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Sonic Mediations

Sonic Mediations
Body, Sound, Technology

Edited by

Carolyn Birdsall and Anthony Enns



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

CAROLYN BIRDSALL AND ANTHONY ENNS

It is no longer necessary to make the common claim that sound is underappreciated in theory and academic research. In recent years there has been a tremendous number of conferences, art exhibitions and books on sound technologies and auditory culture.¹ In the field of film studies, Michel Chion, Rick Altman and James Lastra worked to shift the attention of film scholars away from their exclusive focus on the visual towards the sonic dimension of cinema.² Scholars such as Douglas Kahn, Friedrich Kittler, Steven Connor, Emily Thompson, Michael Bull and Jonathan Sterne have also provided comprehensive accounts of the complex role that sound played in the history of social thought and the transformation of sound following the advent of modern media technologies.³ While some of these critics have been hailed as pioneers, they frequently note that there is a much longer theoretical interest in concerns with voice, sound, music, noise, orality and literacy, as can be found in the work of German critical theory, Canadian media and soundscape studies and French poststructuralist theory.⁴ In addition, there has been a renewed

¹ Some recent conferences include “Sonic Interventions” in Amsterdam, “*Kunst-Stimmen*” and “*Hörstürze*” in Germany and the London “School of Sound” seminar series, to name only a few. Major art exhibitions like “Sonic Boom” in London, “*Phonorama*” in Karlsruhe and “*Sons et lumières*” in Paris suggest that sound also plays an increasingly significant role in contemporary art.

² Chion, *Audio-Vision*; Altman, *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* and “The State of Sound Studies”; Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*.

³ Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*; Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*; Connor, *Dumbstruck*; Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*; Bull, *Sounding out the City*; Sterne, *The Audible Past*.

⁴ See, for instance, Adorno, *Essays on Music*; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; McLuhan, *Understanding Media*; Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*; Barthes, *Image Music Text*; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; Attali, *Noise*; Schaeffer, *Traite des objets musicaux*.

appreciation for the importance of sound in the twentieth-century avant garde.⁵

Within this flurry of activity many of the scholars working in sound studies are trying to address the questions raised when the study of sound crosses disciplinary boundaries to encompass such disparate fields as music, literature, film and art as well as theatre and performance studies.⁶ Due to its inherently interdisciplinary nature, however, it remains difficult to identify sound studies as a discipline. The problem is not a lack of existing scholarship, as Sterne points out in *The Audible Past*, but rather the absence of commonly shared assumptions and theoretical models:

We have histories of concert audiences, telephones, speeches, sound films, soundscapes, and theories of hearing. But only rarely do the writers of histories of sound suggest how their work connects with other, related work or with larger intellectual domains....The challenge, then, is to imagine sound as a problem that moves beyond its immediate empirical context. The history of sound is already connected to the larger projects of the human sciences; it is up to us to flesh out the connections.⁷

According to Sterne, therefore, the goal for scholars in sound studies is to seek out common areas of concern and to fully apprehend how their objects of analysis can be brought to bear on more fundamental philosophical questions.

This volume identifies mediation as one of the core concerns for scholars working in sound studies, not least because sound is a spatial and temporal phenomenon that always relies on a medium to make itself heard. Some conceptual ground work has been laid in media studies, where scholars have variously tried to address the issue of mediation with terminology as varied as “the medium,” “mediatisation” and “remediation.”⁸ That said, much of this work has occurred within a limited realm of disciplinary-specific concerns. Nonetheless, mediation is a useful metaconcept for interdisciplinary sound studies because it touches on the

⁵ For more on sound and the avant garde, see Kahn and Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination*; Weiss, *Phantasmatic Radio*; Campbell, *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi*.

⁶ For recent essay collections emphasising the interdisciplinary nature of sound studies, see Bull and Back, *The Auditory Culture Reader*; Cox and Warner, *Audio Culture*.

⁷ Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 5.

⁸ See, for instance, McLuhan, *Understanding Media*; Auslander, *Liveness*; Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*.

most basic questions concerning the relations between the *body*, *sound* and *technology*. All of these three concepts have been dealt with in existing scholarship, but too often one is attributed undue agency at the expense of the others. On the one hand, there has been a tendency to fetishise the powers of technology in relation to (listening) subjects.⁹ On the other hand, the “corporeal turn” in the humanities has sometimes been charged with overprivileging the agency of the body and perception.¹⁰ As a consequence, investigations into auditory perception and sound technologies have sometimes led to theories that posit sound as a passive in-between or having a bridging function.¹¹ By working with an overarching concept of mediation, such tendencies are forestalled, as scholars are encouraged to avoid technological determinism or overgeneralise the phenomenal body. Lastly, the attention to mediation may also allow scholars to recognise sound as a co-participating agent in cultural practices and performance.

Rather than taking mediation itself as self-evident, the chapters collected in this volume therefore invite readers to rethink this concept in terms of the interactions between body, sound and technology. This volume provides a series of detailed and focused case studies involving different sound and music technologies, performances and installations. Each of these case studies focuses on a set of highly specific questions: How are audio performances mediated by sound technologies as well as the performer’s body? In which ways is the immediacy of live performance influenced by sound technologies? How do bodies and technologies mediate the experience of auditory perception? What is the role of the listener in audio-based performances? How does sound mediate the experience of viewing optical media and how does this complicate vision-oriented theories of spectatorship? Our aim is not to establish a particular canon or promote a particular theoretical project, but to allow for potential overlappings in the approach to mediation by scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

The contributions to this volume comprise scholars from disciplinary backgrounds as diverse as musicology, film and media studies, art history, comparative literature, philosophy, theatre studies and science and technology studies. Rather than setting out the four sections in terms of disciplines or objects, however, the chapters are organised in terms of the functions and conceptualisations of sound. While each of these sections

⁹ See, for example, Williams, *Television*.

¹⁰ For a critical overview of the “corporeal turn” in the humanities, see Shilling, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society*.

¹¹ See, for example, Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 11.

focuses on a specific aspect of sonic mediation, many of the individual essays also deal with themes of affect, memory, voice, musical gesture, gender, liveness, sampling, narrative, interactivity and intermediality. Indeed, these concepts are often appropriated in different ways from one disciplinary field to another. For example, the narrative concept of focalisation can be fruitfully adapted for the analysis of sonic elements in radio plays, music theatre and opera, while the concepts of absorption and immersion similarly appear in discussions of opera, cinema and sound installations. Such examples are a testament to the self-reflexive and rich conceptual crosspollination occurring in interdisciplinary inquiry.

Section I, “Mediating Perception,” examines the body as a mediator between sonic events and technologies. Anthony Enns’ “The Phonographic Body: Phreno-Mesmerism, Brain Mapping and Embodied Recording” and Steve Goodman’s “Audio Virology: On the Sonic Mnemonics of Preemptive Power” both explore the relationship between sound technologies, auditory perception and memory. Enns takes several case studies that challenge the common claim that there was a gradual shift towards disembodiment with the development of sound recording technologies. By investigating instances of what he calls “embodied recording,” in which the body itself functions as a sound recording device, Enns argues that the body continues to occupy a central position in the production and reception of sound. While Enns’ chapter highlights issues of control in concepts of “embodied recording,” Goodman extends this insight to examine how contemporary capitalism also exercises control over the body through the deployment of sound. He introduces the concept of “audio virology” to trace the ways in which sonic branding strategies like jingles and Muzak function as agents for manipulating consumers. Bruce Johnson’s “‘Quick and Dirty’: Sonic Mediations and Affect” approaches the issue of sonic control by examining how responses to certain sounds have a physiological basis, thereby revealing the pre-cultural factors determining sonic affects, such as anxiety. Vincent Meelberg’s “Touched by Music: The Sonic Strokes of *Sur Incises*” also addresses the relationship between sound and affect by examining the physical role of the body in the act of listening. Using the concept of “sonic strokes,” Meelberg develops a theory of how bodies mediate the experience and meaning of musical listening, which reverses conventional assumptions about atonal music composition. Like the other chapters in this section, Meelberg is interested in the extent to which the body acts as an agent in the act of listening.

The essays in section II, “Mediating Performance,” emphasise the status of the technological apparatus as mediator by examining the

intersections between performers and machines. Jeremy Wade Morris' "Delegating the Live: Musicians, Machines and the Practice of Looping" and Jan Hein Hoogstad's "'Oh Baby, I Like It Raw': Engineering Truth" explore the role of digital sound technologies in contemporary music production. Drawing on Bruno Latour's notion of technologies as nonhuman social actors, Morris examines how the DL4 loop sampler functions as an active participant in musical practice. By "delegating the live" to the DL4, musicians using the pedal foreground the importance of repetition and invite a reconsideration of the relationship between live performance and recorded mediation. Rather than presenting technology itself as an active agent in music production, Hoogstad focuses instead on the role of the sound engineer. He examines the sonic interventions performed by hip-hop DJs like RZA, who employ digital technologies to create noise and vocal distortion in ways that subvert subjectivity as well as musical and linguistic conventions. Hannah Bosma's "Voice or Ear? The Female Voice and the Listener's Position in Paul Lansky's *as it grew dark*" focuses on the ways in which sound technologies mediate the voice in electrovocal acoustic music, which potentially destabilise authorial control and gender identities. In her reading of Paul Lansky's *as it grew dark*, for example, Bosma shows how the structure, objectification and distanciation of the acousmatic medium undermine the hegemony of language without attributing these vocals to a disempowered female figure. Finally, Kathryn Woodard's "The Pianist's Body at Work: Mediating Sound and Meaning in Frederic Rzewski's *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*" investigates the specific functions of corporeality in the composition, performance and perception of Frederic Rzewski's piano piece. Woodard suggests that the intersection between bodily perception and knowledge serves to enact and comment upon the power structures underlying musical traditions, by ascribing different subject positions to the pianist, who embodies the struggle between genres defined along lines of race and class. While the other contributions to this section focus on electronic and electroacoustic means of sonic mediation, Woodard argues that the pianist's body also functions as a sound technology in performance.

Section III, "Mediating Space," establishes how sound technologies and installations offer new ways of thinking about how sound mediates between listeners and the spatial environment. Rather than focusing on the interactions between musicians and machines, Taina Riikonen's "Producing Microscopic Embodied Spaces: The Flautist's Mouth, Reverberation Effects and Kaija Saariaho's *Lichtbogen*" examines how the space of the performer's mouth is mediated during electronic music

performances. By adapting Henri Lefebvre's concepts of social space, Riikonen investigates how the embodied flautist's identity is constructed through the interactions between the instrumentalist, the microphone and the sound director. The sense of physical intimacy produced in performance is negotiated precisely through these interactions, as it depends on the sonic reverberations created with the technology under the sound director's control. Steven Connor's "Atmospherics" also addresses the issue of intimacy and distance by examining how early historical responses to the atmospheric noise received by electronic sound technologies inspired new ways of thinking about the relationship between people and their spatial environment. With the rise of static interference, the atmosphere was often perceived as a threatening and chaotic force but was gradually treated as potentially productive, with instruments like the theremin introducing the body directly into the circuits of sonic transmissions. The theremin thus represents an early example of interactive media and a possible precursor to the use of sensory triggers and gestural controls within contemporary experimental and sound installation art. Ruth Benschop's "Another Interactivity in *Pneumatic Sound Field: On Interactive Sound Art and Digital Audio Technology*" examines the potential interaction between sound, technology and audience occurring in sound installation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, Benschop redefines the concept of interactivity in installation art as the creative engagement of the participants and their awareness of the sonic environment. Adair Rounthwaite's "Hearing History: Storytelling and Collective Subjectivity in Cardiff and Miller's *Pandemonium*" focuses on the ways in which sound installation can also be employed to convey a sense of history that is dependent on the listener's embodied experience and participation. For Rounthwaite, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's site-specific installation work creates a collectively shared event, allowing participants to imaginatively engage with the space and integrate it into their own present experience. As with the other chapters in this section, Rounthwaite highlights how noise or other forms of interference can mediate the relationship between listeners and the spatial environment.

The final section, "Mediating Audiovision," addresses the role of both image and sound in mediating the experience of theatrical and cinematic events. Milla Tiainen's "Towards Intensive Audiovisual Encounters: Interactions of Opera and Cinema" employs Gilles Deleuze's notion of "intensities"—a theoretical concept that does not privilege either optics or acoustics—in order to discuss the mediation that occurs when opera is incorporated into cinema. In her reading of Luc Besson's *The Fifth*

Element, Tiainen argues that an “intensive approach” is necessary for explaining how the visual action on-screen and the operatic elements in the soundtrack are mutually co-creative. Tereza Havelková’s “Do You Want to Be Absorbed? The Knotty Acts of Mediation in *Rosa: A Horse Drama*” takes the opposite approach by examining the use of cinema in contemporary opera. Havelková argues that Peter Greenaway’s *Rosa: A Horse Drama* alternates between operatic and filmic music in order to oscillate between theatricality and absorption. Havelková applies the concept of “focalisation” from narratology to describe these different musical registers and the way they mediate the audience’s relationship to the action on stage. Rather than treating the theatre as a transparent medium, in other words, Havelková approaches opera itself as a medium that foregrounds its own acts of mediation. Pieter Verstraete’s “Auditory Imagination and Narrativisation in Béla Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*” similarly examines how the interactions between the visual and acoustic elements in contemporary musical theatre create a critical distance that allows audiences to reflect on the effects of theatre itself as a medium. Verstraete extends the existing concept of “auditory imagination” to show how the use of minimalist settings and contrasting juxtapositions between textual and visual elements can draw the audience’s attention to their own interpretative acts of listening and reveal how theatrical events actually occur within the mind of the spectator-auditor. Carolyn Birdsall’s “Sound Bites! Dissonant Audiovisions as Historiophony in *Hitler’s Hit Parade*” analyses how the interaction between visual and acoustic elements in Oliver Axer’s *Hitler’s Hit Parade* create a critical relationship to the medium as well as towards fixed historical narratives about the Nazi era. By using popular music to recontextualise and undercut found footage from Nazi Germany, Birdsall argues that this film disrupts the listening conventions, the narrative structure and the emotional registers traditionally employed in documentary films. The chapters in this section thus employ a wide range of disciplinary approaches and concepts in order to discuss the same fundamental issue: how the relationship between sound and image can potentially create a sense of critical distance or medial awareness.

In conclusion, the concept of sonic mediation is broad enough to extend the limitations of existing disciplinary frameworks and music-centred models, but specific enough to elucidate a finite set of fundamental concerns that are relevant to scholars working on sound. The first part of this concept, the “sonic,” encompasses a broader understanding of categories such as the voice, music, noise and silence, while the attention to “mediation” sharpens sound scholars’ awareness of the specific

contributions of the sonic event, corporeality and the technological apparatus. By creating a forum for scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, this collection represents a model for sound studies: not as a homogenous field but rather a mosaic of innovative approaches. Rather than attempting to consolidate these approaches or privilege any single one, the particular benefit of sound studies lies in the fact that it allows scholars from such varied fields to enter into a productive dialogue around shared theoretical concerns.

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