Hearing Modern History: Auditory Cultures in the 19th and 20th Century

Veranstalter: Daniel Morat, Freie Universität Berlin
Datum, Ort: 17.06.2010-19.06.2010, Berlin
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Proceedings of „Hearing Modern History," the 9th annual Blankensee Conference of the Berlin Wissenschaftskolleg, were occasionally interrupted by vuvuzela blasts coming through the open windows of the seminar rooms. Whether received as irony or irritant, this unignorable noise – then at the height of its prominence, early in the 2010 World Cup – neatly highlighted sound's place in the perceptual weave of everyday life and within broader social and cultural contexts. As a single 120-decibel note, or a low drone temporarily estranging media-aesthetic conventions, the vuvuzela's plastic Ur-honk is first and foremost a densely material sound, but it is more than simply an acoustic phenomenon. Impossible without contemporary modes of manufacture and distribution, the vuvuzela quickly became part of emergent practices of „public viewing." Its use and reception – both positive and negative – are informed on one level by fans' longing for sentimental experience, on another by notions of alterity and authenticity, on yet another by shrewd commercial calculation. (For FIFA, the vuvuzela sounded the coming of a provincialized Europe.) In other words, the vuvuzela is also and always already a historical phenomenon. The fact that it is a passing fad, intriguing in its global reach but likely soon forgotten, in no way lessens this historicity.

An appropriate accompaniment, thus, for a conference on the history and historiography of sound, which sought to connect recent interdisciplinary sound research with more established historical analyses and narratives. In his opening remarks, conference organizer DANIEL MORAT (Berlin) outlined the achievements and the limits of two decades of inquiry into „auditory culture." Alluding to tensions and disconnections between mainstream historiography and the diffuse field of „sound studies," he suggested that some investigations of listening practices, soundscapes and acoustic dispositives had suffered from a lack of historical perspective, inadequately connecting their objects to broader society-wide processes. That said, however, historians of sound could learn from methods of reconstruction and analysis in neighboring disciplines, whether media studies, musicology or cultural studies. Ultimately, a more thorough integration of sound into accounts of modernity and modernization could go beyond a sensory thickening of historical analysis, offering fresh perspectives and questions. Hence the main focus of „Hearing Modern History" was on the fifty years around 1900, a medial and sonic „Sattelzeit" characterized by new auditory technologies, the transformation of the urban soundscape and the emergence of new modes of listening in war, entertainment, science and medicine.

Opening the conference, WOLFGANG ERNST (Berlin) energetically took up the fundamental question of sound's historicity, arguing for an archaeology rather than a history of sound. He insisted that in many respects sound – heard, recorded or transmitted – was radically ahistorical; its specificity could not be captured and subsumed by the logocentrism of traditional narrative historiography. Serious engagement with „the sonic" – sound as sound and sound as time – could open up access to a plurality of non-narrative temporalities, beyond history-writing's reliance on Gutenberg-era structures of printed language and narrative contextualization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the historians present responded with reservations on this point, stressing the cultural context of sound's perception, production and consumption, and suggesting that sound history, as any other, should guard against the persistent chimera of unmediated access to the past.

In contrast to Ernst's pointed intervention, both HOLGER SCHULZE (Berlin) and MARK M. SMITH (South Carolina) stepped back to survey the existing field, highlighting theoretical lacunae and methodological problems. In a paper rich in conceptual coinages and compelling examples, Schulze reflected on fundamental questions of sound studies, interrogating its objects and methods and its episte-

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mological and social function. Recent work on sound practices, he claimed, should be praised for its predominantly materialist and culturalist analyses. This body of work provided ballast against recurring idealist notions of sound as dematerialized, ahistorical or „angelic."

Where Schulze referred to work in media and cultural sciences, Smith's keynote address focused on the historiography of sound in a more narrow disciplinary sense. Extending the genealogy of sense-historiography further back than in most accounts, Smith located the roots of today's „historical acoustemology" in the Annales school and the classics of 1960s social history: their perspectives from below and their thickening of the web of social description, he claimed, had paved the way for a subsequent historiography of the senses. Turning to the present and future, he characterized the historical study of sound as both a field (specialized sound-historical research) and a habit (non-specialists paying attention to questions of sound). The true impact of sound- and sense-historiography, according to Smith, is increasingly to be found in textbooks, mainstream histories, and popular museum practice. This issue of museum sound was widely taken up in the subsequent discussion (appropriately, given the location in Berlin's highly mediatized Museum of Communication), raising questions of authenticity claims, acoustic architecture and the ethics of contextualization.

After the opening discussions of theory and discipline-formation, subsequent panels presented a series of detailed local studies. KARIN BIJSTERVELD (Maastricht) reported on the collaborative research program „Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage," an analysis of the staging and inscription of urban sound in historical documents and artistic works. Outlining a subsection of this program, ANNELIES JACOBS (Maastricht) pointed to one example of Dutch sonic specificity. Analyzing a broad range of Second World War diaries, she showed how the striking silence of wartime Amsterdam was integrated into a broader cultural-semiotic constellation, incorporating resistance, national identity and (de-)modernization.

In his comparative historical study of concert listening, SVEN OLIVER MÜLLER (Berlin) addressed a well-known but still startling transformation: the rapid nineteenth-century change in the behavior of audiences, who went, in the space of two or three decades, from unruly, noisy and interruptive to reverent, concentrated and silent. Comparing the experience in various European cities, Müller revealed patterns of transnational influence, uneven development and class antagonism underlying this radical change. Taking the question of urban specificity into the present day, PHILIP V. BOHLMAN (Chicago), LARS-CHRISTIAN KOCH (Berlin) and SEBASTIAN KLOTZ (Leipzig) used a series of analytical snapshots to introduce an ambitious project mapping sound's role in contemporary urban life. They focused in the first instance on Berlin, Chicago and Kolkota, cities where music and sound are key sites of negotiation in the formation of urban identities.

After soundscapes and cultural identity, a series of papers addressed the history of science and media. ANTHONY ENNS's (Dalhousie) study of early telephonic experiments centered on Alexander Graham Bell's use of dismembered human ears as the basis for prototypical telephones. Framed by theories of mediated perception (from McLuhan to Crary and Kittler), Enns' paper impressively marshaled a wide range of historical detail, from patent applications and legal disputes to the „Human Telephone," a vagabond vaudevillean with a telephone receiver permanently attached to his head. Staying with the late nineteenth century, ALEXANDRA HUI's (Mississippi State) paper addressed notions of „musical competence." She traced the recurrence of this topos across more than one context, showing how it connected German psycho-physiological debates with the critic Eduard Hanslick's polemics against cultural, sound-environmental and psycho-perceptual degradation, which he attributed to the turn-of-the-century „piano epidemic."

The papers of STEFAN GAUSZ (Berlin) and CHRISTINE EHARDT (Vienna) examined the intersection of sound, technology and material culture in the first decades of sound's technical reproducibility. Refusing the term

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„technological media" as theoretically problematic, Gauß sought to redescribe the early history of the phonograph and gramophone – which he called „phonoobjects" – in terminology drawn from recent cultural theories of objects and things. Focusing on the lesser-known Austrian context, Ehardt's cultural history of the early auditory headset traced the device from live opera transmissions at Vienna's 1883 International Electricity Exhibition – when it was known as the „Telephonhaube" – to the iconography of headphones in the context of early radio.

Referring to sound theorist Douglas Kahn's concept of „worldly sound," CAROLYN BIRDSALL (Amsterdam) examined renderings of the urban soundscape in interwar radio productions and early sound film documentary. In close readings of works including Walter Ruttmann's early sound film „Melodie der Welt," she demonstrated the tension between the use of documentary sound material and the metaphysical imaginary of a „global soundscape." In the same period, but with an emphasis on listening rather than sound, AXEL VOLMAR (Siegen) sketched an archaeology of early radio listening, arguing that modes of mid-1920s wireless listening represented a continuation of the acute acoustic attention of wartime experience, and – more distantly – of medical auscultation. JOHN M. PICKER (MIT) likewise honed in on the cultural significance of the stethoscope. Mapping late-Victorian culture's modes of audition via close readings of literary texts and early phonographic performances, he suggested that a new and intense acoustic-haptic perception, first appearing with the stethoscope, ultimately underlay broader cultural anxieties about noise, technology and the disembodiment of the voice.

JAMES MANSELL's (Manchester) impressive paper blended intellectual and cultural history to investigate how noise and sound were lent cultural significance in early twentieth century Britain. Sound was a key trope, Mansell argued, in conceptions of the self, as well as in the formation of identities of place, nation and faith. Addressing the esoteric sound-philosophy of the Theosophical Society, he plotted its surprising cultural impact in best-selling self-help manuals, but also less directly in the musical commemoration of the Great War. Theosophy, he indicated, formed part of a third, dialectical standpoint towards sound and modernity, existing alongside futurist celebrations of noise and culture-critical animus against the din of the modern.

Reflecting the recent prominence of art-as-research, the conference's closing session took an alternative format, supplementing scholarly approaches with the work of broadcasters and artists. UTA KORNMEIER's and GABY HARTEL's (Berlin) sound documentary work used interviews and field recordings to reflect on London's auditory psychogeography. In a local context, VALERIA MERLINI and OLAF SCHÄFER (Berlin) presented an experimental re-scoring of Ruttmann's 1927 film „Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt." The new version juxtaposed Weimar-era images with contemporary Berlin street noise, posing questions, not least, of the changing nature of ambient urban sound.

Introducing the concluding discussion, VEIT ERLMANN (Austin) again reflected on the wider state of sound studies, contextualizing the conference – with its emphasis on North Atlantic modernity – in terms of wider issues and global networks of sound scholarship. Much remained to be done, Erlmann suggested, sketching a future agenda and diagnosing blind spots in the study of auditory cultures. He pointed out, for example, the need for more transnational analysis, as well as for sustained theoretical and methodological reflection. In other words: there is more to learn about sound and its history, although it remains an open question whether the discussion will primarily take place – to borrow Mark Smith's terms – as a diffuse habit or within a discrete field.

Conference Overview:

Introduction: Daniel Morat (Berlin)

Panel I: Theoretical Approaches
Moderator: Doris Kolesch (Berlin)

Wolfgang Ernst (Berlin): Towards a Media-Archaeology of Sonic Articulation
Holger Schulze (Berlin): The Sound and the Senses. Historical Anthropology of Sound

Public Keynote Lecture
Mark M. Smith (South Carolina): Futures of

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Hearing Pasts

Panel II: Sounds of Urban Pasts
Moderator: Paul Nolte (Berlin)

Karin Bijsterveld (Maastricht): Auditory Topoi in the Representation of Urban Soundscapes
Annelies Jacobs (Maastricht): Analyzing the Dramatization of Sound in the Urban Past

Panel III: Music Listening in the City
Moderator: Hansjakob Ziemer (Berlin)

Sven Oliver Müller (Berlin): Suspense, Ennui, and the Invention of Silence. Berlin, London, Paris, and Vienna 1850-1900
Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago) / Lars-Christian Koch (Berlin) / Sebastian Klotz (Leipzig): Berlin, Chicago, Kolkata. Urban Auditory Cultures in Historical and Comparative Perspective

Panel IV: Sounds of Science
Moderator: Julia Kursell (Berlin)

Anthony Enns (Dalhousie): The Human Telephone. Physiology, Neurology, and Sound Technologies
Alexandra Hui (Mississippi State): Noteworthy Neighbors? Hearing in the Laboratory and Listening on the Street at the End of the Nineteenth Century

Panel V: Objects of Sound
Moderator: Rebecca Wolf (Berlin)

Stefan Gauß (Berlin): Listening to the Horn. On the Cultural History of Phonograph and Gramophone
Christine Ehardt (Vienna): Phones, Horns, and Audio-Caps Listening in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Panel VI: Auditory Cultures in Interwar Germany
Moderator: Yaron Jean (Leipzig)

Axel Volmar (Siegen): In Storms of Steel. Staging the Soundscape of World War I in the Weimar Republic
Carolyn Birdsall (Amsterdam): The Documentary Ear? Sound Aesthetics and the Auditory Imagination in Interwar Germany

Panel VII: Auditory Identities in Britain
Moderator: Thomas Mergel (Berlin)

John M. Picker (MIT): Aural Anxieties and the Advent of Modernity
James Mansell (Manchester): Sound and Selfhood in Early Twentieth-Century Britain

Panel VIII: City Sounds Now and Then
Moderator: Jan-Friedrich Missfelder (Zürich)

Uta Kornmeier, Gaby Hartel (Berlin): SFX and the City. The Perception of Urban Ambient Sound in London
Valeria Merlini, Olaf Schäfer (Berlin): Symphony of a Metropolis A Dualistic Listening Experience

Concluding Discussion
Moderator: Veit Erlmann (Austin)

Tagungsbericht *Hearing Modern History: Auditory Cultures in the 19th and 20th Century*. 17.06.2010-19.06.2010, Berlin, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 13.07.2010.

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