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Study and Re-Use of 'Sleeping' Sound Collections

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ABSTRACT

A number of recent publications feature thoughts on the neglect of the ‘unheard’ (Søndergaard, 2013) and the ‘buried’ (Hoffmann, 2015) sound archive. This article explores what types of knowledge sound archives might hold. To that end it moves between past and present when considering certain shared programmatic intents: examining future projections reflected in the founding rationale of a specific Dutch theatre sound archive (Theater Instituut Nederland or TIN) in particular, while reviewing the rhetoric of ‘neglect’ and ‘re-use’ in current sound scholarship in general. Examining how the TIN archive reflects the birth of an often quoted Dutch avant-garde theatre movement, the article seeks to address how sound documents might contribute to rethinking aspects of theatre history and perhaps aspects of historiography in general.

Key words: sound, archives, history writing, the unheard, Dutch theatre sound archive, avant-garde

‘Although, who knows,
maybe you future people write with laser pens?
But probably even those have a certain smell?
Do future people still sniff their (laser) pens?’
(Saunders, 2013)

Past Future Imaginaries

– Will People Still Listen to Our Avant-Gardes in the Future?

Sound scholars currently promote a trend of listening to neglected sound archives. This article engages with the discourse on these ‘forgotten’ archives, working both discursively and through the example of the specific Amsterdam theatre sound collection. On the discursive level I observe tendencies and vocabulary used in current sound studies literature to promote the re-use of sound archives. The Amsterdam example serves to identify these current attempts as categorically comparable to the historical sound archive’s founding rationales.

In this article I wish to disentangle historical or current programmatic intents from historiography in order to map what can or cannot in fact be found in sound archives. In a conscious reversal of the historian Mark M. Smith’s *Futures of Hearing Past* (2014), which looks ahead into a future of historical sound studies, I suggest instead ‘hearing past futures’, tracking down the projections for posterity that underlie sound archival sources, and pondering the consequences for future use. In promoting a trend of listening, do we put ourselves in line with the rationale of the founders of sound archives, which has, in the course of time, been proven fallacious, as the neglect seems to manifest? Can a change of collective memory practices be

effectively incited from academic discourse? In other words: Do we make ourselves vulnerable to ephemeral fashions, and what does it mean then to conduct ‘sound’ historiography? With these questions in mind, my objective here is to problematise the sound studies notion of using archives in order to hear sounds that, as of yet, remain essentially unheard. To that end I will stage a conversation between a variety of fields as well as a variety of historical actors. I will be reviewing tendencies in different fields within the body of sound literature: the growing literature on theatre sound (Brown, 2010; Mervant-Roux, 2011; Ovadija, 2013; Curtin, 2014) and literature on sound (archival) material in between archival studies (Ketelaar, 2002), memory studies (Assmann, 2008) and concrete categorical sound archival theorisation (Søndergaard, 2013; Hoffmann & Mnyaka, 2014; Hoffmann, 2015). The specific sound archival theorisations are considered specifically in regard to the notion of neglect. The Amsterdam theatre collection is discussed and provides examples scattered throughout the theoretical discussions, specifying the case of sound archives for the case of sound art/theatre archives.

For ‘Future Students’ and ‘Current Lovers’: Starting with Amsterdam Theatre Sound

In 1972 Lou Hoefnagels, a Dutch politician invested in causes of archiving and sound archiving – who was both a founding member of the IASA¹ and one of the big promoters of a Dutch theatre sound archiving endeavour – published: ‘What we know of the theatre in former centuries is very incomplete [...] what really happened? The pulsating life of the stage performance itself is something we don’t know. [...]’ (Hoefnagels, 1972, p. 526). Hoefnagels further framed a recording and archiving practice as a duty of ‘civilized nations’ to register ‘the living theatre’,² to document according to one’s technological availabilities, beyond the static documentation on paper, but through sound as being available and more suited to the dynamic of a stage performance. The Amsterdam theatre sound collection had been established six years earlier, in 1966, as a foundation called ‘Theater Klank and Beeld’ (Theatre Sound and Image); later it professionalised as part of the Dutch theatre museum. At first sight the archive’s institutional history seems to be a quixotic project of singular enthusiasts, one of whom was Hoefnagels. The enthusiast before him, Gerard Piesaar, had established the archive after being impressed by a vibrant commercial fan culture of theatre performance registration on a holiday in France in 1959, finding LPs with Molière performances available even at local gas stations. The users of the Dutch collection in contrast were not believed to have a commercial interest. Instead, Lou Hoefnagels – who in the institutional history of the sound archive was most productive in terms of expressing his programmatic intent regarding the archive in promotional publications and future projections – mentioned a twofold target group:

'future students' and 'present lovers and practitioners of theatre to stimulate their interest and to increase their number' (Hoefnagels, 1972, p. 22).

Today the collection of Dutch theatre documentation of sound recordings contains about 37,000 (sound) items from more than six decades of theatre practice. It includes not only results of a registration practice in sound of about '30 till 35 % of 110 theatre productions per year' in its first years (Hoefnagels, 1972, p. 21), but also 'documentaries on authors and plays (in collaboration with theatrical companies)' (Hoefnagels, 1972, p. 22). In the meanwhile the body of the archive has also come to include an uncounted number of donations from private collections as well as radio broadcasts with interviews, radio dramas and performance broadcasts – the earliest recording, of a speech in honour of Queen Wilhelmina's wedding by actor Louis Bouwmeester, dating back to 1901.

These 'future students', whom Piesaar envisioned as being served by the theatre sound archive, arrived in much smaller numbers than expected, so that by the 1990s the archivists of the Theater Instituut Nederland (TIN), where it was housed, referred to it as 'a sleeping archive'. In what can be read as a final blow to the optimistic vision on which the theatre sound archive was initially founded, when the TIN ultimately moved to terminate its institutional support for the initiative, following Dutch government budget cuts in 2013, even Hoefnagels' 'lovers and practitioners of theatre' (Hoefnagels 1972, p. 22) failed to come to its defence.

In order to try to make sense of this object beyond simply describing the idiosyncratic circumstances from which it emerged, I propose to draw on notions of temporality as developed within both archival studies and memory studies. By inscribing past, present and future to its material body, it has, for example, been argued that an archive can be thought to function as a sort of 'time machine' (Ketelaar, 2002) preserving past material memories for future communities. From the perspective of memory studies, with memory scholar Aleida Assmann, one could speak of the archive as being by definition 'located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage (Zwischenspeicher)' (Assmann, 2008, p.103).

With regard to the Amsterdam archive, one could say that the material in this archive has, thus far, never found the subscribers for which an archive is created. Now, with the material body in the hands of the University of Amsterdam, I am contemplating potential broader uses of the archive, thereby engaging in this lineage of potential future projections. I can distinguish disciplinarily driven questions from those that tend to be more programmatic and, at worst, normative. I departed from questions such as: Can one actually hear directors' decisions? How do acting traditions manifest in auditory terms? How does a potential conception of auditory dramaturgy change over time? On the other hand, I, too, wonder on the future level:

What would it require for theatre scholars to use sound archives in their research? Which type of research (question) is best suited to the particular auditory mode?

The Place of Sound in the Archive/in the Disciplines

– Hearing the Unheard

It was the French theatre scholar Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux who, in the edited volume ‘Theatre noise’ (2011), was the first to remind fellow theatre scholars of the existence of specific theatre sound archives, at the time promoting a paradigm shift to regard theatre as a ‘listening place’:

The clearest sign of this (mostly) implicit theoretical domination of the eye in theatre studies is the near complete oblivion of rich sound archives, which I would definitely distinguish from audiovisual archives. Researchers, theatre historians, specialists of stage production etc., hardly ever use audio recordings of performances, nor even remember that they are available and could be consulted. (Mervant-Roux, 2013, p. 189; emphasis added)

Labelling collections and archives as almost completely forgotten (‘near complete oblivion’ [Mervant-Roux, 2013, p. 189]) or as ‘asleep’, might, as in the Amsterdam case, be vocabulary chosen for unofficial use by the archivists, but this choice of vocabulary is in the vicinity of the more charged terms of ‘hidden’, ‘buried’ or ‘unheard’ that current sound scholars take up.

Regarding theorisations of sound archival neglect, in recent sound studies literature I highlight two studies with different objectives. Whereas both deal more or less explicitly with under-utilised sound archives and engage conceptually in their reactivation, one of them (Hoffmann, 2014, 2015) contributes to theories on modes of listening as being affected by archival figurations, while the other profiles specific, yet unknown sound material against the backdrop of artistic practices, the ‘Unheard Avant-Gardes’ (Søndergaard, 2013). As the focus of this article revolves around sound archives in their entirety as bodies of knowledge, moreover around the explicitly ‘forgotten’ ones, my concern coincides with some aspects of the studies just mentioned and is thereby clearly distinct from those studies, which engage with singular archival sources.³

The first, Anette Hoffmann, who has published on acoustic archives in recent years, places herself in her articles ‘Hearing voices in the archive’ (Hoffmann & Mnyaka, 2014) and ‘Introduction: Listening to sound archives’ (2015) in a line of thinking on modalities and methods of listening to sound archives.⁴ She differentiates her work from current approaches that examine the relationship of historical knowledge and sound, her interest not being ‘to listen to “the past”, but instead to listen to acoustic archives and historical sound files’ (Hoffmann, 2015, p.

1). Hoffmann's main argument is that listening to a sound archive means to listen to sounds that are 'figured' (Hoffmann, 2015, p. 1), which may be close to what I have described above as a complex of political and archival as well as disciplinary intents underlying the archive. These conditions determine not only the historical record, but along with it also the way it was or is going to be listened to. In the case of theatre registrations, the archival part of the curation is first of all the reason why the performance has been considered worthy of registration, but but when listening one also hears artistic choices belonging to the situation of the original stage. Sounds in general, particularly those of the theatre archive, are not, as archivist Brien Brothman problematises, 'raw material for historians' (Brothman, 1993, p. 208). It seems quite necessary to assume an attitude of listening with all trained and acquired skills. Whether those skills have to be native to the archive's disciplinary affiliation I think could be subject of further discussion elsewhere.

Hoffmann ascribes sound archival neglect to the disciplinary specificity in which the archives had been set up, and in her words sounds are 'buried in archives assigned to specific disciplines' (Hoffmann, 2015, p. 2). Interestingly, in Hoffmann's account this limited accessibility is attributed to the aspect of archives having 'been digitised only recently' (2015, p. 3), seemingly implying that archives have at least now been digitised. However, this is not the case in the Dutch example. The TIN did, during its active time, digitise only about 5,000 items. Such a selective digitisation or no digitisation at all seems not to be accounted for in Hoffmann's examples.

The Dutch example then seems, compared with the archives that Hoffmann studies, to add another potential nuance in the range of neglect. What has been digitised has already, at least to some extent, been selected for re-use, as opposed to material remaining simply untouched in boxes.

Morten Søndergaard, curator and sound scholar – whose article on the 'Unheard Avant-Garde' (2013) provides my second example from current sound archival literature – draws on the critical vocabulary of neglect and theorises specifically on the neglect of yet unheard avant-gardes. According to Søndergaard, the neglect of (media/sound) archives can be assigned to 'an ontological gap between archival practices and the theoretical scope of the humanities within the last thirty years' (Søndergaard, 2013, p. 312); he thereby points in particular to the role of academics in making use of archives.

Whereas Hoffmann has been characterised above as concerned with specific modes of listening, Søndergaard ultimately departs from a specific artistic practice, a position from which he defines archiving more programmatically. But the point he can be seen to make about 'being unheard' has as its focus an interest in and a study of an avant-garde practice. What is looked for in the archive then is the historical documentation of an object, and as such Søndergaard's contribution must be distinguished categorically from Hoffmann's methodological approach.

When speaking of the ‘collective unconscious’ (Søndergaard, 2013, p. 311), however, and ‘the silence’ of his archival examples of media art (Søndergaard, 2013, p. 314), Søndergaard conjures what in archival studies has been dubbed archival silence (Carter, 2004; Decker, 2013) and what, from the perspective of postcolonial studies, can be further identified not only as a way to critique power, but hegemonies and practices of silencing in particular. Søndergaard’s choice of words of indignation clearly makes his call – or I should say *our* sound scholarly call – to reactivate sound archives stronger.

This discursive choice thus accomplishes a point that is in fact grounded in a programmatic intent which in turn may be comparable to historical sound archival founding rationales, as in the earlier example of Hoefnagels. To problematise the potential fallacy of this position, let me elaborate on the example of the Dutch theatre archive.

On the Failed Search for Cutting-Edge Performance

My own research into the Dutch theatre sound archive had started with a vague hope to find yet unknown evidence of otherwise well-established theatre scholarly narratives.

My first search was for evidence of what in the Netherlands is known as a turning point in recent Dutch theatre history. The so-called ‘Tomato Campaign’ refers to an event in 1969, when students threw tomatoes on stage during a 1969 premiere of ‘The Tempest’ by William Shakespeare as an expression of protest against the perceived rigid theatre traditions of the time. As part of a repeated narrative in Dutch theatre history, this single event is said to have set off a fashion for institutional critique periodising a division in national theatre culture in terms of before and after *Tomaat*. Due to the salient title (in Dutch: *Aktie Tomaat*), the search for sound documents on this event and its consequences, however, served to reveal the complexity of the sound archival search. Which perspective can a sound archive offer in this search? I could have found an over time increasing quantity of experimental performance recordings from this date onwards. Or I could have heard formerly unknown witness accounts in interviews or recorded public debates. However, in the accessible material, including historical performance registrations and interviews, *Tomaat* remained mainly ‘unheard’, and in a few interviews its relevance seemed to be explicitly downplayed by the interviewees. Whereas the archives’ holdings exploded in quantity around the mid-1960s, they mainly reflect a recording focus that seems rather faithful to the institution of text theatre – the sound recordings do not seem to register the movement of the small and site-specific stages that has been associated with the post-*Aktie Tomaat* period according to the dominant narrative. This example of my first search certainly cannot jump to grand conclusions

and disprove the centrality of *Aktie Toots*. But the more I listened to the sound material, the precariousness of any fast conclusion became apparent: Even if, for example, a performance appears to look experimental and non-traditional on performance photos and is discussed as such in reviews of its time, a simple exaggerated rolling of the ‘r’ and a certain conduct of voice might create a different first impression for the contemporary listener. Hoffmann’s emphasis on the affordances of sound as well as the figuration of sound apply for this example. This archive is archive-politically figured through selection (here potentially: the institutional focus in times of institutional critique); it is figured artistically through every actor and recorded situation anew; and situations are historically determined through factors that are not fast to disclose.

How would one subsequently develop a historiography congruent to the multiplicity of voices and figurations that resound through each record? If one was to explore the archive along the archival grain, that is, following the programmatic intent, one would be looking for the big voices of former times that have been kept for posterity. Yet, still, due to its sound format, the archive offers a diversity of voices, which might resist single-minded narratives. Perhaps more so than paper archives, sound archival material might show traces of historical determination, which in turn might be seen as closely related to the archive’s neglect.

Historicising Archival Decisions and Sound Scholarly Vocabulary

The decision of archivists to put an archive to ‘sleep’ can be regarded in all its contingency; however, this decision to de-activate an archive can be embraced as being made for a reason related to broader cultural practices (Assmann, 2006), the framing of which embeds the sounds and the archive into a particular culture. My article has led me to linger at the example of the sound archive in the moment ‘in between remembering and forgetting’ (Assmann, 2008, p. 103).

Once acknowledging the past and current underuse of the archive, the scholarly work seems to be to historicise archival as well as academic decisions and to consider their broader cultural contexts. Relying on sound studies’ profiling as being radically interdisciplinary, I would like to see the research questions on sound archives offer grounds on which it is possible not only to compare sound archives internationally, but also to address their potential historical underlying intents. Then their local, language-bound and disciplinarily specificity becomes accessible. I propose to fully include the acknowledgement and provenance of our own scholarly motivation and vocabulary. At the same time – when thinking of the community of potential users – fellow sound scholars should be included in the conceptualisation of a potential re-activation in order to avoid a fallacious lineage of single appeals to listen by single enthusiasts.

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Notes

- 1 IASA, which stands for International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives, was founded in 1969 in Amsterdam as a foundation to establish dialogue between different archives internationally.
- 2 'It might be expected of civilized nations that they would immediately grasp the opportunity. To register the living theatre and at least begin to record high-lights from the work of actors. And in fact recordings of certain great personalities from the beginning of this century have been preserved for us' (Hoefnagels, 1972, p. 526)
- 3 For theatre, an example of the latter would be the articles by Milutis (1996) and Kolesch (1999) analysing Antonin Artaud's famous 'To Have Done With The Judgement Of God' with a view to addressing (radiophonic) ontologies.
- 4 Thereby, the specific suggestions of listening to a sound archive stand in the bigger tradition of theorising the mode of listening as much discussed in philosophy (Nancy & Mandell, 2007), rhetoric (Gross, 2011) and psychoanalysis (Dolar, 2006; Lagaay, 2008) among others.