. She directly discusses her aim to create a cinematic experience without images and it is clear that voice is the pivotal expressive tool. Her podcast focuses on cinema as a subject while the audio aesthetic pushes the experience into the realm of the symbolic, and the implied audience is to be transported back to Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s. Longworth also suggest that the tone and texture of her voice evokes what the listener should see in their imagination. Her explanation calls to mind Ihde’s definition of the inner voice as an “imaginative modality”, our mind’s eye is not just how we perceive reality, but a powerfully creative space where we reimagine subjectivity. You Must Remember This remains voice-centric, and its audio-cinematic success depends on the extent to which the combination of form and content provokes in the listener the capacity for imagining an idealised historical cinematic experience.

**Movies For the Blind (2007–2019)**

Produced and hosted by voice-over artist Valerie Hunter, Movies For the Blind uses American public-domain films with added narration and audio description of the visual action to create a cinematic experience for the visually impaired. The podcast’s aim is self-evident in its title, though Hunter’s qualifying statement, “where you can enjoy films without looking at a screen”, encapsulates the aim to produce a more general audio-cinematic experience. In a similar vein to You Must Remember This, Hunter begins the episodes by explaining the historical background of a star’s career and personal life. Episodes are split into two or three parts covering a film’s entire running time: Episode 191 (23 October, 2018) focuses on the final part of Behind Office Doors, a 1931 romantic drama directed by Melville W. Brown, starring Mary Astor. Hunter’s tone is much more straight-forward than Karina Longworth’s, with less accenting of words and less rhetorical conjuring designed to establish a mythical aura. After the short introductory theme, there is no musical underscoring or added sound effects beyond the soundtrack of the film which is played as a whole throughout. It is when the Hunter provides the descriptive voice-over in addition to the film’s sound that the audio-cinematic comes into play.

Hunter’s audio-descriptions are interwoven with the original audio track and dialogue in a way that assists the sight-impaired listener in comprehending dramatic flow, spatial positioning and interaction between characters. A certain level of imaginative labour is needed to make sense of the sonic landscape, and there is an assumption that the listener is visualising the action based on the aural cues, both linguistic and otherwise, they are receiving. The very texture of the sound adds to
the overall experience: A background hiss comes from the original sound recording but Hunter’s audio descriptions are much clearer, obviously recorded on contemporary equipment, and her short interventions deliberately aim to guide the listener with as much efficiency and clarity as possible. Obviously, *Movies For the Blind* has a specific purpose and audience, and so, in this context, audio description circumvents the lack of an image merely for functional aims. Yet, this podcast experience requires what Ihde calls the copresence between perception and imagination (2007, p. 124) where descriptions of place and action in the film world suggest a process of subjective and intimate imagining.


Radio Atlas, a podcast publisher, tackles one of podcasting’s inherent shortcomings: the boundaries of language. Produced by Eleanor McDowell, it allows English language listeners to access fictional and documentary audio from around the world by subtitling the voices on each episode which can then be read on a mobile phone by the listener. Such engagement through the smartphone gives more evidence of podcasting’s transmedia flexibility, and reading text on a phone while listening adds a visual component to the experience, reterritorialising the subject, akin to the strategy of repair required of a viewing assemblage. Radio Atlas also holds live events where the subtitles are shown on an auditorium screen for an audience who listen and watch communally as they would any other film. In “Colette’s Podcasts”, a 2014 ARTE radio broadcast produced by Charlotte Bienaimé, Colette Bertin, 82, explores her archive of French radio programmes that she has recorded audio cassettes. Bertin possesses an extraordinary appreciation of the pleasures of listening, using metaphorical flourishes that are very visual. Even for the monolingual speaker, Collette’s articulation of what hearing means to her – how she describes the sound entering her body, leaving an imprint, a trace that activates memory – is emotionally captivating. But, beyond what she says, it is the sound of the voice, its material resonance, its intonation, phrasing and timbre, even filtered through the translation of the subtitles, that is the essential ingredient of an experience akin to Beck’s synaesthetic listening.

This podcast reflects on the phenomenological paradox between *dispositif* and assemblage that structures both cinema and podcasting. Because listening to podcasts on a mobile phone is the most popular way to access the medium, using the phone’s screen to display subtitles translating the language of the voice-over does not problematise the ontology of podcasting. The essence of the podcast is retained even
though what results is a unique symbiosis of sound, text and image. Yet, having personally listened to and watched this podcast in an auditorium with an audience, it is striking how traditionally cinematic the experience is. There are no images as such and the subtitles functionally translate the language spoken as they do on the mobile phone app. Watching in an actual cinematic dispositif, amplifies the sense of an immediate, communal experience that is traditionally associated with cinema.


Like the Radio Atlas podcasts, Phantom Power is not primarily a film podcast as its interest is more broadly in the sonic arts and humanities. Produced and hosted by sound technologist Mack Hagood and documentarian and composer Cris Cheek, who has now left the podcast, episodes explore a range of sound art practices from historical and theoretical perspectives. There is an emphasis on high quality production values, and the podcast has an aesthetically complex and immersive sonic environment. The soundscapes of each individual episode comprise a combination of discussions with a sound artists, producers, composers, historians or philosophers. Examples of sound arts practices, often the work of the guests themselves, are discussed by the two hosts, often with added sound effects and design which give the show an integrated structure. The podcast’s use of the spatialisation of sound to orient the listener, and the complex references that play with perception and imagination, is highly cinematic.

Episode 17, “The Sounds of Silents” (Nov 1, 2019), is explicitly film-centred and mines the history of film sound in the research of the academics Rick Altman and Eric Dienstfrey. It recounts, using sound clips as direct reference points, how film theatres have used automatic pianos and small orchestras as well as synchronized sound systems, voice-actors behind the screen and filmed conductors on-screen. This episode of Phantom Power reflects the genre hybridisation of podcasting, amalgamating elements of audio documentary, long-form interview, academic seminar and experimental sound artefact. Interviews with Altman and Dienstfrey are cut in to sections, which are contextualised by the hosts, and are underlaid with a sound bed of music and sound effects samples that evoke the materiality of early cinema. Altman enacts the fairground “ballyhoo” around the Nickelodeon used to entice visitors, even using the effect of a nickel being dropped onto an imaginary counter. Altman argues that audiences were drawn to proto-cinema events as much by live orchestras or recognisable musical performers. Moving images, sometimes animated, sometimes non-narrative, were used as affective
accompaniments to the music and sound, which were the primary attractions of the experience.

This soundscape exemplifies the central theme of the podcast: that early phases of cinematic formation prefigure and echo the current crisis or transformation, depending on your perspective, instigated by the digital era. The argument is made throughout, by deploying sonic cues and editing alongside the dialogue, that early experiments with technology and social-cultural practices played with many configurations of sound and image, and that these created ersatz cinematic phenomenological and cognitive experiences. Though such an allusion is not explicitly made in the episode, the podcast medium itself, particularly in how “The Sound of Silents” sonically presents cinema’s past, interrogates how perception is shaped by the form and content of mediation.

The Cinematologists Podcast (2015–)
My own work on The Cinematologists Podcast is central in both theoretical and practical terms to my thinking about the audio-cinematic. The podcast was established in 2015 by myself and Neil Fox as an analytical project with a core focus on the nature of cinema in the contemporary digital context. The podcast is centred on recorded analysis that take place at screenings organised within university auditoria and at commercial cinema venues. A 10-minute introduction is taped to contextualise the film and potential themes of discussion, then, following the screening, a 20 to 30-minute open forum is recorded with a roving microphone for audience comments and questions. We generally do not have the filmmaker present, meaning the conversation is free to move in a more critical direction. The sound recording’s live element aims to evoke an auditorium-like experience. Holding events in many different venues, with diverse audiences, reflects the uniqueness of individual screenings. Depending on the film and the audience, the emotional impact and interpretive direction can be quite different. Recording in a live venue gives the podcast a sense of immediacy, and the unscripted freedom of discussion captures both personal and collective experiences.

We integrate interviews with filmmakers, critics or academics into the show’s overall structure, offering a rich blend of voices and viewpoints. Relevant film-audio clips are incorporated, not only to give an aural sense of the film in focus, but as a way of emphasising or exemplifying the points raised in discussions. We began to expand the environment in which we recorded the podcast, with episodes recorded at Berlinale, the Screenplay Film Festival in Shetland and the 2019 Film-Philosophy Conference in Brighton to try and capture the essence of different cinematic environments beyond film-watching itself. We also integrate
dimensions of the auditorium events into the sound design and editing to create an experience that could situate the listener spatially.

Our continued experiments with different forms of spoken analysis aim at producing an audio-cinematic experience and is most evident in episode 32, “Knowing Sounds: Podcasting as Academic Practice” which was peer-reviewed and published in the academic journal Media Practice and Education (Fox & Llinares, 2018). This episode is formed of a collage of sound fragments, all of which possess a cinematic resonance but are decoupled from their original context. We edited in sound fragments from films to provide space for interpretive reimagining and comments from audience members and hosts, which frame the episodes. These snippets of speech and sound, removed from their original context and then layered together, create an abstract mix of sound cues and spoken thoughts and the listener is actively encouraged to make their own associations, interpretations and to engage their imagination.

I developed this approach to the creation of an audio-cinematic experience in episode 98 “The Cinematic Voice” (March 17, 2020) when I invited several film scholars to record an audio monologue exploring how the voice is used cinematically. In the editing process, these recordings were integrated with relevant clips, juxtaposing descriptions and interpretations with scenes from films. The participants’ voices were overlaid with those of fictional characters. The spoken theoretical analysis in tandem with examples of the sound explore the subject of the cinematic voice as a specific sound aesthetic and as a specific cinematic device, especially as voice-over. Episodes 32 and 98 reflect a philosophical praxis that underpins the production ethos of The Cinematologists Podcast: This is not just a film-centred podcast, but a podcast that attempts to create an experience that is, itself, audio-cinematic.

Whether one accepts the premise that a cinematic experience can occur without images is predicated on how one conceives of the cinematic itself. Casetti’s broadening of the philosophical sensibility underpinning what we might understand as the cinematic experience is a necessary first premise, while digital technologies have had an effect on cinema’s ontology across production, distribution and exhibition. The concept of assemblage provides a framework for exploring how podcasting as a specific experience is created through technological, spatial and social functions, providing an embedded and embodied theory of cinematic experience. In order to argue for an audio-cinematic experience however, the construction of the sonic artefact must tap into symbolic associations through which the listener is interpellated in both perceptual and imaginary senses. Film-centred podcasts, in their spectrum of addresses,
effects and compositions are built on the pleasures of exploring and expanding discourses of cinema as a subject of experience.

I have suggested that certain podcasts reflect sonic aesthetics that are designed to cross the “there” and “elsewhere” divide, drawing the listener into an intimate experience that is without images but that nevertheless generates the cinematic. It is clear that a more focused exploration of specific podcasts, and how their aesthetic design provokes the imagining I have discussed, requires further analysis. Along with this, a move towards audience research methodologies could explicate how listeners understand their engagement with podcasts. “A Cinema for the Ears” could be dismissed as a glib soundbite and as a rhetorical tagline for a medium whose definition and status is still unclear. Yet through the theoretical analysis and practical development of the audio-cinematic, I have attempted to establish some conceptual foundations that specify how we might understand podcasting as visually powerful form of sonic experience.

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