

Politics of Sound

Seminar's summary, Autumn 2018

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We started the seminar by reading the introduction of Brandon Labelle's book *Sonic Agency* and asked ourselves if sound and listening could inform (political) emancipation in approaching personal and political crisis. Furthermore, we addressed Salomé Voegelin's concept of Sonic Sensibility to approach the Sonic World. "*Sonic Sensibility crafts from the heard and the unheard a range of critical ideas and perspectives. (...) Sound's invisible formlessness has the capacity to upset and reorient the politics of visibility*" (Labelle, 2018).

During our listening workshop, we heard Peter Ablinger's work *Rauschen*, a block of white noise that illustrates the different forms of subjective perception at stake when listening to sonic textures. Moreover, we heard an excerpt of Else Marie Pade's *Faust* reflecting the works of a woman composer pioneer in electronic music and active in the Danish resistance movement. Closing this first session, we watched a small portrait of sound artist Moor Mother, showing actual practices of underground sonic experimentations inspired by afro-futurism. Finally, we heard an excerpt of Peter Cusack's *sounds from a dangerous place*, documenting ecologically damaged places through the practice of sonic journalism.

The second session explored the political dimensions of music. Departing from Teodor Adorno's text *Musiksoziologie*, we addressed his classifications of different forms of listening. Furthermore, we analysed Christopher Small's concept of Musicking as a social activity and process. We then discussed a short essay on Noise Music by Rudolf Eb.er that proved that categories between musical genres might be problematic.

During this session, we have tried to put in parallels the practices of contemporary notated music (Neue Musik) with the one of underground Noise music as both sonic practices informed by political dimensions. During the listening workshop, we heard works by Helmut Lachenmann, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Anton Webern, Incapacitants, Nina Garcia and Maja Ratkje.

The third session explored the tensions between sound and technology, hinting that technology could be understood as a *pharmakon*, that is to say, both as a remedy and a poison. Shuhei Hosokawa's text offered an insight into the Walkman as a technological item from the 1980's reflecting an era but also new forms of individual listening permitting to immerse a subject in her/his own sonic world and thus becoming separated from his/her environment. Audio technologies are central aspects of researches within sound studies as they show how we listened through history, how we listen nowadays and which transformations occurred. Tracing audio technologies from the gramophone to the tape players, the CD player, the first MP3's player and actual digital technologies permit to realize a genealogy of sound production and listening while also identifying different forms of disciplinary mechanisms, as addressed in Michael Bull's text.

Andrea Polli's approach to Sound Walking and sonification on the other hand, defined strategies to reassess our environment and described sound art as an activist practice by listening to the sonic world. We furthermore heard Christina Kubitsch's Audio Walk that permits to develop a sensible hearing of electro-magnetic waves present in urban environment and not audible without a proper transducer/device (in her case, a self-developed headphone).

The fourth session focussed the questions around sonic-ecology and addressed the soundscapes in the age of the Anthropocene. Murray Schafer concept of soundscapes dates from the 1970's and articulated a binary perception between "beautiful" nature sounds and "ugly" human made noise pollution. This concept has been criticised by Tim Ingold in his text "Against Soundscapes" where he advocated for a non-fixed notion of the soundscape that would be oriented "like a kite, in the sky".

Further texts by Hildegard Westerkamp and Gascia Ouzounian argues that soundscape of the natural world can help us listening better to our environment, helping becoming "attuned" to it. Alison Pezanowski-Brown gave a more actual takes on ecological sound art, underlining that listening to the present climate crisis and the sixth mass extinction help us to become aware of a damaged planet and its eco-systems. Sound Art as a dark ecological practice (cf. Timothy Morton's Dark Ecology) could therefore be a practice which helps us rethinking our relationship to the environment and conceptualize anew the relationship between human and non-human. We listened to field recordings/phonography of Jana Windren (more specifically the sounds of coral reefs dying), Chris Watson's Vatjanokull as well as Kits Beach Soundwalk by Hildegard Westerkamp to close this session.

I missed the fifth session so I cannot write about it, besides that it addressed the tension of media and history, like the question of the historicity of the concert hall by Emily Thompson or the text by Alain Corbin focussing the sonic identity of the village in the 19th century through the sonic presence of its bells.

The sixth session continued the articulation of sound, media and history, however with a focus on the modern times. Many Suzanne-Wong proposes to re-interpret history and archaeology by applying a de-anthropocentric strategy permitting to create new narratives when confronted to past or present history. Lauri Siisiäen addresses Michel Foucault's analyses of the Bentham's Panopticon by focusing on the auditory through the tin tubes constructed to listen to, survey and discipline the inmates. Siisiäen thus created the concept of panauditory (as an alternative to the panoptical) and shows that sound and listening can be understood as ways to address power relations. Further in the text, Italo Calvino's novel exemplifies the figure of the king who has to permanently listen to the surroundings in order to avoid a coup d'état or simply to consolidate his power-knowledge articulation through his capacity to listen and decipher the surrounding while sitting on a throne.

Steve Goodman's text starts by taking the example of the "Ghost Army", a unit of the U.S Army specialised in camouflage during World War II. The Ghost Army has been notorious to use audio technology to establish an ecology of fear by using audio-illusion to humbug the adversary. Goodman's shows furthermore the articulation of the military, marketing and entertainment as an efficient combination to manipulate and control through sounds. The works of Juliette Volcler (cf. Her book "Extremely Loud") would further be very helpful to address these questions.

Friedrich Kittler's gramophone exemplifies the importance of the transformation of technologies and how it influences radio but also pop cultures and underlines here also the interrelations of entertainment and the military as forms of power relations.

We then mentioned specific audio techniques like compression, mixing, the vocoder or stereo effect as potential regimes of truth during past and present history.

The final session focused the possibility of a philosophy of Sound Art through the works of Salomé Voegelin, Brandon Labelle and Kodwo Eshun.

Voegelin advocates for a phenomenological philosophy of sound art, reinventing new tools to address the world through sonic sensibility while adopting a critical position towards the hegemony of the visual and proposing other ontological approaches based on listening.

Eshun's works permit to create new narratives when approaching music history through Afro-Futurism. Afro-futurism indeed allows to connect the dots between afro-centric traditions, science-fiction and the speculative strategies of a non-linear time where past, present and future interact permanently. This hints to adopt a critical position towards the western-centric dimensions of music history by shifting away from its colonial tradition and imagining new potentialities. These concepts imply to look at history from different perspectives, but also invites us to critically address and listen to the present time in order to think a possible other future than the one we are actually facing.

Sound and listening are often full of doubts, triggering relationships between subjects and the human/non-human sonic world and thus bringing central epistemological and ontological perspectives to analyse the production of subjectivities. Furthermore, sound and listening can give a voice to the

unheard and by doing so they can become relevant components of the production of social, artistic and political dimensions.

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