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Soundscapes, sound clash

Nessa Johnston

The ‘sonic turn’ in media and cultural studies of recent years has been manifested by a snowballing of publications in the last decade, consolidating sound’s status as a legitimate area of enquiry. The introduction to *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies* (edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) points out that this ‘increase in scholarly attention to sonic phenomena is ... perhaps attributable to more recent, turn of the twenty-first century innovations in audio technology and new media practices’ (p. 3) – in other words, online digital platforms for the production and consumption of audiovisual media have allowed unprecedented access to previously ephemeral and inaccessible sonic artifacts. The frustration regarding sound expressed by the architect Rudolph Markgraf in 1911 – that ‘sound has no existence, shape or form, it must be made new all the time, it slumbers until it is awoken[ed], and after it ceases its place of being it is unknown’ – is less of a problem in the digital era. Indeed, *Sound Clash* is accompanied by an online resource which helpfully allows audio, visual, and audiovisual texts cited in some of the articles to be viewed or listened to by the reader.

The disciplinary boundaries of this book and also *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*, edited by Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), stretch far beyond that of film sound studies (or more accurately the study of sound and moving image media), which addresses the multimodal peculiarities of moving image media’s ‘auditory dimension’ and works very much within the shadow of Michel Chion’s groundbreaking yet occasionally frustratingly poetic writings.² Both books are pitched as part of the wider field of sound studies with a conceptual framework that moves beyond media studies to take sound-centred approaches to the study of past history, past and contemporary sonic environments, the interrogation of social and cultural formations, as well as

more philosophically, psychologically, or scientifically-oriented inquiries into the nature of listening and hearing. Sound studies can therefore feel like a scattered subject and despite its apparent consolidation within these two books a newcomer might find it challenging to navigate. As a banal yet illustrative example, my university's library classifies a number of influential sound studies titles under subjects as disparate as music, history, anthropology, film and television studies, and sociology. Two other recent edited collections have provided a corrective to this navigation issue: Jonathan Sterne's *The Sound Studies Reader* and Trevor Pinch's and Karin Bijsterveld's *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*,³ with the latter filed under 'physics' in the same library.

For the interested researcher sound studies might apparently represent a route into the academic study of sound that can bypass the visually-dominated field of film and media studies. However, the paradox is that an awareness of media studies is an inescapable necessity even in studies of sound that appear to move beyond film sound studies' borders. Given sound's ephemeral nature any scholarly encounter with it is typically mediated via printed textual descriptions of sound, sound recordings, film, television, and radio. Hence Bijsterveld's assertion in the introduction to *Soundscape of the Urban Past* that any study of urban sounds before 1900 must engage with the question of how sounds are 'staged' – sound studies is not so much the study of sound as the study of a 'mediated cultural heritage of sound' (p. 14).

Bijsterveld's edited collection arose from a major research project investigating these cultural stagings of sound in urban contexts, concentrating upon three European cities – London, Berlin, and Amsterdam – with the time period restricted to the late 19th century up to the present day. The team (Bijsterveld, Andreas Fickers, Jasper Aalbers, and Annelies Jacobs) systematically researched sonic representations of the three cities across a corpus of historical texts, radio plays, and feature films. The very concept of the soundscape which underpins this investigation roots the project in R. Murray Schafer's seminal work on acoustic ecology which investigated historical changes in environmental sounds since the industrial revolution, documenting contemporaneous soundscapes for posterity as part of the World Soundscape Project and theorizing issues surrounding noise pollution. However, along with other more recent sound studies scholarship⁴ the *Soundscape of the Urban Past* team are less negatively disposed to man-made or mediated sound than Schafer, who conceived of the modern day human subject as alienated from the 'natural' sound world via a combination of excessive man-made noise and the 'schizophrenia' of sound reproduction, amplification, and broadcasting. Not only does the project's methodology, which values media texts as important sites of the 'dramatization' of sound, suggest a more positive approach to mediated sound than within the acoustic ecology framework, the overall impressions

and findings of the project demonstrate a nuanced and varied range of attitudes to urban sound articulated across time, contexts, and media texts. Bijsterfeld situates their methodology within other more recent work that approaches sounds in terms of their cultural meanings, appropriating Schafer's notion of the soundscape in a manner that attends to its cultural situation (p. 16).

The book has an unusual structure, consisting of three major chapters presenting detailed research findings, each followed by a short reflective response from various invited authors: Mark M. Smith, Patricia Pisters, and Evi Karathanasopoulou and Andrew Crisell (as co-authors). A fourth section comprises three short contributions by leading scholars in the sound studies field (Jonathan Sterne, Holger Schulze, and Ross Brown) who explore the main theme of the book in a broader sense. Following the introduction the first of the three main chapters, 'Shifting Sounds. Textualization and Dramatization of Urban Soundscapes', provides a detailed overview and synthesis of the team's research project, though mainly focusing on feature films and textual sources rather than radio. The research and analysis is situated as a response to the question of how museums might go about curating sound for exhibition purposes, responding to previously encountered practical problems of staging the sounds of the past. Although the typically mute stagings of the historical past in a museum context have been enriched by the addition of relevant sonic experiences via the increased use of multimedia, the relative newness of this approach requires the systematic investigation of the efficacy of various sonic narrative strategies provided by this book.

A strong trope that emerges from this chapter is a sense of the inherently temporal and spatial nature not only of sound itself but also of human responses to sound. For instance, in fiction films and in written accounts, an arrival to a city tends to be staged as profoundly sensational and new, with urban noise eliciting equally joyous and anxious responses in protagonists and writers, given the contrast provided by the new soundscape with previous sonic experience. Similarly, the sonic environment of cities tends to be staged as dynamic and shifting, described in terms of the rhythms of city life or with the sounds of one neighborhood juxtaposed with others. Moreover, the responses to sound articulated suggest it is not necessarily the inherent characteristics of sounds themselves (loudness, harshness, timbre, etc.) that are intrinsic to their appeal or lack of appeal; indeed the listener can easily become used to sounds. The book includes a particularly striking example of this phenomenon, in which a World War II-era Amsterdam diarist writes detailed and evocative accounts of terrifying airplane drones, bombings, and gunfire. Over time the diarist's descriptions gradually give way to little mention of sound beyond 'two hours of booming and rumbling, but we hardly listen to it anymore'. This example can be further situated in relation to shifting conceptualisations of sound charted by this chapter, with 19th century writings tending to conceive of

sound in musical terms and the post-war 20th century demonstrating a tendency towards ‘noisification of music’ and ‘musicalisation of noise’.

The second major chapter of the book, ‘Sounds Familiar. Intermediality and Remediation in the Written, Sonic and Audiovisual Narratives of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*’, co-authored by the four team members, comprises an intermedial analysis of the novel by Alfred Döblin and its various adaptations, including an early sound film, a radio play, and the well-known television serial directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Among the definitive city portraits, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is a key text for investigation within a project of this nature and its adaptations across media provide an intriguing opportunity to investigate the staging of sounds comparatively. A particularly striking conclusion, chiming with those of the first main chapter, is that the most vivid dramatisations of sound occur within the novel rather than in adaptations involving sound reproduction. In contrast, the third main chapter by Carolyn Birdsall focuses directly on sound media with a detailed investigation of early German radio documentary, chronicling many interesting experiments in sonic depictions of cityscapes including city portraits and reportage along with experiments in outdoor broadcasting. The chapter includes a particularly illuminating discussion regarding sound recording and notions of realism and closes by showing how a tendency to use radio documentary to evoke a sense of place and locality became co-opted by the ultra-right through notions of *Volk* and *Heimat* – a conclusion that demonstrates what is at stake in consideration of these cultural stagings of sound.

It is within the three response chapters and the three additional chapters that some particularly useful theorisation takes place. Jonathan Sterne contributes a brief yet insightful survey and critique of the aforementioned term ‘soundscape’, encompassing usages prior and after Schafer’s adaptation of it and pointing out its peculiar tensions as well as reiterating what Sterne views as Schafer’s implicit anti-modernist politics. Holger Schulze theorises the auditory *dispositifs* of audio guides in museums and soundwalks – an under-interrogated and under-theorised sonic interface. As a response to Carolyn Birdsall’s chapter, Karathanasopoulou and Crisell argue persuasively that radio’s aesthetics are inherently urban, evolving within a context of the interdependent growth of industrialisation and urbanisation, and can therefore be understood as expressive of urbanity ‘not only in terms of content but also in its corporeal presence’ (p. 176). Mark M. Smith’s response to the first main chapter proposes that historians of the urban past ‘get their ears wet’ and consider the contribution made by bodies of water to urban soundscapes. The book closes with Ross Brown’s chapter on the memorial two-minute silence of Armistice Day in an eloquent exploration of this annual event as a (mass) mediated silence, relaying via microphones and radio broadcast the textured urban ‘silence’ of Whitehall in intermedial co-presence with the domestic silences of listeners at

home. The book's unusual structure allows each contribution to 'talk' effectively to the others and overall renders it more than the sum of its parts.

Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies is a more conventionally-structured volume (it is a special issue of *American Quarterly*). The editors Kara Keeling and Josh Kun have research backgrounds in gender and race representation and popular music studies respectively; these interests are reflected to a great extent in the selection of chapters, with six grouped in a section entitled 'Sounding Race, Ethnicity and Gender'. However, the overall breadth and diversity of the 17 contributions is impressive and some provide significant interventions in the ongoing sound studies conversation. The first section, 'Sound Technologies and Subjectivities', includes some excellent articles on our technologised interactions with sound, some with a historical focus as in D. Travers Scott's analysis of a set of telephone training films produced from 1927 to 1962. Though focusing on materials from the past Scott's arguments provide a useful and lucid theorisation of the peculiar 'intimate intersubjectivity' of telephone conversations (pp. 46-47).

A number of other essays with a historical focus explore questions concerning sonic markers of race and ethnicity – an important perspective that sound brings to typically visually-oriented analyses of race and representation. A particularly illuminating example is Nina Sun Eidsheim's contribution 'Marian Anderson and "Sonic Blackness" in American Opera', which illustrates the problematic critical and musical reception of the African-American opera singer in a career which spanned much of the first half of the 20th century and beyond. Eidsheim charts reception of African-American opera singers from the outright racist hostility of critics in the 19th century to less overt manifestations of racism articulated as what the author terms 'acousmatic blackness' – characterising their singing voices as sounding 'black' despite no objective evidence or physical reason for such perceived aural qualities. Linguistic research suggests that non-sonic information regarding voices can falsely cue perceptions of the corresponding speaker's ethnicity, which Eidsheim cites as possibly accounting for the peculiarly race-fixated reception of the opera singers' voices. This underlying prejudice lasts to this day, with few African-American singers being cast in lead roles and many being subjected to the 'Porgy and Bess' typecasting curse.

Eidsheim's essay along with several others in the volume unearth previously under-scrutinised problems of sonic representation. Particularly impressive is Roshanak Keshti's article 'The Aural Imaginary in World Music', which provides a compelling synthesis of psychoanalytical and phenomenological theories of the auditory imagination contextualised by problematic questions of race, gender, and representation. Keshti identifies a tactile and embodied (as well as peculiarly colonialist) articulation of the act of listening to world music as described by fans and promotional materials from record labels. Another highlight of the volume

is Mack Hagood's 'Quiet Comfort: Noise, Otherness and the Mobile Production of Personal Space', a wide-ranging yet rigorously-argued piece on the increased popularity of noise cancellation headphones, especially amongst business travellers. Hagood demonstrates how the technology exemplifies neoliberal ideas regarding selfhood and freedom as well as carrying out an 'othering' of noise. In support of his argument the author cites the marketing materials associated with the headphones, which cast the technology's users exclusively as white male businessmen and the sources of noise as representatives of the domestic or 'foreign' sphere, such as women and children.

Two essays bring to light ways in which radio communication can counteract white American hegemony. Dolores Ines Casillas reports on the 'transgressive possibility' of Spanish-language radio broadcasting in the U.S. as a response to the 'visual-based surveillance and legislative tactics' of anti-immigration policy (p. 382), while Art M. Blake focuses on the postwar subculture of CB radio usage, unearthing a distinct black CB culture that was particularly lively in the 1970s and an articulation of black struggle for full rights and equality. Blake's complex argument casts black CB as a type of 'audiomobility' which 'circumvented white prohibitions against black mobility and audibility, denied white assumptions of technical and verbal superiority, as well as internal black class politics around accent, vocabulary and speech style – about "sounding black" in an affirmative sense as opposed to the white-articulated racist manner identified by Eidsheim.

The third section of the book, 'Sound, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere', shares the greatest common ground with *Soundscapes of the Urban Past*, including historically-focused contributions by Lilian Radovac and Ronda L. Sewald exploring questions of sound and space in urban American environments. Both demonstrate a particularly nuanced approach to class issues with Sewald in particular challenging the reverse snobbery of earlier writings on urban noise by Jacques Attali and John M. Picker – 'noise regulation as class warfare' (p. 319) – by demonstrating that campaigns against the use of loudspeaker technology in urban spaces were led by a diverse mix of individuals rather than a paternalistic bourgeoisie.

Taken together these two volumes successfully 'sound out' areas of study that are typically visually-dominated, using a diverse array of methodologies and lines of inquiry and focusing on overlapping yet wide-ranging topics; read together they provide complementary investigations of sound cultures rooted in either side of the North Atlantic. While the focus on the city in *Soundscapes of the Urban Past* is made explicit it is interesting to note that although *Sound Clash* is not ostensibly focused on the city or urban sound culture overall its essays tend to focus on primarily urban topics. Therefore we might argue that there is an inextricable link between 20th century culture, urban culture, and sound mediation which repeatedly manifests itself through the preoccupations of sound studies.

Notes

1. Quoted in Thompson 2002, p. 12.
2. Chion 1994, 2009.
3. Sterne 2012; Bijsterfeld & Pinch 2011.
4. Several writings collected in *The Sound Studies Reader* challenge assumptions underlying his conception of acoustic ecology, along with Sterne in his earlier work *The Audible Past*. See also Waldoock 2011.

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Shadow economies and digital disruption

Chris Baumann

Judging by the titles of Dina Iordanova's and Stuart Cunningham's edited volume *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-Line* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012) as well as Ramon Lobato's *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), one could be forgiven for thinking that the movie theatre as we know it has ceased to exist. Both books are concerned with the many alternative ways moving images are experienced outside of the controlled confines of multiplexes and art house cinemas, yet both books tackle this subject differently. Whereas the contributions of the nine authors that appear in *Digital Disruption* centre around the digital technologies and formal online circuits that condition today's film culture and challenge a film industry whose distribution system has long relied on revenue generated by the box office and ancillary markets, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*