

Concepts of Sound and Listening. On the Role of Sound Technologies in US-American Cultural History

Panel Organizer

Steffen Just (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn)

25 years after the interdisciplinary field of sound studies first took root, established humanities disciplines still grapple with integrating the epistemological potentials, perspectives, and methods of sound scholarship into their canon. While many contemporary humanists acknowledge sound as a legitimate research topic, it is often only treated as a secondary expression or a representation of something else. Two key explanations exist for this sort of treatment – one epistemological and one methodological. On an epistemological level, a prevailing belief in the humanities persists, suggesting that the study of sound alone cannot unveil unique insights into political, cultural, or social issues or topics. Sound can only be examined as a referent or a reflection of an already-existing phenomenon. This belief manifests in various forms, such as viewing sound as a stratagem of state propaganda, a diplomatic tool in political conflicts, the musical backdrop of social movements, an expression of subcultural milieus, a representation of hegemonic values and norms, or a product of capitalist economy. Accompanying this belief are methodological reservations, with some scholars in the humanities expressing concerns that sound, as a phenomenon, is too elusive to be a suitable subject of research. Given the prevalent training and specialization in analyzing (seemingly more tangible) textual and visual source materials, scholars often shy away from studying sound unless it is represented in a textual or visual form(at).

This panel proposes that delving into specific technologies provides valuable and alternate pathways into the study of sound. The presentations set out to explore how sound and listening in the United States have been *technologically produced and conceptualized in a variety of ways throughout the 19th and 20th centuries*. In doing so, the panel aligns with Jonathan Sterne and Mitchell Akiyama's call for sound research to relinquish "axiomatic assumptions regarding the givenness of a particular domain called 'sound,' a process called 'hearing,' or a listening subject." Only by acknowledging the "articulatedness of sensory technologies, sense data, and the senses themselves" can we highlight the technological plasticity of sound and listening.[1]

This plasticity, in turn, unveils significant insights into US-American culture, as sounds and listening are inherently interwoven within a complex and inter-relational web of discourses, practices, media apparatuses, formations of knowledge, affects, subjects, identities, and more. Addressing one of the central questions posed in the CfP, "how do the United States take shape acoustically in different historical and regional contexts?", the contributions aim to elucidate how *specific concepts of sound and listening have historically played a constitutive role in the formation US-American culture and society*. The presentations highlight that technologies can serve as excellent non-textual source materials for reconstructing US-American soundscapes.

Works Cited

[1] Sterne, Jonathan & Akiyama, Mitchell. 2012. "The Recording That Never Wanted to Be Heard and Other Stories of Sonification". In: *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* edited by Trevor Pinch & Karin Bijsterveld. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 544–560, here p. 556.

Presentations

Sinusoidal Soundscapes. Telharmony and the Conceptualization of Electro(mecha)nical Listening

Christina Dörfling (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin)

'Empowered by You'. Datafying and Programming Music Listening in the first Half of the 20th Century

Max Alt and José Gálvez (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn)

Twangin' the Country. Pedal Steel Guitar and the Sonic Materiality of American Identity
Hendrik Burfeind (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel)

The Soundscape of 1980s Pop Music. FM Synthesis and the Conceptualization of Sound as Signal
Valentin Ris (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn)