

# Production and Generation of Acoustic Space of Audiobooks

**Liang Kong**

*Broadcasting and Anchoring School, Communication University of China, Beijing 100024, China*

**Abstract:** *In China, audiobook narrative is a form of artistic creation, and listening to books is a type of radio program favored by audiences. In the context of turning to the auditory age, especially sound studies or hearing culture has gradually become epidemic in China. Based on the theory of sound studies and space production, this article focuses on the production and generation of acoustic space in the dissemination and consumption of audiobooks that is separation, shaping, construction, flow, and dispersion.*

**Keywords:** *Audiobook Narrative, Acoustic Space, Sound Studies*

The discussion of sound in the medium always leads to a specific space-time scene, that is, sound is always generated and transmitted in a certain space, or "sound itself constitutes an environment that surrounds people or is a part of space" (Alan Corbin, 2003: 117). R. Murray Schafer compared "Soundscape" and "Landscape", and the same suffix "-scape" of the two directly draws people's attention to the spatial dimension of sound.

So, how does the production and generation of acoustic space work in the process of dissemination and consumption of audiobooks?

## 1. Separation

In Lefebvre's space theory, separation is the premise of space production. The same is true for the production of acoustic space. In the book *The Bells of the Earth: The Acoustic Conditions and Sensory Culture of French Villages in the 19th Century* by Alain Corbin, the farthest distance that the church bell can reach is often the radius of the parish's coverage, "the physical attributes of the distance and intensity of sound source can distinguish a listener's subordination to the acoustic space." (Broadcasteam, 2019) In the 1950s and 1960s, the audiobooks spread on wired broadcast in China also has above-mentioned characteristics. A big loudspeaker is surrounded by people who are listening to books, and the farthest distance at which the narrator's voice can be heard clearly is the boundary between the listeners' acoustic space and the daily sound space. Even if you are in a public space, the noise in the daily sound space is inevitable, and it does not prevent the audience from focusing on the auditory attention of the audiobooks at the beginning and smoothly entering the acoustic space constructed by the narrator and the listener.

Of course, the flowing landscape in the daily sound space is always an important attachment to the personal acoustic space. The sound of outdoor birds and insects, the sound of pots and pans at home, and even the personal acoustic space with strong personal characteristics formed by earphones cannot completely avoid the intrusion of daily practical sounds, such as the arrival reminder in the subway and the car horn behind you. It is the auditory "exit" that still needs to be left when wearing earphones. However, the tenacious performance, the daily practical sound under the suppression of audiobooks, is an example that the daily sound space is always an important attachment to the personal acoustic space, and it also shows that the personal acoustic space is a new space formed beyond the daily practical sound.

However, if the listener is placed in a completely silent and dark environment, or intentionally closes the visual channel, allowing the visual space to be completely transferred to the acoustic space, theoretically, it should be the moment when the acoustic space has the richest texture. As McLuhan envisioned, "If you sit in a dark room and talk, words will suddenly acquire new meaning and unusual texture." (Marshall McLuhan, 2019: 370)

## 2. Shaping

The object of shaping is the smallest unit in the acoustic space, that is a certain person's certain external appearance, certain course of action, and certain mental activity, or the depiction of a certain scenery, the presentation of a certain object, the generation of a certain plot, etc. The process of shaping begins when this smallest unit begins to appear in the listener's brain, and ends when it is "complete" in the listener's brain.

Shaping is based on the narrator's narrative, that is, voice and expression. The narrator does not copy the "sounds under the same type of situation or origin" in reality, but by "depicting (that is to say, expressing) the feelings associated with the origin or mentioned environment in the scene", to deliver "real, effective and appropriate" sounds and their semantic content to the audience. (Michel Chion, 2013: 297) The audience restores the voice and semantic content of the narrator to the corresponding image on the basis of individual experience, and appears in the acoustic space in the smallest unit.

Sound studies researcher Pierre Schaeffer defined two listening modes in his book *In Search of a Specific Music*, namely, "semantic listening" and "sourced listening". Based on this, some scholars proposed that the listener will not only decode the auditory signal and the semantic content behind it, but "will also be interested in the possibility that the sound originates: who is Talking on the other end of the receiver? What kind of person is he?" (Zhihua Zeng, Bin Lu, 2019: 131) It can be seen that the audience will not only have an imagination of the narrator's content, but also the curiosity of the image (not a narrowly defined image) of the narrator. The listener creates an "implicit narrator" that communicates to himself by collaging the voice image of the narrator with any visual image (Zhihua Zeng, Bin Lu, 2019: 131).

## 3. Construction

Different from shaping, construction no longer pays attention to a certain character, a certain scene or a certain action, but focuses on a certain situation that is jointly shaped by various characters, various scenes, and various actions. In this situation, the construction process begins with the appearance of various characters, the presentation of various scenes, and the unfolding of various actions, and naturally ends with the end of the characters, the disappearance of the scenes, and the termination of the actions.

As same as shaping, it is not difficult to see that the construction process also depends on time, or even longer. Schaeffer once famously said "Time is a space for sound" (Michel Chion, 2013: 317), which points out the intimate relationship between space and time in acoustic space. Indeed, just like any object needs its own contour line, it is natural to put the contour line of the sound in time. Under the guidance of the narrator's narrative, the audience's auditory activities are unfolded in the flow of time, and the production of acoustic space is opened; in the process of space production, characters, scenes, actions are added and filled into the acoustic space in the process of auditory activities until a certain situation has been constructed. Therefore, it can be said that the acoustic space is produced by auditory activities while accommodating auditory activities.

In addition to being attached to time, as the "second space", the construction of acoustic space also depends on the listener's cognition of the "first space" (perceived material space). The so called "first space" and "second space" come from Edward W. Soja's *The Third Space: A Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imaginary Places*. According to Soja, the cognition object of first space is mainly the perceivable material space in the experience world; while the second space's is the space of "conception" rather than "perception", in other words, it is a medium that "philosophers, artists and architects...use art against science, spirit against matter, and subject against object". The acoustic space presented by the art creation of narrator is also a space of conception rather than perception. It is artistic, spiritual, and subjective. However, it is undeniable that conception comes from perception, just as the relationship between art and life, spirit and matter, and object and subject. In other words, the narrator realizes the transmission of semantic information by simulating the sound elements in the field of interpersonal communication and the daily sound space; and the listener also completes the process of construction of acoustic space filled with the multi-person, multi-scene and multi-action based on this daily auditory experience.

At the same time, for the construction of acoustic space, there is another dimension that needs to be grasped, that is, the scale of the spatial scope. Generally speaking, in perceivable material world, people's knowledge and grasp of physical space mainly rely on vision, "because vision can fairly

accurately distinguish the volume, form, level, and depth of a certain landscape within a certain range.”<sup>1</sup> However, hearing has its own law of grasping space, and it can even be regarded as a kind of advantages. The human ears are like a frequency analyzer. When the left and right ears receive sound at the same time, there will be a phase difference. Through the balance and filtering of the “far-near phase filter”, not only the direction, position and distance of the sound source can be judged, but also the size and scope of the acoustic space can be judged.

Therefore, as the core link in the production of acoustic space, “construction”, from the angle of content (characters, scene, actions, etc.), depends on the perceptual experience of first space; from the angle of form (scope, scale), depends on the combined action of the visual space and hearing law; from the angle of body, depends on the flow of time.

#### 4. Flow

In the generation of acoustic space, “construction” refers to the generation of a specific situation, while “flow” refers to the transition between different situations, the process of flow and change that new acoustic space replaces the old acoustic space.

Firstly, this flowing characteristic of acoustic space is related to hearing itself. Generally speaking, vision can perceive permanent space and form, but listening is more about “perceiving sounds that disappear without a trace” (Wolfgang Iser, 2002: 221). Therefore, according to Chion, unlike visual reprojected, which can be “firmly anchored to the source”, auditory “reprojection to the sound source is only partial” (Michel Chion, 2013: 150). This means that the generation of acoustic space is destined to be fluid but in order. In the book *Exploration in Communication*, McLuhan summarized it (acoustic space) as “there is no focal point..... it is not a pictorial space that can be packed in a container, but a dynamic space that is always in a fluid state, and constantly generates its own unique dimensions” (Huifang Gao, 2016: 83). It is this kind of “continuously generates its own unique dimensions” firmly anchors the listener in the voice and expression of the narrator, but it would deprive the listener’s “ability to make things in spectrum” (Michel Chion, 2013: 270) actively.

In addition, it is helpful to put the flowing characteristics of acoustic space in the context of era and society. McLuhan and Iser both regard sound studies and hearing culture as a representation of (post-) modern culture, and believe that the characteristics of visual culture are continuous and homogeneous, which is totally different with the characteristics of “synchronicity and fluidity of the electronic world”. Hearing culture is more (post-) modern in comparison. Therefore, it can be said that hearing culture born after the booming of electronic media will inevitably reflect the characteristics, that is fluid, liquid, and boundary-eliminating, in all aspects (including acoustic space production).

#### 5. Dispersion

In the production of personal acoustic space in the act of listening to books, private space and public space have always maintained a state of co-existence of embedding and peeling. The separation mainly points to “peeling”, while the dispersion points to the “embedding”.

One of the meanings of “dispersion” is the elimination of the auditory boundary between individual space and public space. Generally speaking, public space is always related to state institutions, infrastructure, and workplaces, while private space is more “characterized as personal, emotional and family territory” (Paul Du gay et al., 2003: 111). These two kinds of spatial forms, which respectively reveal the universal, collective, rational, and the individual, several, perceptual, are given the former superior to the latter in value order. In other words, the long-standing superior status of public space and the corresponding indifference to private space are historical, both in the East and the West. In the history of Chinese audiobook narrative, this kind of power relationship has changed from “discipline” to “rebellion” to “independence”. The sound environment is characterized as the individuality and private attributes of the personal acoustic space elevate gradually with the process from “mixing with public space” to “mixing with family space” to “emerging in private space”. The gradual revealing of the individuality and private attributes of the personal acoustic space seems to separate the personal space from the public space, and some critics have even criticized it as “splitting, “fragmenting” and

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from *An Introduction to Literature and Art Broadcasting* printed in November 1984 by the Department of Literature and Art of Beijing Broadcasting Institute.

“distinguishing” the public space. In the specific process of production of acoustic space, however, “there is no such ‘absolute’ thing that escaping from the world and turn to selfishness and division” (Paul Du gay et al., 2003: 93).

In the West, the mobile listening behavior of audiobook is still considered to be in a contradictory position between public and private. However, it does “challenge the established boundary between the public and private realms” (Paul Du gay et al., 2003: 116), and it has become an important power in reconstructing the boundary between public and private spaces.

In addition, another important meaning of “dispersion” is that with the completion of separation, shaping, construction, flow, the production of acoustic space will also gradually dissipate with the end of audiobooks. Therefore, in general, it is the end of acoustic space production process that the elimination of the boundary between personal space and public space, coupled with the gradual dissipation of acoustic space production.

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

In summary, the acoustic space of audiobooks is formed through separation, shaping, construction, flow, and dispersion.

There is a profound auditory tradition in Chinese culture. Although slightly prejudiced, broadcasting can be regard as tribal drums in McLuhan’s eyes, “The non-visual world contains a wealth of vitality from the pre-literal age, and it still feels the strong influence of broadcasting. The broadcasting information is violent and unitive implosion and reverberation. For Africa, India, China, and even Russia, broadcasting is a profound and ancient force, a bond that connects the most distant years and long-forgotten experiences.” (Marshall McLuhan, 2019: 368)

## References

- [1] Alain Corbin. *The Bells of the Earth: The Acoustic Conditions and Sensory Culture of French Villages in the 19th Century*[M]. Bin Wang, translated. Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2003.
- [2] Broadcasteam. *Sound Theory, Fuzhong Wu: Mobile Acoustic Media and Space Reproduction: Taking Audiobooks as an Example* [EB/OL]. [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xU3vOA0fWYN\\_2CY4gwMEpg](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xU3vOA0fWYN_2CY4gwMEpg), 2019-07-01.
- [3] Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*[M]. Daokuan He, Translated. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019.
- [4] Michel Chion. *Sound*[M]. Aigong Zhang, translated. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013.
- [5] Wolfgang Iser. *Undoing Aesthetics*[M]. Yang Lu, Yanbing Zhang, Translated. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2002.
- [6] Zhihua Zeng, Bin Lu. *Sheng Ling Qi Jing: An Overview of All-media Audiobooks Research*[M]. Beijing: Communication University of China Press, 2019.
- [7] Paul du Gay et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*[M]. Xian Zhou et al., translated. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003.
- [8] Huifang Gao. *On McLuhan's Acoustic Space and Visual Space: A New Understanding of McLuhan's Media Thought*[J]. *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, 2016,(4): 79-93.