

Acoustic Ephemerality: Introduction

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More than 250 years ago, in his aesthesiology, Johann Gottfried Herder addressed the core of the disconcerting nature of the acoustic when he stated that “the sound vibrations [...] elapse and are no more” (Herder 1993: 292). Over the last three decades, a field of research has opened up in the sciences and the arts that studies the diverse phenomena through which *sound* structures everyday life, the sciences and the arts. The philosophical return to the acoustic (Berendt 1983; Sloterdijk 1987) may at first have been subject to the general suspicion of the ideological (Welsch 1993), but is increasingly being transferred to and systematized in presence, performance and media theories (Mersch 2002; Meyer 2016). Strands of research have now developed within sound studies (see Sterne 2012) – intersecting with science studies and media studies in particular (Kursell 2008) – that focus on the physicality and materiality of acoustic perception and storage and therefore examine the question of which physical and corporeal particularities come into play during the listening process. At the same time, cultural historians have been examining how the sounds of the past (such as the chiming of bells) were embedded in acoustic sign systems that structured social and everyday lives (see Corbin 1995) and anchored in soundscapes (Schafer 1994) that shaped people’s sensory perception (Morat 2014).

The acoustic determines time (and time the acoustic), through its unavoidable directness via the sensory organ of the ear and its passive/active intermediary function (Serres 1985) as well as in the fleetingness and precarious transience of the acoustic medium *per se*. Since the time of Augustinus, at least, the question of time as set out in the eleventh book of his *Confessiones* has been linked with the acoustic: articulation, the rhythmization of human language, allows time – in which the future becomes the past – to be experienced. Time and acoustics have a self-referential relationship, which music, the art of time *par excellence*, plays like a virtuoso: music is formed by time and forms time in return without eluding it. The formal structural techniques of repetition or the serial may undermine the unrepeatability, and thus the irretrievability, of the acoustic but do not override it.

If a grace note lasts a month – a fleeting moment when compared the longest sound, which will last almost 59 years – in Halberstadt, where John Cage’s eight-page work “Organ2 / ASLSP” is in the process of being performed during a span of 639 years, a metaphysical thrill, or even pure dismay, can occur at a conceptualization of music that deactivates it. Music expresses that which makes the acoustic unique: its precarious presence. The acoustic presence is not to be translated into its latency. As soon as an attempt is made to stretch acoustic material into infinity without a change of media, and thus to hold it fast, it is lost. And it is precisely this precarity that must be examined. We cannot act as though this acoustic precarity does not exist by reading Cage even “more radically”: “as slow as possible.”

An initial acoustic paradigm can be derived from the musical “phenomenology” central to this special issue on acoustic ephemerality: a so-called “microephemerality.” The inability to fixate the current moment is transferred in turn to the precarity of the medium which, in contrast to the iconic, does not transport or even contain any further information within this state of supposed temporal deactivation. This temporal/media interdependency of the acoustic microephemerality applies in turn to acoustic documentation, which makes sense only in a temporal conformance with the “original”: visual techniques of cutting, time lapse and slow motion tear apart the temporal structure and, thus, the “informational content” of the acoustic medium.

Therefore, reproduction is directly dependent on the cultural coding of the subjective time experience. The temporal/media interdependency cannot be dissolved, and the further it is removed from the “original point in time,” the greater the historic reconstruction effort, which is diametrically opposed to the presence effect of the acoustic. The attempt to “store” the “microephemerality” for the future therefore results in an increasing “macroephemerality” in historic dimensions.

The following articles draw attention to the specifically ephemeral qualities of the acoustic and to the relationship between “micro- and macroephemerality” in the modern age. Three focal points will be explicitly highlighted: the functions of media, music and the sciences as generators of acoustic paradigms. The interweaving of micro- and macroephemerality will reveal three things: 1. acoustic ephemerality as an indicator of the fading of knowledge and its potential return via media, 2. how differences between media become audible and how these differences are esthetically engaged with in the production of knowledge and art, and 3. the remarkable phenomenon of acoustic evidence and the political dimension of sound archives.

1. The return of unfaded knowledge

Always fading, the acoustic ephemeral cannot be held fast. We dwell on the acoustic ephemeral as it resonates in the room and in our thoughts. In contrast to the visual, its ephemeral form and latent presence mean that the acoustic plays a significant role in shaping the subconscious of our everyday world as well as our knowledge formation. The acoustic does not draw attention, but retreats as it constantly fades. This fading is not to be viewed metaphorically, but is inherent to the acoustic. The acoustic is subject to a precarious ephemerality, both in its physiological/psychological and physical/technological repository. Therefore, the acoustic ephemerality is determined not only by its phenomenology, but also by the remembering of it and its storage capabilities. The sound archive in Berlin, for example, stores the sonic remains of World War I, bringing forth the suppressed voices of subalterns from the era of imperialism and colonialism, as [Britta Lange's article](#) shows. As [Monika Dommann](#) makes clear, in the Watergate political scandal, the secret tape recordings of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon also became a controversy of personal rights, as the culturally embedded concept of private ephemeral communication was betrayed and destroyed in a social constellation informed by power. However, [Marianne Sommer's article](#) points out that audiovisual recordings of the ephemeral can also function as a multi-purpose act of evidence creation: Julian Huxley's recordings of animal voices both demonstrated the threat to animals in the modern age and documented his argumentation on the basis of evolution theory and his hypothesis of the supremacy of language. Meanwhile, [Dieter Mersch](#) uses the composition practices of Morton Feldman (one of the most influential American composers, next to John Cage, and a member of the New York School) to show how every sound in a prolonged time period gains its own individuality at the limit of the audible. After the Shoah and World War II, an ethic of non-melodramatic music takes concrete form alongside a specific conceptualization of the resounding independence of the tonal event per se, allowing the transitory/ephemeral basic condition of sound to be experienced as unforeseeable music.

When we examine the storage media of the acoustic ephemeral, the question of latency and presence becomes linked to the question of stasis and dynamics. Technical possibilities remain intrinsically tied to sensory perception. The esthetics of the acoustic as well as the analytical potential of its storage – its “inspection” or “auscultation” – are structured by the nature of our physiological-auditory apparatus. The particularities of the acoustic medium encompass areas of knowledge that obey special knowledge paradigms that cannot be accessed visually. [Janina Wellmann](#) provides a perfect example of this in her article, which takes a closer look at René Théophile Laennec's studies on cardiac disease in the first half of the 19th century. In the tradition of the Enlightenment, the body is compared with a musical instrument in order to record something not (yet) visually accessible from an auditory perspective.

2. Media differences and aesthetic differentiations

Nevertheless, something unbelievably persistent and static clings to the acoustic. The eternal or universal predisposition of the harmony of the spheres or the romantic conception of music – the predisposition that seems to push all cultural and historic boundaries – are expressions of cultural fantasies diametrically opposed to acoustic ephemerality. Literature rarely lends itself to the universalistic aspiration in the same way as music, but always locates itself in a specific historic and cultural framework, although it is anchored in its inscribed literality and does not – like a piece of un-notated music – fade away after every performance.

To gain an adequate understanding of the aesthetic characteristics of the acoustic, we need to investigate its media environment. In so doing, it becomes clear that different representations and changes in audio formats are (mutually) influenced by recording practices around the acoustic. [Julia Kursell's article](#) on the psychological experiments performed with wax cylinders around 1900 shows that, with the new recording media, the epistemic practices of musicology also changed, and rhythm and tonality measurements grew in importance. [Simon Aeberhard](#) recalls that it was the media evolution towards acoustic storage that first enabled such composition and writing practices as demonstrated by John Cage. Neither *4'33"* nor *Lecture on Nothing* would have been conceivable before Edison. Accordingly, contemporary musical composition responds ever more precisely to changes in format (vinyl, CD, MP3 format, etc.) and the associated narratives of acquisition and loss, as demonstrated by Hannes Seidl's compositions using the MP3 filter. In parallel to this, [there is a growing awareness](#) of the historic practice of recording things once declared inaudible – e.g. in Chopin's music. Just as with music, other art-forms or practices respond to new developments, relying on the auditory sensory channel (as with film); reflect these developments, such as in phonetics; or orient towards them (like literature): be it [a doomed attempt within Arno Holz's poetry](#) to log everyday life in 1900 as precisely and comprehensively as possible, or through including an (almost invisible) soundtrack in Robert Walser's micrograms, or, [as in the case of Peter Weber](#), revealed as geological imagination.

3. Acoustic evidence and the political dimension of sound archives

Until the end of the 19th century, an archive with music, sounds, noise or voices was unthinkable. Acoustics were bound to the symbolic arrangement of text and the cultural practice of oral transfer. The invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison and the gramophone by Emil Berliner meant that acoustic vibrations could be transduced to and from a physical medium, voices literally carved onto a sound carrier. In this way, the individual auditory signature of individuals of the past (for example the voice of the tenor Caruso) or the near-extinct (individual dialects or the languages of entire peoples) – in short: the mortal – could be permanently conserved like an embalmed corpse or preserved meat (Sterne 2003). As Marianne Sommer shows, since the turn of the century, Ludwig Koch had dreamt of a sound institute that would record the voices of people, animals, objects and cities in phonographic format for future generations. He was one representative of the soundscape movement, founded in the early 1970s by Canadian composer and sound researcher Richard Murray Schafer (Schafer 1994). Schafer used tape, which had been developed by BASF during World War II using PVC and stored acoustic signals via magnetic charges. Soundscapes became a cultural studies tool, an acoustic form of artistic intervention, and an environmental policy instrument for documenting and denouncing the auditory “pollution” of the modern age.

The acoustic evidence, the directness reflected by sound documents, continues to astonish. It is not just the media that becomes audible in the acoustic (scratching, clicking, interference). Instead, it is the interference itself that reflects the actual message. For example, incomprehensible noise or deleted sequences, as highlighted in Monika Dommann’s essay on the renaissance of the presidential tapes as a consequence of digitalization. In addition, it is the realization of physicality in the document audibility process, the bridging of absence and the impression of suspending temporal and spatial distance, and the re-presentation of the voice that have become lost in textual records, as Britta Lange emphatically shows in her study of the Berlin sound archive.

Digitalization has made storage media so cheap that choosing not to record or retain is in itself an actively non-conformist decision. Following Edward Snowden’s disclosure of immense digital monitoring activities by the secret services, we must pay even more attention to what is actually recorded and for what purpose. A discussion is required as to who has the power to decide under which circumstances acoustic recording is legitimate and about what should be retained and what should be deleted. In the age of big data, there is a new pleasure to be found in the fading away of acoustic vibrations as well as a political dimension to acoustic ephemerality that has previously gone largely unnoticed.

These articles were written for a two-part cultural conference. In the first part, which took place from 22–24 April 2014 at the Culture and Congress Center in Lucerne (KKL), renowned Swiss drummer and improviser Lucas Niggli interacted with the lectures via acoustic and performative interventions. In the second part, which took place from 2–4 September 2014 at the University of Basel, a collaborative day was hosted by the City of Basel Music Academy, where sound installations and compositions by Hannes Seidl and Michel Roth were performed by students from the School of Music, Basel. In particular, Hannes Seidl’s installation “Mehr als die Hälfte” (More than half) allowed visitors to freely experiment with a reciprocal MP3 filter.

The three artists mentioned above are also involved in this special issue of the *Journal of Sonic Studies*. Michel Roth asked all of the authors to provide an audio recording, a sample of their voice, or an example of a characteristic sound featured in their article. Hannes Seidl sent these sound files through his reciprocal MP3 filter, retaining that section of the signal that is often discarded without question. Lucas Niggli pricked up his ears when he heard of the material acquired and, through his improvisations, allowed the unheard side tones and shades of the articles to be experienced through music.

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