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Between Noise and Silence : Sound, Technology and Urban Space during Nazi Germany

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SUMMARY

The main aim of this dissertation is to research the cultural significance of sound and sound technologies in Germany between the 1920s and early 1940s. My first hypothesis in researching this issue is that it provides new insights about change and continuity during the Nazi era (1933-1945) that are overlooked in much (visualist) historiography. My study proposes that the cultural significance of sound is necessarily broader than that of music and musical performance. This larger category of sound allows for the consideration of noise, silence, speech, everyday incidental sounds and imagined sound, in addition to a formalised concept of *music*. A second hypothesis is that the historical study of modern auditory culture requires attention to the temporal and spatial qualities of sounds in a given context, and to the historicity of related cultural practices, listening modes and the technological devices employed.

In my introduction, I present the “soundscape” (Schafer 1977) as a guiding concept for tracing the intersections between modern sound, technology and urban space. My study of urban soundscapes is based on the initial premise that the National Socialist movement forced an increase in pressure on the acoustic environment. Analysing various components of the soundscape, I argue, reveals shifts in social organisation, power relations and the ideological construction of auditory experience in this particular historical setting. I also make clear that this study of early twentieth century sound takes place from the perspective of the present. I underscore this necessary act of (re)construction and interpretation based on a selection of textual, audio and visual sources, rather than mourn the elusive or ephemeral nature of the sound archive.

While I engage with cultural historical sources and explanations, my approach to the selected case studies is governed by the concept-based approach of cultural analysis. I also take my cue from the interdisciplinary field of soundscape studies, yet I significantly revise its prevailing treatment of listening (attention and distraction) and critiques of audio technologies. Drawing on phenomenological theories, I urge for an understanding of “auditory experience” that invokes a dynamic between listening, hearing and speaking. I account for alternative genealogies of modern sound and acoustics, before emphasising a more differentiated historical interpretation of technologies like radio. In my own study, therefore, I draw attention to the social construction of audio technologies in various cultural fields and to ongoing difficulties in manipulating sound, rather than asserting the inherent qualities of these media. The *urban* soundscape is explicitly chosen as a locus for analysing cultural practices using sound, on account of the prominence of the modern city as a medium of social relations. Indeed, the overall project to use sound to control urban space and rework identity formations motivates the selection of cases for the five chapters of this study.

In my first chapter, I show how the principles of sonic presence and spatial monumentality underpinned various National Socialist activities in the 1920s and early 1930s. In addition to noisy “clash” violence and musical song, I identify new forms of acoustic publicity (such as loudspeaker vans) and intersubjective exchange (like the party’s distinct greeting). Using the specific example of commemorative events for the martyr Albert Leo Schlageter in Düsseldorf in the 1930s, I develop “affirmative resonance” as a conceptual tool for analysing the role of sound in the creation of resonant spaces within urban environments during Nazism. I frame my examination of Schlageter commemorations in Düsseldorf by calling upon a phenomenological concept of the “auditory imagination” to theorise acts of listening and the voice within auditory perception. I also propose the importance of *imagined* sound, particularly given that Schlageter’s death (symbolised by gunshot sounds) was repeatedly invoked as prompting a collective experience of national awakening. I argue that, although the party subdued resistance in the urban soundscape with terror and coercion in the first months of 1933, the staging of mediated sounds within public rituals involved a great deal of trial and error.

In the second chapter, I explore continuity and change in the interwar soundscape in terms of what I call a “festivalisation” of the everyday. By this I mean that the increased frequency of official events and celebrations during the first Nazi years significantly affected the rhythms of everyday life. Here I expand on my interest in the production of space, ritual and listening attention, and engage with a somewhat unlikely tradition appropriated during Nazism: the boisterous annual carnival festival in Düsseldorf. I first engage this case with theories of the “festival” and challenge the usual notion of carnival as an all-inclusive, temporally and spatially confined ritual. I then discuss the contribution of radio broadcasts to the nature and experience of the carnival festival, whose sounds were dispersed to new sites of (national) reception. The expanded importance of carnival as a national cultural event, moreover, gives me cause to consider the rejection of jazz music as carnival’s sonic emblem (in favour of *Heimat* and *Volk* cultural forms). In this vein, a close reading of a 1939 carnival broadcast allows me to consider how the sounds of otherness were increasingly staged in carnival events and street parades, with “German humour” used to perform unity and police the borders of belonging. On this basis, I argue that carnival’s noise began to resemble and overlap with anti-Semitic rites of violence, as part of a broader marking out of exclusion within the festivalised, urban soundscape.

In the third chapter of this study, I choose to focus on the redefinition of sound following the outbreak of war in 1939, which I read primarily in terms of changes within the Düsseldorf soundscape. I contend that the ideal of a disciplined *Volksgemeinschaft* (national-racial community) was dependant on: attentive radio listening, a controlled system of air raid sirens, and the designation of illegal listening activities and speech as a source of fear or anxiety. I first establish the pre-war definition of radio as a live conduit between Adolf Hitler and all (ethnic) Germans (as “imagined listening community”), along with efforts to control spaces of reception

and provide subsidised radio receivers. Against this background I argue for the specific importance of wartime “special announcements” for manipulating listening attention and staging a mediated celebration of national military success (with evocative theme songs). A heightened emphasis on radio as a “cultural front,” as I demonstrate, was accompanied by an imperialist notion of Germany’s acoustic space as extending across occupied Europe. I then propose that a temporal-spatial organisation of the urban homefront was also attempted through siren systems, whose significance has not been sufficiently emphasised in the visual iconography of the air war. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s visualist account of modern techniques of control, I analyse the tensions between sound as a disciplinary practice (official measures) and sound as an unpredictable disruption to everyday life (air attacks and their aftermath). The prevalent fear of sound was heightened, as I suggest, due to acoustic forms of surveillance, new categories of listening crimes, and a generally changed listening environment. My analysis emphasises the feedback and eventual contradiction between the soundscape and the claims made on radio, as well as the adjustments made by listening subjects when negotiating the space of the darkened and threatened city.

The fourth chapter revisits Nazi-era efforts to use sound to fill, condition and control urban spaces and their inhabitants. I take Richard Wagner’s music-theatre in Bayreuth and his “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” concept as an influential model for the immersion of audiences in a darkened space of reverberant sound. I first re-evaluate Wagner’s legacy for the sound cinema and for notions of national community under Nazism. I then employ the acoustic metaphors (symphony, rhythm) used in Walther Ruttmann’s work as conceptual tools for tracing a gradual shift towards urban control, a subdued soundscape and unified community in filmic portrayals of the city. The concept of “rhythmic harmony,” as I argue, can be fruitfully used to theorise simultaneous attempts to reorganise the cinema space and spectator attention (as “controlled event”), and to invest the cinema space as a site of festive gatherings (and exclusions) by the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. In my reading, I emphasise the ongoing risks and problems with cinema sound, and the subsequent interruptions produced by the World War II soundscape. Finally, the persistence of synthesis or “synchronisation” as a metaphor for totalitarian control in the present day motivates my analysis of a contemporary film (*Hitler’s Hit Parade*, 2003). I contend that this documentary film critically employs a principle of sonic continuity to activate listening attention and foreground its own act of selection. By transcending the opposition between parallelism and counterpoint the film draws attention to established chronologies and audiovisual stereotypes in representations of National Socialism.

In the fifth and final chapter, I remain with the question of the (ir)retrievability of the past, and the influence of public discourses and media narratives on memories of the Nazi era and its sounds. I make use of a concept of the “echo” to examine how sound figures in the production of memory. More specifically, I examine a series of oral history interviews, which I

conducted in Düsseldorf during 2004-2005, and try to elucidate the dynamic between individual and social contexts of remembering in the present. Here I take a critical position towards the politics of memory, particularly with regard to a recent “memory boom” and the emergence of narratives of (German) suffering. I draw on Pierre Janet’s tripartite theory of memory as a framework for considering to what degree these accounts can be interpreted according to the categories of habit memory, narrative memory and traumatic memory. Since the majority of the interviewees were children or young adults during Nazism, I accentuate the ideological production of sensory perception within Nazi pedagogy. For these purposes, I revise a concept of the “earwitness” to address the role of auditory imagery, gesture and sound-making in the process of remembering in an interview context. This concept, I suggest, may also aid the denaturalisation of a visually-based notion of witnessing. In emphasising the ways that earwitness experience is filtered through the “lens” of the present, my analysis of the echo seeks to address the (inter)personal negotiations involved in collective and cultural memory.

In my Afterword, I return to the project of using sound for examining the past more generally, and for establishing its specific cultural and political significance during Nazism. Here I reassert my claim that the processes of power and discipline associated with sound can produce uneven, if not unpredictable, results. My case studies, I point out, confirm the affective potential recognised for establishing sonic presence and disciplining the senses through sonic overwhelming. At the same time, however, the examples I present reveal the difficulties and labour required in order to successfully establish acoustic dominance during the 1920s and 1930s. This study gradually shifts from how sounds were heard to how they are represented and remembered. Nonetheless, this move towards the present day is not a strategy for rehabilitating the present, since the contemporary era is shown to perpetuate its own stereotypes and assumptions about the National Socialist era. In reflecting on the selectiveness of the audio-visual archive, I do not endorse projects to fully recover the historical soundscape. The study of the soundscape – aided by a theoretical engagement with related concepts – can nevertheless provide new ways of understanding the historicity of listening and modern sound, in addition to their implication in modern violence, war and dictatorships like that of Nazi Germany.