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Paul C. Jasen. *Low end theory: Bass, bodies and the materiality of sound*. New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 296 pp. ISBN 9781501309939.

Paul C. Jasen's *Low End Theory* took me by surprise. At first, I thought I was asked to write a review about it because I regularly teach a university course on hip-hop. *The Low End Theory* is also the title of the second album by the American hip-hop collective "A Tribe Called Quest" (1991). Since this was my first association when I learned about the title of the book I was asked to write about, I thought its subtitle, "Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience", would somehow refer to the outstanding importance of bass sounds for the aesthetics of rap music. But it turned out that although hip-hop plays a minor role in the last chapter, *Low End Theory* is as much about haunted houses, the Bristol Hum, the acoustic realities of natural caves once inhabited by early mankind, man-made burial mounds, Gothic cathedrals, the frequency range of medieval organs, Affektenlehre, cymatic arts, the sensory re-arrangements of Op(tical) Art, the sonic architectures by La Monte Young, and the "audiogenesis of dance" – as it is about rap music. And "A Tribe Called Quest" is not even listed in the index of the book. If my theoretical knowledge about hip-hop didn't qualify me as a reviewer of Jasen's work, my theoretical orientation as a cultural musicologist, heavily influenced by post-interpretive cultural anthropology and cultural studies, finally made me the most unlikely candidate for this job. While reading the book's introduction, I felt personally addressed as one of those "culturalists" against whom Jasen explicitly positions himself theoretically. But in the end, I am very happy that I got the job because *Low End Theory* definitely is a rewarding read, even for ... or, maybe, especially for a "culturalist" like me.

Though this structure is not explicitly reflected in the table of contents, I read the book as tripartite, with the first part – consisting of the introduction, "Elements of a Myth-Science",

and Chapter 1, “The Sonic Body: An Ethico-Acoustic Toolkit” – being the theoretically and, to a “culturalist,” epistemologically most challenging one.

Here, the author positions himself in a tradition of thought that takes the writings of Baruch de Spinoza as its starting point and finds its most recent continuation in the work of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and in Brian Massumi’s affect theory. Jasen opposes this to an idealist line of thinking he identifies with René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and those contemporary “culturalist” theories that consider “all the elements of experience, and their possible interactions [as] always prefigured in their social construction” (p. 4). In doing so, they ignore “the world-making agency” of material existence: in this case, of sound in general and of low-frequency sound in particular.

Operating in “a space where sound studies overlap with the cultural studies of the senses” (p. 9), the book aims at finding a way to analyze (and a language to describe) how bass, which Jasen understands “as a (social) agent” (p. 2), affects the *sonic body*,” which operates as an itinerant between [...] ‘vibrant matter’ and fleshy thought” (p. 5).

The *sonic body* is definitely the key concept in Jasen’s project, which is a good example of what Gregg and Seigworth (2010) call “processual oriented materialism.” Functioning as a “transducer,” the *sonic body* in its materiality is thought not as a fixed, but as a contingent entity that is “always adaptively recomposing [...] in the immanent relations of its worldly encounters” (p. 13). Instead of “the bodily experience of bass by an individual,” Jasen prefers to speak of the sonic body’s *sensation* of low frequency sound as

something “pre-personal” – a matter of qualitative change in a body that precedes the interpretative work of perception. It strikes before cognition can make sense of it and before culture can mediate it. The idea is not that it is separate from the social but that it is *asocial*, that it retains an autonomy and an agency of its own, having the capacity to redirect thought, action, and collective organization. (p. 11)

So, as a “culturalist,” I am not out of the game but have been asked to wait and to consider if there isn’t a dimension I have missed so far. OK, fair enough! And I willingly admit that I found most of the examples of *sonic bodies* affected by low frequency sounds that Jasen presents in the second and third parts of his book quite convincing.

The second part, consisting of Chapter 2, “Spectral Analysis: Disquieting Encounters”, and Chapter 3, “Numinous Strategies”, is about encounters with what Jasen calls instances of “the man-made unknown” (p. 35): that is, encounters with low-frequency sounds that occur as unintended and usually unrecognized side-effects of human technologies. Additionally, this part is about what Jasen calls the “audiogenesis of religion,” that is, the use of comparable effects people all over the world and throughout history made (and still make) after they had learned “to ‘play’ the sonic body in ways designed to catalyze religiously useful becomings” (p. 65).

Though some of the phenomena Jasen discusses here are included in Jörg H. Mühlhans’ list of “Myths About Infrasound” (2017, pp. 275–277), they perfectly illustrate Jasen’s overall approach and what he – following Brian Massumi (2002) – calls *insistence* or the ability of material intensities (in this case, low frequency soundwaves) “to push themselves into perception and consciousness, [...] whereby insistence] describes both the self-activity of matter and its ingress into the social” (p. 36). Searching for examples for such *insistences*, Jasen cites Tandy and Lawrence’s notorious article “The Ghost in the Machine”, in which the authors identify infrasound of 17–19 Hz as “a natural cause for some cases of ostensible haunting” and ghost sightings (Tandy & Lawrence, 1998, p. 360).

I don't dare to decide who is right: Mühlhans who makes clear that later studies testing Tandy and Lawrence's theory yielded "hardly any significant findings that could support [their] claims" (Mühlhans 2017, p. 276), or Jasen who cites the article as an important contribution to "a minor science of the sonic body" (p. 44), a term he uses alternately with "myth-science" or "nomad science" and – following Deleuze/Guattari – opposes to a *Royal Science* that Mühlhans's article surely is representative of. Royal or "institutionalized science employs transcendent Method to extract generalizable laws from nature [whereas] a more ambulant science" that Jasen deems more appropriate to investigate how low frequency sound affects the sonic body "works intuitively and contingently, pursuing variation and anomaly, inhabiting materiality and following its singular flows" (p. 15). To me, his objections that "low-frequency investigations can only ever give a partial account of a given spectral terrain" and that while individuals' sensitivities towards low-frequency stimuli vary widely, "[s]uch 'subjective effects' are typically ignored by or mentioned mainly as curiosities in studies concerned with average tolerances and predictable neurophysiological effects" make a strong argument for a myth-science such as Jasen proposes because "what is a haunting if not an anomalous, unpredictable experience – a rupture in the quotidian?" (p. 46).

The phenomena discussed in the second and third parts of the book are too numerous and too diverse to all be mentioned here. Even the list given above just covers a selection. Though I stumbled upon the quasi-evolutionist order in which they are presented – with the discussion of Donald Tuzin's (1984) ethnographic accounts of the contemporary use of low-frequency producing instruments amongst the Ilahita Arapesh of Sepik, Papua New Guinea, preceding the discussion of archeoacoustic studies of megalithic mound structures across the British Isles and of the "organ-church assemblage" of the European Middle Ages – what Jasen has to say in Chapter 3 about the "audiogenesis of religion" was of special interest to me. This provided a valuable contribution from a materialist perspective to recent, "culturalist" discussions about community-building capacities of musical rituals in ethnomusicology and popular music studies (see, for example, Partridge, 2013).

While the second part is about the effects of naturally occurring or unintentionally produced low-frequency sounds and the use people all over the world, and since pre-historic times, have made of low-frequency sounds for religious purposes, Part Three, consisting of Chapter 4, "Tone Scientists 1: Vibratory Arts," and Chapter 5, "Tone Scientists 2: Bass Cults," is basically about "playing the sonic body" for secular reasons, be they intellectual, aesthetic or Dionysian. Due to my individual research and teaching interests, it is the last chapter of the book on popular music "bass cults" I found particularly fascinating.

"Dropping Science" is an often-used expression to describe what rappers do. Not for the first time, Jasen cites Kodwo Eshun in this case to explain what "science" means in the hip-hop context:

To drop science is to mystify, rather than to educate. In HipHop, science breaks it down in order to complexify, not to clarify." The aim is not *knowing* so much as sparking an *un-knowing*, an undoing of self-certainty. For the rapper in battle, it's not about enlightening opponents or reaching a consensus, but lyrically pulling the rug out from under them, leaving them vexed and speechless. (p. 157, citing Eshun, 1998, p. 28ff.)

The use rap music and other genres of popular music like Drum'n'Bass, Jungle, Dubstep, or Footwork make of "the low end" follows the same logic. Accordingly, Jasen speaks of *bass science* to describe "strategies [...] which treat sound and song as bio-aesthetic technologies" (p. 18) to "disorient, unsettle, unhome" (p. 159).

Unhomed myself by Jasen's book, I have just decided to extend the hip-hop course I will give this year to include another topic and to add a "processual oriented materialist" perspective to my hitherto exclusively "culturalist" approach. By now widely travelled and well-thumbed, my copy of *Low End Theory* obviously *affected* me more than many other books I have recently read, matter and mind involved (if this still is a reasonable distinction at all).

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