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Karin Bijsterveld. *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage.* Bielefeld: Transcript - Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2013. 232 pp. $40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8376-2179-2.

Reviewed by Andrew Behrendt (University of Pittsburgh)

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Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Auditory History of Modern European Cities

It seems a reasonable wager to say that students of modern urban cultural history are not usually expected to learn to use their ears. They are trained to work with plastic images and architectural forms; to recognize the power dynamics of surveillance and the policing of spaces; to attend to the influence of economic systems on the disposition of society and the environment. They pore over reams of broadsheets and tabloids for snapshots of everyday life; they reconstruct forgotten lives and lost cityscapes from pictorial evidence and, if possible, tangible objects; they decipher silent, handwritten diaries in order to restore a voice to the marginalized. They are students of these and many other topics, applying many methods, but for the most part theirs is a visible worldâa society, it might be said, of spectacle.[1] Less often, though, are they encouraged to equip themselves with methodological tools designed to analyze the representation of urban soundscapes. The volume under consideration here could be read as a corrective, however preliminary, to that imbalance. The outcome of a convincingly interdisciplinary project spearheaded by scholars from Maastricht University joined by international collaborators, *Soundscapes of the Urban Past* offers a loosely joined but nonetheless thought-provoking collection of essays on how researchers and museum curators might tune in to the auditory history of city life.

As Karen Bijsterveldâs introduction emphasizes, the main objective of the book is not to somehow excavate or reconstruct the soundscapes of the past, but instead to explore the âmediated cultural heritage of soundâ that comprises our textual (broadly defined) access to the ways in which historical actors staged their descriptions and interpretations of those soundscapes (p. 14). Bijsterveld explains that because ârepresentations of sound, both in historical text and in radio play and fiction film, always imply a particular dramatization of sound,â one of the tasks of the book is to analyze the âparticular repertoires of dramatizing soundâ that historical actors have employed for that purpose (pp. 14-15). By understanding how historical actors applied their strategies of mediating sound, we can learn how the representationâas well as regulation and contestationâof urban environments

changed over time; from there, so Bijsterveldâs introduction holds, we can understand how urban identities shifted, too.

The principal achievement of the introduction is in outlining the core analytical concepts applied throughout the volume: auditory topoi, keynote sounds, sound marks, sound icons, and, to a lesser degree, acoustic profiling. These concepts are not original to *Soundscapes of the Urban Past*, but rather are borrowed from earlier studies. From, in part, the work of Michael Cowan, Philipp Schweighauser, and Bijsterveld herself comes the idea of the auditory topos, a tool for understanding how historical texts have qualitatively described and âevaluatedâ sounds.[2] Bijsterveld names four ideal types of topoi, two ânegativeâ and two âpositiveââthe intrusive, the sinister, the sensational, and the comfortingâeach of which can be further articulated in terms of quantity, distance, direction, and rhythm (p. 19). Thus, for example, a typically âcomfortingâ sound is often described in a text as being produced by a singular source, arriving from a considerable distance away from the hearer, moving in no particular direction, and following a regular or unspecified rhythm. A âkeynote sound,â a term originally coined by composer Raymond Murray Schafer, is one that forms part of the basic background of a âsonic environment,â such as the constant noise of urban vehicular traffic. âSound marks,â also an invention of Schaferâs, are the âsounds that stand out in a particular environment, and are considered typical for a specific location,â for instance the London Undergroundâs recorded warning to âmind the gapâ (to take Bijsterveldâs example, p. 15). âSound icons,â are sounds that have undergone apotheosis, transcending their original peculiarity to become an instant cue for thinking of a place (e.g., âHail to the Chiefâ for the White House) or to signal that a narrative has shifted (e.g., the arrival or departure of a character being denoted by a train whistle). Finally, âacoustic profilingâ (p. 20) refers to the discursive association of certain kinds of people with certain kinds of sounds, usually for the purpose of demarcating group belonging and territoriality.

These terms stand as only the initial entries in what, by the conclusion of the book, becomes a potentially fruitfulâif not easily manageableâvocabulary for the historical analysis of sounds. One of the volumeâs chief contributions is precisely this act of collecting, explaining, and broadcasting this otherwise specialized terminology for the benefit of a wider audience. Any scholar unfamiliar with the field of auditory history will find here a useful âbeginnerâs dictionaryâ of concepts that will help him or gain purchase on the question how best to describe the cultural construction of sonic phenomena. However, despite its value as a kind of catalog of methodological tools, the introduction does not provide much in the way of a historiographical survey, even though the accompanying bibliography makes it clear that literature on (urban) sound studies has been maturing for several decades. Even a brief overview of the development of the field would have been welcome, if only to give the reader a fuller sense of where this volume fits into itâand to help guide nonspecialists toward its seminal works.

Beyond the introduction, the book is organized into three pairs of articles and three stand-alone articles. Each of the pairs consists of a focused historical study followed by a shorter âresponseâ article offering reflections or expansions upon its larger partner. This approach lends the majority of the book a certain sense of cohesion otherwise characteristically lacking from edited volumes. Although the framework remains unsurprisingly loose-fitting, the contributors generally do make an effort to refer to the key concepts and typologies laid out in the introduction; this, in conjunction with the three pairs, provides at least a welcome (albeit limited) feeling that the different parts of the volume are in âconversationâ with each other.

âShifting Sounds,â the first âmainâ chapter by the four core members of the *Soundscapes* project (Karin Bijsterveld, Annelies Jacobs, Jasper Aalbers, and Andreas Flickers), grapples with what the authors call the âmuseum authenticity problemâ (p. 31). By this they mean the double bind faced by museum curators when attempting to make the urban past accessible to the public: presenting, with relatively little scholarly mediation, artifacts as direct representatives of that past *in se* versus maintaining that such objects cannot be self-apparently âauthenticâ because present-day observers inevitably construct the past. The contributors propose that we study the ways in which historical texts staged sound in order to develop better methods of exhibiting them in the present. They observe that the ânarrative repertoires used in text, film, and radio to articulate particular impressions of urban soundscapesâ often staged sounds in a manner that reflected a sense of novelty, using âstark narrative transitions in time and spaceâ to ascribe meaning to certain sounds and, by extension, the urban environments that produced them (pp. 35-36). From here, Bijsterveld et al. examine a number of films and written travel accounts to isolate three kinds of transitions: shifts across space, exemplified by scenes depicting an outsiderâs arrival to a city; shifts in time, as shown

in accounts of the ârhythm of everyday urban lifeâ (p. 46); and juxtapositions of two spaces within a city (e.g., the sounds of one neighborhood versus another) or of two moments in a cityâs history (e.g., peacetime versus wartime). Analyzing these narrative strategies, the authors argue, âprovides a fresh angle on the constructed identities of cities and their residentsâ (p. 59). Understanding how an author staged an arrival scene or part of a workday can help recover a âperiod ear,â i.e., the sounds that were especially striking or meaningful to the historical agents in a particular era (p. 45); juxtapositions of neighborhoods can reveal class identity as constructed through âacoustic profilingâ (p. 59); juxtapositions of the past and present can offer an authorâs reflections on the absence or alteration of previously unremarkable sounds. By way of conclusion, the authors suggest that curators could design exhibitions that make use of these kinds of transitions, either by showing them at work in historical texts or by creating museum spaces that give visitors a simulated firsthand experience of them.

Mark M. Smith follows up the chapter with a short think piece, âWhy Historians of the Auditory Urban Past Might Consider Getting Their Ears Wet,â in which he rightfully urges us to remember the central importance of aquatic spacesârivers, harbors, etc.âin urban history. Water, he contends, ânot only possessed its own soundmarks that people in cities listened to â¦ but the seas and rivers also served as aquatic platforms for various technologies that produced their own sounds, thus enabling us to historicize how waterâand what it carriedâsounded at various points in timeâ (p. 69).

In the second full-length study, âSounds Familiar,â Fickers, Aalbers, Jacobs, and Bijsterveld examine the staging of sound in four versions of Alfred DÃ¶blinâs 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: the original work, the 1930 radio play *Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf* (The Story of Franz Biberkopf), the 1931 sound film directed by Phil Jutzi, and, naturally, Rainer Werner Fassbinderâs monumental 1980 television series. Their aims are twofold. They seek to investigate first âwhat â¦ a systematic comparison between the different media forms in which the original novel has been performed â¦ can tell us about the different ways in which *the city* has been staged as a symbol of modern conditions of life,â and, second, the âsymbolic role and narrative function of city soundsâ in these stagings (p. 78). Their methodological approach adheres to the concept of intermediality, and the authors adopt a tripartite definition based on the work of Irina Rajewsky: 1) medial transposition, i.e., adapting a work from one medium to another; 2) media combination, i.e., the mixing of different media forms in a single work; and 3) intermedial references, i.e., instances when a work in one medium âevokesâ the techniques of another medium (pp. 79-80).[3] Here Fickers et al. point out that intermediality is not merely a âtheoretical category,â but also âa lived reality in which new cultural practices emergeâ (p. 81). To this end they the present late Weimar-era Berlin as a time and place deeply fascinated by the dynamics of intermediality, conditions woven into the fabric of the novel by DÃ¶blinâs *Kinostil* imitation of cinematic montage and use of written sound effects.

This sustained comparison across media and historical context is an informative one. It provides a convincing demonstration of how attention to the staging of sound in historical textsâas opposed to uncritically regarding the evocations of sound as ârawâ empirical data about the past, or else mere artistic ornamentâcan shed light on the place of sound at different moments in the history of culture. Its most interesting result is not that the four versions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* all operate according to various modes of intermediality. Rather, argue the authors, it is that while the three adaptations of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* used the capacity of their respective media to stage the city *per se* as cacophonous, hectic, even unforgiving environment, only the original text truly gave it a voice. Whereas the novel privileged Berlin as its narrative subject and acted as the cityâs âmegaphoneâ through the use of âonomatopoeic languageâ and representation of local dialect, the conventions and restrictions of film and radio âdowngradedâ Berlin to little more than an urban setting for the protagonistâs travails (p. 111). The relatively more complex and innovative *staging* of sound in the written text (and, to an extent, the radio play, which hewed closer to DÃ¶blingâs initial creative vision) gave rise to a richer sonic environment than the media equipped to *reproduce* it.

In her reply to the chapter, however, Patricia Pisters mounts a defense for the use of sound in Fassbinderâs television adaptation, arguing that it may be more significant than Fickers et al. have suggested. She posits that it would be more correct to hear the seriesâ soundtrack as expressionistic, rather than simply realistic, and that doing so might yield an even more fruitful comparison to the other versions. She urges us not to overlook the gendered staging of sounds, suggesting that the way in which Fassbinder âembodiedâ the female voice in the âdiagetic worldâ of his series would offer welcome complications of our understanding of its Berlin soundscapes, revealing, for example, how sounds are used to denote different kinds of spaces, including a sense of âhomeâ (p.

121).

Carolyn Birdsallâs contribution, âSonic Artefacts,â is a particularly deeply researched study of the practical and conceptual problems that faced Weimar-era radio producers in their attempts to deliver sonic portrayals of the urban. Birdsall frames her investigation within a discussion of the contemporaneous debates over what cinematic/phonic conventions, or âreality codes,â were thought to transmit the truest reflection of reality: those which strove to maintain âfidelity to usual perceptionâ (the phonographic) versus those which emphasized âvocal clarity or intelligibilityâ (the telephonic) (p. 134). She identifies three defining âcurrentsâ within these early attempts to make urban life come alive on the airwaves. In analyzing the first current, documentary, Birdsall focuses on the evolution and staging of *HÃ¶rbilder*, or âacoustic portraits,â which explicitly sought to help audiences âvisualizeâ the characteristic features of certain German cities. She finds that although technological limitations kept these projects largely studio-bound until ca. 1930, *HÃ¶rbilder* documentarians developed techniques that allowed them to move (literally or figuratively) around a city to captures various facets of its nature. One method was to produce a montage or âsymphonyâ of on-location recordings, which would be aired later; another was the âwandering microphoneâ technique that loosely assembled series of live broadcasts from fixed locations to âexploreâ urban spaces through a kind of virtual audio *flÃ¢nerie*. But because both of these strategies ultimately relied on a narrative arc, *HÃ¶rbilder* thus followed a âreality codeâ that resided somewhere on the line between fiction and nonfiction. Birdsall observes that the second current, actuality, or notions of âlivenessâ and âeventnessâ in radio reportage (p. 147), was immature and sensitive to political intervention. Although the intention was to stay up-to-the-moment, such broadcasts nonetheless relied on prerecordings of original sounds, montage, and âwandering microphoneâ tricks, as well as a âbirds-eyeâ perspective technique that provided a mediated view of events âfrom above.â Birdsallâs examination of the third current, authenticity, focuses on interesting identity debates over radioâs proper role in reproducing the uniqueness of the *Heimat* for expanding audiences. As the national political situation into the early 1930s destabilized, radio representations of particularly local soundscapes (such as dialect) were increasingly absorbed into more nation-based discourses of identity.

In response, Evi Karathanasopoulou and Andrew Crisell offer some preliminary ruminations on what contribution Birdsallâs article makes to the volume. They contend that, as primary sources, early radio documentaries do not speak only to the history of the evolution of the medium; rather, they in fact reflect how radio itself was part-and-parcel of the development of a new âurban aesthetic,â in which the distant and novel instantly penetrates the familiar, meaning is derived more from medium than message, and the physical presence of radio hardwareâaerial antennasâshapes the urban environment as much as portrays it.

The final three essays, all of them comparatively brief, constitute a mixed bag of topics and intentions. Jonathan Sterneâs âSoundscape, Landscape, Escapeâ makes the case for thinking of a soundscape as more than âthe widely-understood notion that [it] is both a physical space and its representation.â He posits instead that we should imagine âsoundscapeâ as a dynamic construct that âsimultaneously indexes a set of sonic-spatial practices, the metadiscourses that describe them, and the cultural and sensory conditions that make it possible toâeven passivelyâexperience sonic space in certain termsâ (pp. 183-184). Recognizing that the concept is itself âartifactualâ (p. 184), Sterne performs an archaeology of the term, digging into the 1960s to find its coevolution with an elitist concern for consuming âpure,â hi-fi recordings of art music as a means of escape from âlo-fiâ mass urban culture.â The exercise is (as Sterne calls it) schematic but illuminating, although one wonders slightly why a volume whose title leads with the word âsoundscapeâ would not foreground a critical discussion of such a fundamental idea.

Perhaps the explanation for this is the fact that, like Sterneâs piece, Holger Schulzeâs subsequent article on museum audio guides, âThe Corporeality of Listening,â also explores the embodied praxis of hearing soundscapes. Specifically, Schulze argues that typical implementations of audio guides reflect little awareness of how visitors, as hearing anthropological subjects, actually process the experience of walking through a museum while receiving auditory information through a special device. Drawing on the recent work of Rolf GroÃmann on performance practice, Schulze posits that the experience is corporealized by way of three âauditory dispositivesâ: the spatial, the temporal, and the narrative.[4] By paying attention to how listeners experience the interaction of space and sound, the rhythm and pace of their movements through a gallery, and how they might be directed towardsâor liberated fromâfollowing a particular narrative structure, curators and architects alike might be enabled to design museum spaces that better suit lived practices of hearing.

Returning to the city itself, Ross Brownâs contribution, âThe Eleventh of the Eleventh of the Eleventh,â meditates not on staged urban sound, but on a grand urban *silence*: the annual observance of Remembrance Day in London. He convincingly interprets the ceremony, in which those assembled in Whitehall at 11:00 a.m. every November 11 keep silent for three minutes to commemorate the end of World War One, as being less about the absence of sound than about âbeing, presence, and communityâ (p. 210). The silence to memorialize the dead is in fact a âcelebration of livenessâ (p. 211), because it only serves to amplify the unintended (and intentional) intrusion of noise produced by the still-living world into a sacralized sonic space apportioned to the fallen. Brown, in conversation with Schulzeâs essay, proposes that the âmemorial silence is representative of a fourth kind of auditory dispositive,â a ritual dispositive, in which âoneâs auditory experience (and the eventâs audience) is subsumed *by* the performance and becomes part and parcel of a whole system of enactmentâ (p. 214). Here, then, we are given cause to consider how urban soundscapes can be shapedâif only momentarilyâby orchestrated efforts to disrupt them, as well as by the unorganized multitude of sounds that make them what they are. This final essay is driven more by impression and reflection than by cohesive argument, but that does not make it any less provocative. It is, to be sure, an appreciably eloquent conclusion to the volume.

The patently, solidly European focus of *Soundscapes of the Urban Past* should not dissuade scholars working in other geographical areas from probing the volumeâs methodological insights. Indeed, it would be a worthwhile enterprise to pursue comparisons of diverse âmediated cultural heritagesâ on an intercontinental or global scale. Nor should those working outside of media studies, narrowly defined, consider the staging of sound to belong only within the precincts of recorded sound, film, or literary texts. Ifâas especially demonstrated in the essays on *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and âauditory portraitsâ of German citiesâinvestigations into historical soundscapes reveal a basic interest in defining urban identities and defining a sense of place in particular urban settings, then historians of tourism should consider adding sound to their analytical repertoire. All too often, tourists are studied solely as agents of vision and tourist spaces as overwhelmingly visual environments. But tourists had ears as well as eyes, and so traveled aurally as much as optically; and Weimar-era *HÃ¶rbilder* reveal that even non-travelers were intrigued at the prospect of hearing the places they could not visit.

Notes

[1]. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle: Annotated Edition*, trans. Ken Knabb (n.p., Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014)

[2]. Alexander Cowan, âImagining Modernity through the Ear,â *Arcadia* 41, no. 1 (2006): 124-46; Philipp Schweighauser, *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a New History of Literary Acoustics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006); and Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

[3]. Irina Rajewski, âIntermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,â *IntermÃ©dialitÃ©s* 6 (2005): 43-64.

[4]. Rolf GroÃmann, âVerschlafener Medienwandel: Das Dispositiv als musikwissenschaftliches Theoriemodell,â *Positionen* 74 (2008): 6-9.

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