

SoundEffects



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

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Introduction

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Introduction

During the past ten to fifteen years an increasing interest in the auditory aspects of human life has developed within the humanities in Europe as well as throughout the world. This tendency, however, can in no way mean that a coherent body of sound studies is emerging. Rather, what can be labeled 'sound studies' or 'auditory culture' consists mainly of sub-disciplines attached to more traditional departments such as musicology, media and communication studies, art history, cultural studies, architecture, urban studies and anthropology. Even if these sub-disciplines live auditory lives of their own and produce important research, a common platform is called for in order to develop common ground with respect to theory, vocabulary, methodology, and even history of auditory lives. The quest for a common ground, where researchers from the humanities, the social sciences and beyond can become acquainted with and present research on sound, is the initial reason why we launched *SoundEffects. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* in 2010.

The emergence of the field of sound studies can be traced to a number of developments running through modern welfare states. First, the design of urban development focuses not only on such issues as infrastructure, building materials, visual design, but also on noise as a parameter for social life. Second, technological developments of digital media (such as the transformation of the music industry due to mp3 technology) are examples of societal and commercial developments, but at the same time they influence our understanding of what a culture of listening might be. Third, sound art and installation art are responses to developments within art history and at the same time examples of the emergence of new art forms. Finally, the digitalization of sound archives raises questions of cultural memories and gives us new understandings of our auditory past.

As different as these four examples might be, they are nevertheless aspects of auditory culture; they are examples of developments taking place in the middle of our society, and for this reason alone, sound studies must be organized with the general purpose of analyzing contemporary life forms. Furthermore, auditory culture and sound studies are intimately linked with notions of inter-disciplinarity. In a certain sense, sound seems to act both as a medium of life and as a way of relating in (and to) the world, of bringing things together, of confronting life forms, of communication. While this calls for an inter-disciplinary approach, it should be emphasized that inter-disciplinarity does not eliminate difference. Inter-disciplinarity in the case of sound studies is a testing of objects and of everyday life occurrences rather than the founding of a new discipline. Since the very foundation of sound studies is inter-disciplinarity and calls for methods and theories appropriate for this, it will be a secondary but equally important task of the journal to test and challenge the strengths of current inter-disciplinary methods.

If sound studies have lived a life on the fringes of the major humanities departments and institutions, things may seem to be changing. Forced to deal with societal demands of a 'new humanities', traditional academic disciplines and approaches have been under pressure for a number of years. If something good can be said about this institutional development within academia – associated as it is with discourses of new public management and skepticism against traditional humanistic disciplines – it is that it challenges thinking and forces research into new territories. Being on the threshold of institutionalization, sound studies could benefit from this development, and turn the homelessness into an advantage.

The reason why cultural and sociological research on sound has until recently been considered marginal may be found in preconceived notions regarding sound's lack of semantic unity and clarity. If sound does produce meaning differently than written and spoken words, this difference calls for analyses of the essence of auditory sense making and experience. In a discussion related to this complex matter, Steven Connor distinguishes between the viewing subject as "located in a single determinate position" and the listening subject, whose ears are basically working independently of each other (Connor 2008, p. 2). Sound leaves traces throughout the body, making it a sensing and experiencing entity, according to Connor, who continues: "We may register the sound as vibration, through our feet, solar plexus and other portions of the body, and we get a spatial distribution as opposed to a spatial convergence" (Connor 2008, p. 2). Sound may lack the ability to establish precise distinctions, as Connor suggests, but the bodily experience of sound opens up a different and equally complex field to analyze.

That sound communicates beyond the production of semantic meaning challenges its conceptualization. Due to the physical and vibrational nature of sound, its bodily experience must be taken into consideration. In academic disciplines like experimental psychology and neuroscience, responses to sound are measured as arousals and reactions in the autonomous nervous system or as brain activity. Sound affects our bodies and brains on a sensory level, but at the same time its effect interchanges with conventionalized discursive frames of everyday life and culture.

As indicated in the title of the journal, we understand effects first and foremost as human experiences – including pain and pleasure, meaning and emotion, social interaction, cultural memory and perception. Whenever sound is experienced there are sound effects – not as a sender-controlled passive reaction (as it was studied in the research of the 1930s), but as the mental, bodily and social engagement of the listener with the world. By contracting the word 'sound effects' to 'SoundEffects' we want at the same time to emphasize that sound is never just an auditive entity, but has a visual, spatial, graphic, even temporal component that cannot and should not be left aside.

The nine articles in this first issue of *SoundEffects* discuss all these (and other) aspects of auditory culture from a vast number of perspectives: from philosophical approaches, to sociological analyses, literary criticism, and medical history. In the call for papers for this first issue we invited scholars to reflect on the topic ‘sound experience’. From very different perspectives the articles engage with this complex matter. They by no means constitute a coherent body of texts. Rather as a whole they demonstrate how differentiated and vibrant the field of sound studies is.

The issue closes with a short review of one of the books on sound and sound experience, published within the past year.

Welcome to *SoundEffects*!

The editors