

Sound Theory at Grand Theory's End

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Review of *Sound Objects*. Edited by James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. 312 pp. ISBN 9781478001454 (paperback).

In an issue of *Feminist Media Histories* dedicated to genealogies, Roshanak Kheshti begins the entry on “sound studies” with an aside, one with enormous weight for the humanities and social sciences today: “The interdisciplinary ‘studies’ that formed on the margins of the traditional disciplines toward the latter part of the twentieth century—American/ethnic studies, cultural studies, film studies, gender/women’s studies, performance studies—experienced feminist sound studies interventions.”¹ The second part of this point, that feminist sound studies first emerged as an intervention in other studies, is preceptive enough, but the first part is tenacious in its critical importance: “studies” first appeared in marginal relation to the disciplinary, which is afforded master status. But if the “studies” are subordinate, struggling for recognition and autonomy, then what is at stake in the appellation “theories”?

Much ink has been poured over the question “what is sound studies,” and in their recent collected volume *Sound Objects*, James Steintrager and Rey Chow sidestep this question to arrive somewhere in the middle of this already well-established transdisciplinary conversation. “The collective thrust of this volume is to make a multifaceted case for thinking the topic of sound objects theoretically,” Steintrager and Chow write in the introduction (1). If the general object of sound studies is sound, then what kind of ob-

1 Roshanak Kheshti, “Sound Studies,” *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (2018): 179. Thank you to Amy Cimini, who shared this essay with me and helped me grasp its importance.

ject is sound, particularly when the distinction between subject and object is one of the most entrenched distinctions in theory across the disciplines?

This volume is not the first in which Steintrager and Chow appear as a duo, the collection being the third installment of an “ongoing project and intellectual collaboration” (vii) that began in 2011 with a special double issue of *differences*.² The project, they say in the introduction, was motivated by the spirit of curiosity and without yet knowing that “sound studies was rapidly congealing into a field—if, thankfully, not quite a discipline” (vii). This spirit—curiosity around the not-yet congealed—guides the volume, both as a whole and in its individual contributions. The volume does not attempt to discipline sound studies in the way that an anthology or handbook might, nor does it strive for a shared lexicon, but it does reinforce a famous place of beginning (I hesitate to say “foundation”): French composer Pierre Schaeffer’s term *objet sonore*, “usually translated into English as ‘sound object,’” French film theorist Michel Chion writes in the book’s opening chapter. It is a term that is “both one of the most frequently mentioned ... and one of the most misunderstood” of Schaeffer’s concepts, Chion continues (23).

I won’t attempt to define it here; that is the purpose of the volume. I will only say that, as the editors also point out, the question of the sound object comes to the fore with sound recording technology—i.e., the possibilities afforded by isolating and repeating sounds without visual reference, which Schaeffer called the “acousmatic.” These possibilities pressurize the imputed relationship between sound and source. The problem of (mis)understanding Schaeffer’s concept is not one of translation but application, particularly because Schaeffer’s research was meant to guide new compositional practices, and these applications—as the volume’s contributors, ranging from comparative literature to communications and to musicology, demonstrate—far exceed what Schaeffer imagined or intended. The misunderstanding, but also reimagining, was compounded when Schaeffer’s thought moved out of mid-century France into Anglophone contexts, but also into scholarly and artistic contexts almost totally unrelated to the compositional one in which Schaeffer found himself as an artist and researcher. With this, it is safe to say that *Sound Objects* is both about Schaeffer’s thought and the transdisciplinary reverberations of his theory, and not about him at all.

2 Rey Chow and James A. Steintrager, eds., “The Sense of Sound,” special issue, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2/3 (2011).

Steintrager and Chow's editorial beginning is a strategic one. Isolating Schaeffer's concept as they do, they seem to suggest that to do sound theory today is in some way to come up against, even indirectly or without intending to, the sound object theorized by Schaeffer. And this place of the beginning of sound theory is slippery. It's a point of contact—a relation, another term favored by many of the volume's essays—and not a foundation. It is important to say here that much of the thrust of the volume comes out in its brilliant groupings where themes emerge slowly over the time of reading and as a series of echoes and relations. If the volume is careful never to state exactly what sound theory is, then the claim nevertheless manifests in its collective refusal to “arrest a paradox,” write contributors Jairo Moreno and Gavin Steingo (178). This refusal is one that many of the essays implicitly associate with the notion of sound as a peculiar kind of object. For example, Moreno and Steingo reserve a place in thought, in agreement with Chion, for “sound *qua* contradiction” (179). This claim is echoed by Georgina Born, who finds in sound “nothing but mediations—indeed, of nonlinear, recursive mediations of mediations” (196), and also by Veit Erlmann when he suggests that “sound is not an object but an abject” (159).

Returning to the misunderstood concept “sound object” introduces an ambiguity of aim that is never quite resolved in the volume, and with good reason. It would be incorrect to say that the book is dedicated to or is even a study of Schaeffer's thought, but Steintrager and Chow nevertheless position him as what one of the book's commentators, Dominic Pettman, calls a “pioneer” (and as Chion points out, he “invented” the book's central term). Schaeffer appears in the book as a primary text excerpted in interview with Chion in the book's opening section titled “Genealogies.” Consider, in contrast, how excerpts from Schaeffer's opus *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966) are translated and reprinted in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner's seminal volume *Audio Culture*—first published in 2004 and expanded and updated in 2017—where Schaeffer appeared amongst a wide group of other writers working under a similarly hybrid identity of artist-writer-theorist.³ Cox and Warner presented Schaeffer as one of many, some preceding and post-dating him, and also as part of a longer story about modernism. One does not walk away from *Audio Culture* thinking that Schaeffer is the progenitor

3 *Audio Culture Revised Edition: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017; first publ. New York: Continuum, 2004). See also Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: Essays Across Disciplines*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); orig. ed. *Traité des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines* (Paris: Seuil, 1966).

of sound studies, and not only because Cox and Warner assembled their volume well before sound studies was a term.⁴ Instead, Schaeffer appears in *Sound Objects* in a hitherto difficult-to-access interview that took place much later in his career with Chion (who might be called one of his chief inheritors), and not in print but over the radio. The remarkable interview is here newly assessed and reframed by Chion, who now finds himself redefined on the other side of a long career as a formidable figure (forefather) in “sound theory.” In other words, the volume’s very organization seems to say that to study a beginning of sound theory, you have to study what Jacques Derrida would call its dissemination, making Schaeffer something of a trace. Theory, as intellectual history, is traditionally revered as a story between fathers and their sons; and if the paternal metaphor is irksomely present at the beginning of the volume, it quickly gets deconstructed in practice. The editors’ contrasting approach has something to do with the definition of sound theory as it mounts not directly but through its execution across the chapters.

In the interview with Chion, translated by Steintrager (also one of Chion’s major translators in another intellectual history), Schaeffer reminds his audience of his first identity as a researcher in music theory, which was not yet the sound theory that, I suggest, Steintrager and Chow are arguing Schaeffer initiated not in himself but afterwards. What’s more, many of the chapters could be thought without him, making Schaeffer a strange kind of progenitor. The book ends with an essay by David Toop and thus where the book began, at the point of contact between sound theory and sound practice, Toop sharing this hybrid identity. At the same time, the name Schaeffer is nowhere to be found in Toop’s essay. In fact, he ends by declining to provide footnotes, wary of academizing his contribution, wary of the very status of sound theory. “I am loath to quote from academic works for fear this will be taken as supporting evidence for a proposition that is entirely personal and speculative,” Toop writes of his moving diary about drawing as sound (255). He instead hopes to reckon artistically (theoretically?) with what he calls, quoting Julia Kelly, “a temporal dynamic of the just-passed, of an ungraspable and unfixable lost moment” (255).

4 In 1995, I was a teaching assistant in the class that launched the book, and the class was titled “Contemporary Music and Musical Discourse,” signaling its distance in time from what we now call sound studies. Discourse, particularly in its Foucauldian valence, is a term that Steintrager and Chow claim as a central component of (sound) theory in the opening pages of their volume. Theory is a discourse whose sedimented enunciations must be historically and institutionally analyzed (1).

In these and other moments, I wondered if the book was not finding obliquely in sound what is left of theory after deconstruction. In the introduction, Steintrager and Chow remind readers of theory's resistance to the philosophical currents of existentialism and, more importantly for this volume, the visualism of phenomenology. The linguistic turn of structuralism and poststructuralism—in many cases redeemed by this volume for sound and, again, not directly, but through its practices—was a move from image to text. In any case, sound is, Steintrager and Chow write, “forever playing the role of the disruptor” of the visual (4). It is against this backdrop that Steintrager and Chow redefine Schaeffer as a (sound) theorist, one who was paying attention to the subject/object distinction differently. The mid-century research of Schaeffer coincides geographically and chronologically with the emergence of what John Mowitt summarizes as the tradition of “Grand Theory” instantiated by Marx and Freud (211). At the same time, Steintrager and Chow show, Schaeffer's work represented an investment in phenomenology while also revealing “deep structuralist affinities” (8). While Schaeffer began “to categorize sound objects in morphological and typological terms” (9), he could not help but coincide, if implicitly, with Foucault's poststructuralist project in *The Order of Things* (*Le mots et les choses*, 1966), appearing the same year at Schaeffer's *Treatise on Musical Objects*. In other words, Schaeffer is a theorist, part of the milieu of Foucault and Derrida, but those entanglements were never explicitly addressed or thought by his project. In this way, with the essays taken together, the volume picks up on Foucault's genealogical impulse to historicize what he called the “unthought” structures of prevailing schemata (9)—in this case the sound object and its guises.

Readers should not approach this volume hoping for an intellectual history. Instead, they will be prompted forward through the chapters by themes that, loosened from context, “resonate.”⁵ Reading across the chapters, we do learn about how the sound object was constitutive of the subject for Freud in the form of what Jean Laplanche, adapting Jacques Lacan, calls the “enigmatic signifier” (Mowitt's essay); about the thingliness of music and the instrument as reified objects (Jonathan Sterne's and Toop's essays); of the unstable status of evidence of the object outside of its perception (Steingo and Moreno's essay); how the subject/object binary introduces a tension between the human/nonhuman (Born's essay); of sound objects as

5 Here I mean to invoke the comparative mode of study described in my *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

they lay bare the myth of the unified subject or collective (Michael Bull's essay). In each of these cases, the authors either invoke the older debate initiated by Schaeffer or move beyond it. Mowitt seems to summarize a collective view of the volume when he writes, "sound is precisely *not* what is retained. It is, instead, what leaks out, or 'whistles' between the limits of the Imaginary and the Symbolic as they frame the transcendental parameters of the speaking subject, of the human" (225). Here the sound object appears to be something like the force of theorization itself.

But what exactly is the relationship between sound theory and Grand Theory? The answer is not so clear, and readers have to attend to the ways that individual authors handle their material. In some moments, the answer seems to be that "sound" has always been a preoccupation of this tradition (Steintrager returns to Adorno, Mowitt to Freud, Erlmann to Julia Kristeva, for example). This preoccupation only became evident later or, more precisely, recognized as "sound." Mowitt, Bull, and Chow retrieve a series of sounds from the pages of *Grand Theory*, a premise that, had it been collectively urged for by the authors, *could* amount to a retelling of theory as proto-sound studies—but that would be to miss the point. After reading the volume, I nonetheless wondered to what extent theory has always been sound studies, particularly if we are to believe Martin Jay's thesis in *Downcast Eyes* (1993) that the history of theory is also the history of the denigration of vision.⁶

Steintrager and Chow are aware that "sound theory" is itself a visual locution, *theoria* being a Greek word for viewing. *For More Than One Voice* (2005), by Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, a figure already established in ancient philosophy and feminist theory, was one of the first books to take as its object sound and to reassess the history of Western philosophy and theoretical descendants on its basis. Cavarero links *theoria* in Plato's lexicon to *scientia* as "seeing clearing after having sought to perceive."⁷ One might well ask what is possible for sound theory given theory's origins in the discursive and linguistic turn? If theory is seeing clearly after having sought to perceive, a collection and division of objects into categories and classifications, then a theory based on sound would be based on the limits of theory itself, that is, hearing differently and ambiguously. At the very

6 See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

7 Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 36.

least, the question would have to remain open. Steintrager and Chow's volume does not address the question of why sound studies now: the introduction abruptly transitions from the claim "theory itself must also proceed otherwise, with sound" (6), with a new section titled "Sound Objects: The Problematic," that is, its summary of Schaeffer. But they do so without addressing the intellectual history in between. I asked myself, how did theory come to exhaust itself and find sound?

This brings me to the volume's importance in that it is the first to address (again, obliquely) the relationship between the linguistic turn and the sonic turn, and the tenuous relationship between sound studies' debt to Grand Theory, particularly its white male inheritors, and the "other" studies. Though Fred Moten's name nowhere appears in *Sound Objects*, it is worth recalling, for a consideration of the meaning and existence of sound theory, that his book—largely classified in African American studies, yet a major contribution to what is now sound studies—came out in the same year as Sterne's *The Audible Past* (2003) (another now-canonical book in the field, though for very different reasons).⁸ In a section titled "Resistance of the Object," Moten begins his magisterial *In the Break* with a deconstruction of Saussure's suppression of sound, the scream of Aunt Hester, as a suppression of Blackness. Marx is not able to think through—or listen to, these two being intertwined in sound theory—"the commodity who speaks," an inability that Saussure inherits.⁹ For Moten, at the point of Grand Theory's exhaustion, a Black sound becomes audible and legible, the entanglements between race and theory being difficult to overestimate.

Thus, I want to suggest that even though the majority of the contributors to *Sound Objects* are white men, the organization and framing of the book resists the patrilineal metaphor that shapes the tradition of Grand Theory because (and one senses Chow's role here) something of it is actually post-colonial in its force. The volume touches on the postcolonial *tout court* in the middle section, titled "Acousmatic Complications," where Chow and Pooja Rangan (also teacher and former student) appear side-by-side, making this section something like the heart of the book. For Chow, the acousmatic is compelling precisely to the extent that it supersedes the desire for the object (above all, the inner voice) to be "native" to its source. It turns

8 See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

9 Moten, *In the Break*, 1–24.

out that when theory is thinking the subject and object relation, it is thinking acousmatically, Chow convincingly argues, making the sound object the transdisciplinary phenomenon par excellence. In Rangan's brilliant essay, which offers a close reading of two films (Julia Dash's *Illusions*, 1982, and Mounira Al Solh's *Paris Without a Sea*, 2007), she is careful to make a claim, in conclusion, on behalf of a series of terms coined by the essay. Again, obliquely through a series of rhetorical moves, Rangan wants to lay claim to or make legible an alternative intellectual history of sound theory, one where Chow is to be found along with two contemporary female figures within African American studies and sound studies, Nina Sun Eidsheim and Jennifer Lynn Stoeber. This grouping does not share the paternal metaphor of lineage traditionally attributed to the genealogy that also orients Rangan's essay (in this case, Schaeffer, Chion, and Dolar).

When Rangan ends her close reading of two films by women of color directors, involving lip sync and colonized, racialized bodies both on-screen and acousmatically off-screen, she insists more than once that what she is proffering, by way of case study, is a series of "concepts," such as "ventriloqual listening" and "the skin of the voice." I am not sure it is correct to say these terms are concepts. The phrases enumerated seem to be something else, and this something else is important for the meaning of sound theory. For example, Rangan credits Eidsheim for conceptualizing "acousmatic blackness." But race is not a feature of Schaeffer's thought (I've argued elsewhere that it is implied, though not directly stated, by Chion's thinking of darkness).¹⁰ To go further, the term, as Eidsheim uses it, is a citation and related to the academic writing of and Eidsheim's conversations with sound artist Mendi Obadike.¹¹ Not having published this writing, Obadike instead elaborates—theorizes?—acousmatic blackness in her work as a sound artist in the duo Mendi + Keith Obadike.¹² This matrix raises questions of theory and practice in sound, of the slipperiness of citation, inclusion, and exclusion, once the patrilineal model of theory and discourse has left the scene. Just in the way it becomes entirely appropriate for other essays in Steintra-

10 See Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*, 20.

11 See Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). See Mendi Obadike, "Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2005). This dissertation is cited in relationship to "acousmatic blackness" in Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 228–29n26.

12 For samples of projects, see the artists' website "Mendi + Keith Obadike," blacksoundart.com.

ger and Chow's volume to theorize the sound object without ever citing Schaeffer, sound theory here surfaces as a break from theory's abiding and paternal logic of inheritance. In a stunning move, Rangan shows us how the *ideological* inheritance of the theory of the sound object—whose beginning, Schaeffer posits, is the master listening sessions to Pythagoras behind a screen, notably a myth that Schaeffer's inheritors go on to repeat¹³—is the continued idealization of a source in its absence.

To be sure, there is a struggle going on in sound studies, as in any study, for conceptual status, a struggle to reach beyond the study and to take on the portability of the conceptual object. What the book leaves me with as a reader, as someone invested in theory's remains, is the sense that, in sound, we approach the limits of what Grand Theory is supposed to be in its transmissibility. In the end, Schaeffer—the forefather and master—gets loosened from the object of his thought for the “sound object” to live a much more interesting and varied life.

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¹³ See Kane, *Sound Unseen*, for a convincing study of how Schaeffer mythologizes Pythagoras.