



INTRODUCTION

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In 2005 Michele Hilmes asked whether there was a field called “sound culture studies” and whether it mattered.¹ In 2012 the publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* and the *Sound Studies Reader* by Routledge was a very strong indication that there indeed is such a field and that it has already consolidated itself (that is, if handbooks and readers may generally be taken to be a sign of research consolidation in a defined field).² In fact, there can be no doubt that since the early 1990s, sound and auditory perception have come to play an increasingly important part in cultural studies.³ The years after 2000 saw the publication of a number of relevant readers and collections, even before the *Oxford Handbook* and the *Sound Studies Reader* appeared.⁴ Michele Hilmes’s first question can therefore certainly be answered in the affirmative. But what about her second question: Does it matter?

This pertinent question can only be posed from a specific point of view. In the present collection, it will be posed from the point of view of modern history. The history of sound and of auditory perception is only a part of the larger field of sound studies, which is still dominated by media and cultural studies. Nevertheless, the subfield of sound history has also been very lively during the last few years.⁵ Mark M. Smith, one of the leading proponents of the field, retraces the genealogy of scholarship on the history of sound and hearing in his essay “Futures of Hearing Pasts,” which complements this introduction and which also ponders the possible future of sound history, both as a field and as a general habit of historical inquiry. But Smith has already argued in his earlier work that the aim of sound history cannot simply be to add “texture, meaning, and depth” to the history we already know. Instead, it has to open up “new storylines,” that is, it has to find new explanations for historical problems and has to disclose

previously unknown historical connections.⁶ The central question of this collection, therefore, is whether the study of sound and of auditory cultures can open up new perspectives on the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe.

In the context of recent historiography, the scholarship on the history of sound and of hearing can be described as being part of a larger trend towards the history of the senses.⁷ Within this larger trend, though, visual history is still dominant. Always comparing themselves to visual studies might, in the end, be a fruitless feature of the debates in sound studies, but it is still valid to point to the current dominance of the visual in the field of cultural and historical studies. This dominance often goes along with the thesis of a “hegemony of vision” in the modern age.⁸ However, the emphasis on the “scopic regimes of modernity”⁹ obscures the fact that since the mid nineteenth century the very conditions and habits of hearing and listening have also been subject to fundamental change occasioned by modern phenomena such as urbanization, industrialization, and mechanization on the one hand and the emergence of sound recording and sound transmission media on the other hand. Accordingly, it appears appropriate for historians of modernity to deal not only with visual history but also with the cultural meaning of hearing and listening, and the historical changes they have undergone. What role did sound and aurality play in the coming about of modernity? Have “auditory regimes” been equally important in the formation of modern culture and modern subjectivity as “scopic regimes”? Which dimensions of modernity have been overlooked by privileging its visual character?

In order to answer these and similar questions, the chapters in this collection focus on the period roughly between 1850 and 1950.¹⁰ The last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two-thirds of the twentieth century have been described as the period of “high modernity,” in which the most important developments of the modern age—such as industrialization and urbanization, democratization and political radicalization, the emergence of mass culture and consumer society, and the advancement of modern science and of modern media—have culminated in a maelstrom of change.¹¹ The emergence and distribution of new sound technologies, crucial for the transformation of auditory cultures in the modern age, fall into the same period and are part of these larger developments and changes. Many of the chapters therefore focus on the relationship between auditory cultures, sound technologies, and the development of modernity; or, to put it another way, the history of sound and of auditory cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be written without taking

into consideration the reproducibility of sound, which changed both the ways in which historians were, and contemporaries are, dealing with sound and sound artifacts.¹²

Many of the contributors to this collection come from the field of German history, which is why many of the historical case studies present German examples. The collection does not ask questions, though, about the specificity of national sounds.¹³ Examples are also taken from the history of England, France, the Netherlands, and Austria. Rather, the chapters are based on the assumption of common developments in the industrialized nations of Europe, even if there are of course national differences and national developments that have sometimes taken different trajectories and time courses. Taken together, the chapters of this collection provide insights into the commonalities and differences of European auditory cultures in the modern age.

Finally, a comment on the concepts and semantics applied in this collection is appropriate here. It is an interesting feature of the current debates in sound studies that, despite its consolidation, the field has not yet developed a standardized terminology, let alone methodology. You can find the different notions of “sound history,” “aural history,” “auditory history,” “history of hearing,” and “history of listening,” and of either “auditory,” “hearing,” “listening,” or “audio” cultures, alongside each other without a very clear understanding of the differences between them. Accordingly, no attempts have been made to standardize the terms or concepts in the different chapters of this collection. Instead, a variety of notions and concepts have deliberately been allowed in order to present different approaches to the history of sound and of auditory cultures.

Still, there are a few basic assumptions which are shared by all contributors to this collection. The most important one can be phrased in the words of Jonathan Sterne: “Sound is an artifact of the messy and political human sphere.”¹⁴ Hearing is not simply a bodily and physical phenomenon but also a cultural capacity, and is therefore, like all sensory perception, subject to historical change. This also means that the practices of making sounds and listening to them are embedded in a wider cultural, social, and political framework, and that they are themselves being shaped by this framework at the same time as they are helping to shape it. This interplay is what the notion of “auditory culture” is intended to capture. This is why it has been chosen to function as a common denominator for this collection, even though not all of the contributors use it in their chapters.

The chapters in this collection are arranged in roughly chronological order and at the same time grouped together thematically. In Part I, as aforementioned, Mark M. Smith complements this introduction by pondering on the history and possible future of sound history. In Part II, John M. Picker and Anthony Enns trace the interplay of cultural, scientific, and technological changes of aurality in the course of the nineteenth century. In tune with Jonathan Sterne's reconstruction of the "cultural origins of sound reproduction,"¹⁵ they both argue that the invention of sound technologies, such as the phonograph and the telephone, at the end of the nineteenth century was not the beginning of or single cause for fundamental changes in auditory cultures but rather the culmination of earlier tendencies to archive, analyze, and manipulate sound and auditory experience. Picker's chapter, "English Beat: The Stethoscopic Era's Sonic Traces," does so by dealing primarily with literary texts, which he examines for signs of a larger cultural shift toward close listening during the nineteenth century. He then analyzes several spoken word recordings of English authors made by phonograph in the 1880s and 1890s to find that the advent of sound recording simultaneously severed and deepened the relationship between speaker and speech. Anthony Enns, in his chapter "The Human Telephone: Physiology, Neurology, and Sound Technologies," retraces the ways in which the development of nineteenth-century sound technologies, such as the phonautograph, the telephone, and the audiometer, relied on scientific studies of physiology, otology, and neurology, which similarly introduced a mechanistic understanding of auditory perception. Nineteenth-century sound technologies were therefore based on the standardization, automatization, and electrification of auditory perception. That is why Enns, in his conclusion, considers them to be "inhuman."

In Part III, the chapters by Stefan Gauß and Christine Ehardt turn from the prehistory of sound technologies to the early days of their cultural adoptions and uses. They both treat the devices of early sound recording and reproduction not primarily as media of communication but as artifacts and products of industrial mass culture. Gauß, in his chapter "Listening to the Horn: On the Cultural History of the Phonograph and the Gramophone," therefore mainly speaks of "phono-objects" when referring to the devices of early sound technology. He retraces the history of their industrial manufacture and marketing, the adjustments that musicians had to make in the recording studio, the early debates about the "phonograph sound," and the cultural uses to which phono-objects were put in urban space. Christine Ehardt, in her chapter "Phones, Horns, and 'Audio Hoods' as Media of Attraction: Early Sound Histories in Vienna between 1883 and 1933," examines

in particular the introduction of new sound technologies at fairs and exhibitions, theaters, and cinemas in Austria, and argues that they have initially been introduced as media of attraction—that is, as part of the amusement industry “without practical value,” as one contemporary put it—before becoming mass media in the sense understood today. The same is true for early radio in the 1920s, which Ehardt treats in the second part of her chapter, thus transcending the historical caesura of World War I.

The next two chapters by Alexandra E. Hui and Sven Oliver Müller, which compose Part IV, deal with music listening and musical expertise. In her chapter, “From the Piano Pestilence to the Phonograph Solo: Four Case Studies of Musical Expertise in the Laboratory and on the City Street,” Hui argues that in the years around 1900 the multiple and evolving forms of musical expertise changed in relation to the simultaneously shifting listening culture. By juxtaposing debates about musical expertise and scientific knowledge between German and Austrian musicologists, physiologists, and psychologists, such as Eduard Hanslick, Carl Stumpf, Wilhelm Wundt, and Erich von Hornbostel, with Edison’s demonstration recitals of his phonograph, she shows that both scientific techniques of listening and techniques of listening inflicted by the phonograph changed the sounds that could be heard and the ones that could not be heard. In contrast to that, Sven Oliver Müller’s chapter, “The Invention of Silence: Audience Behavior in Berlin and London in the Nineteenth Century,” turns to the study of audience behavior in concert halls and opera houses. Müller shows that changes in listening habits do not necessarily have to be explained with the advent of sound technologies. They can also be traced back to social changes in the urban middle classes and, furthermore, to cultural transfers between different European cities and nations—in Müller’s case between Berlin (where concerts audiences first fell silent) and London.

Part V deals with listening habits and the politics of sound during World War I. Daniel Morat’s chapter, “Cheers, Songs, and Marching Sounds: Acoustic Mobilization and Collective Affects at the Beginning of World War I,” starts by giving close attention to the outbreak of the war in Berlin in the summer of 1914. By analyzing the political dynamics of the shouting and singing in the streets of Berlin during the July crisis and the first days of the war, the chapter dissolves the clear distinction between producers and audiences of sound. Rather the cheering crowds appear to be both senders and recipients of their own acoustic message, boosting themselves into new forms of acoustic mass mobilization that point ahead to the subsequent history of the twentieth century. Hansjakob Ziemer in his

chapter, “Listening on the Home Front: Music and the Production of Social Meaning in German Concert Halls during World War I,” picks up Müller’s question about the connection between listening practices and social interactions in concert halls, and adds to it the political dimension of wartime nationalism. He describes how listeners used symphonic music as a projection space through which the national community could be imagined, and how individuals turned to musical experiences in order to cope with the hardships of the war on the home front.

The three chapters in Part VI, by Axel Volmar, Carolyn Birdsall, and James Mansell, then turn to the interwar period and scrutinize the impact of wartime sounds on the auditory cultures of the 1920s and 1930s. Volmar’s chapter, “In Storms of Steel: The Soundscape of World War I and its Impact on Auditory Media Culture during the Weimar Period,” does so by analyzing the new listening techniques developed in trench warfare and on the industrialized battlefields of World War I. Volmar then argues that the collective listening experiences of the war prepared the cultural background for the large-scale distribution of acoustic media during the Weimar Republic. He shows this, for instance, by analyzing in detail how military listening techniques transformed into civilian practices such as amateur radio. Carolyn Birdsall’s chapter, “Sound Aesthetics and the Global Imagination in German Media Culture around 1930,” takes up this interest in the acoustic media of the Weimar Republic. Using the concept of “auditory imagination,” Birdsall asks how modern (urban) sound and auditory experience were imagined and creatively rendered in the interwar period in Germany. By more closely analyzing Fritz Walter Bischoff’s 1928 radio play *Hallo! Hier Welle Erdball!*, and Walther Ruttmann’s 1929 sound film *Melodie der Welt*, Birdsall shows how a global soundscape was conceived in relation to montage aesthetics, sound film techniques, and technological tropes about modern urban perception.

In contrast to Axel Volmar’s emphasis on the newness of the listening techniques emerging from World War I and the transformative character of its auditory experience, James Mansell relativizes the importance of the war as a caesura in auditory cultures in his chapter, “Neurasthenia, Civilization and the Sounds of Modern Life: Narratives of Nervous Illness in the Interwar Campaign against Noise.” Instead he stresses the continuities between late nineteenth-century and interwar noise abatement campaigns. He finds them especially in the ways in which French and British noise abatement activists of the interwar period still used the theories and narratives of nervousness developed before World War I to underpin their crusade against noise. In its intermingling

of medical and literary accounts of nervousness, Mansell argues, interwar noise abatement built discursive bridges between the late nineteenth-century's *fin-de-siècle* moment and the renewed cultural pessimism of the 1930s.

The last chapter by Annelies Jacobs, "The Silence of Amsterdam before and during World War II: Ecology, Semiotics, and Politics of Urban Sound," which comprises Part VII, finally takes us into World War II. Before analyzing the silences and sounds of Amsterdam from 1918 to 1945, though, Jacobs distinguishes three different approaches to soundscapes of the past—the ecology, semiotics, and politics of sound—and advocates their combination. In her analysis of newspaper articles, diaries, and memoirs of Amsterdam residents, Jacobs then shows how the ecology, semiotics, and politics of urban sounds changed with the beginning of World War II and how, for instance, silence or the noise of an airplane could take on completely different meanings under the conditions of German occupation.

Taken together, the chapters of this collection do not offer a single narrative of the development of auditory cultures in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Instead they present different approaches and possible ways in which the study of sound and of auditory perception can contribute to a broader understanding of modern history. By doing so, they all show that, to answer Michele Hilmes's second question, sound does indeed matter and that examining how sound and auditory perception are interwoven into the fabric of modern experience helps us to get a better understanding of the past two centuries.

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Notes

1. Michele Hilmes, "Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 249–59.
2. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford, 2012); Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (Abingdon, UK, 2012).
3. See, for instance, Rick Altman, ed., *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (New York, 1992); Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).
4. See Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepenick, eds., *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of Modern German Culture* (New York, 2004); Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003); Jim Drobnick, ed., *Aural Cultures* (Toronto, 2004); Veit Erlmann, ed., *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford, 2005).
5. See, for instance, Mark M. Smith, ed., *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA, 2004).
6. Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), 262.
7. See Martin Jay, "In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction," *The American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 307–15; Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley, 2007).
8. David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, 1993).
9. Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, 1988), 3–27.
10. Interestingly, the chapters on "Sounds European" in Mark M. Smith's collection *Hearing History* cover the Middle Ages and the early modern period up to the eighteenth century but stop at the middle of the nineteenth century; see Smith, *Hearing History*, 69–220.
11. Ulrich Herbert, "Europe in High Modernity: Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century," *Journal of Modern European History* 5 (2007): 5–20.
12. See David Suisman and Susan Strasser, eds., *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Philadelphia, 2010).
13. As other collections do; see, for instance, Alter/Koepenick, *Sound Matters*; Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill, eds., *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2012).
14. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC, 2003), 13.
15. *Ibid.*

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