

Podcast Pitch Assignment

Do something risky: imagine the story, before you've even begun to research it.

Dream what it can be, in advance. Ask questions like: “What might work as the beginning, middle and end? How can I be sure to capture conflict, tension and other dramatic elements?” And so move towards your story. “Just be sure to keep your ears open.” (Rob Rosenthal)

Our syllabus states: Around halfway through the semester, each group will make a pitch, sharing their ideas, clips and design ideas for their audio-essay with the class. This podcast will be *about* philosophy, but the work of developing and producing it will also be, in essential ways, philosophical. Consider what one of leading writers on radio, Jessica Abel, says about the task of audio-writing: “taking a bunch of unconnected anecdotes—or ideas—or bits of tape—and forming them into an arc is a very complex and difficult job. Even if you’ve got a focus sentence all worked out, **how do you get from here to there**” (*Out on the Wire*, 112)? The answer to this question is *structure*: finding structure for the tape; discerning the right order that will link recordings together with ideas. And this is what philosophy entails as well: drawing out the structure of sound, critical, rigorous and productive lines of thought.

There are some other key parallels between (good) radio and (good) philosophy: they each provide a reason for a story to exist, a reason that others find compelling; they open up ideas in ways that actually enable listeners/readers to experience, from their own first-person, new ways of understanding something; they *require* the input of others. This latter point is why we will be setting aside time for the podcast pitch: we will need others to help us notice what is most interesting, what is most likely to translate into important experiences for listeners.

Through this project, we will be working to decentre the usual workings of authority in our classroom. Instead of writing to the test (ie. working to submit the essay that a professor seems to want), we will be opening up our process to each other—through the pitch and the subsequent editing. This, too, is essentially philosophical. As Jessica Abel comments, “**Edits are where you find solutions to problems you may not have even known you had**” (*Out on the Wire*, 185). Edits emerge from others’ responses to our work. And it’s through this immanent, engaged work of creative dialogue that we will discover our key stories, insights and questions.

Envisioning our audio essays: questions we will ask each group

- Can you begin in the middle?
 - Is there a way to frame your episode so that the drama is front & centre?
- Where do you want to hit pause?
 - is there an idea that needs to be allowed to grow?
 - Can you restate something in another way (adding sounds, adding voices) to dramatize it more clearly?
- What will you use to create contrast? How will you emphasize a moment or an idea?
 - make a montage of clips that all speak to a shared idea: turn the dial *right* or *left* for the clips so that they evoke a ‘crowd’ of sounds
 - use silence!
 - When there’s a key quotation, overlap another voice speaking some of the same words (perhaps replacing a segment of the original media item with the alternate voice)

- Keep very low audio tunes humming along underneath a key segment

Questions for us as a class, after the pitches:

- Can we begin to discern a broader narrative?
 - What order should these audio essays come in?
 - Can we re-use bits of tape from others' episodes?
 - Are there sources or concepts that we need to explore as a group?

Incorporating Music

- “Music is the frame around the picture. **It makes it more real than real....** This! I had to learn this by trial and error, but it is so profoundly true: if there is music under a person speaking, and then it stops, whatever is said next is really powerful, it sounds important. It’s like shining a light on it” (Ira Glass in Jessica Abel’s *Out on the Wire*, 34-5).
- “The first thing I do when I’m approaching a score is **separate the scenes**. I don’t set strict time limits on how long or short a piece of music can be played, but I do follow one rule: a new scene needs a new sound. Between each completed thought I insert a few seconds of silence for reference. These gaps offer opportunities for musical changes and punctuation. **By isolating a story’s events and concepts into different musical passages, we give the listener the story’s information in chunks**. Each chunk is packaged within the music; each makes for tasty echoic digestion. If your musical phrasing is clear and calculated, the subject’s thoughts will feel the same. Once I get my chunks spread out, I push and pull, adapting the vocal to fit the musical form, and the form to fit the vocal” (Pat Mesiti-Miller, “Using Music”, 2014)

Transom.Org, “Using Music: Jonathan Mitchell”

Jonathan Mitchell: “every radio story can be thought of as a piece of music — the talking, the location sounds, even the silences — these are all musical elements.

“When you add music to your story and let it run under a person talking, what you’re really doing is creating a new piece of music. It’s like when a hip-hop artist samples a short bit of music, loops it, adds a beat, and starts rapping. What we’re doing is a lot like that; we’re just working in a different style. Every sound you bring into your story is working together to create not just a story experience, but a musical experience, **and the music you’re making can either serve or undermine the meaning of your story**.

“Sometimes the best musical choice is to not add any music at all; some stories are just better and more effective **when it’s simply a person’s voice and nothing else**. If you want to add music because you think the person talking is boring, you don’t really need to add music — what you need is better material. If you want to add music to mask background noise, what you really need is to make a better recording.

“But if you have a really good reason to add music, one that springs organically out of the story you’re telling, that gives it deeper meaning, resonance, and clarity, it will often become very clear what kind of music you’re looking for. Whenever I have a hard time deciding what music to use or where to put it, usually that means I don’t really understand why I’m putting music there in the first place. But a good reason tells me so much: where it should be placed, what style it should be, what mood it needs to convey. If music really belongs in your story, it won’t be hard to find clues that tell you what kind of music to use.”

Listen to short clip (“Example 3 (mix)”) and see its visual representation

<http://newcdn.transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/EXAMPLE-3-mix.mp3?e=7>

References

- James Baldwin, 1998. “Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone [1977],” *Collected Essays*. Ed. Toni Morrison. Library of America, 773-779.
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- Rob Rosenthal, “Imagining the Story,” *Transom.org* 10.25.11 <http://transom.org/2011/rob-rosenthal-imagining-the-story/>
- Jessica Abel, *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* (Broadway Books, 2015)
- Pat Mesiti-Miller, “Using Music,” *Transom.org* 6.17.14 <http://transom.org/2014/using-music-pat-mesiti-miller/>