



The Day Technology Became Political. Conference Report : « A Political History of Sound Technologies ? »

Hosted by Jonathan Thomas, Abteilung für Musikwissenschaft/Sound Studies, University of Bonn, 2024

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« *Le jour où la technologie est devenue politique.
Compte-rendu du colloque “Une histoire politique des
technologies sonores ?”* »

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For several decades, music and sound have been the subject of research investigations that focus on the analysis of their symbolic value in a historical perspective, as well as on the imaginaries created around new instruments of sound reproduction and their products. This field of study is situated within

the expansive and adaptable domain of sound studies, a research area that is inherently hybrid and flexible, located at the intersection of disciplines such as media studies, physics, architecture, and musicology – among others. With the exception of sound studies incunabula such as R. Murray Schafer’s *The Tuning of the World* and Jacques Attali’s *Bruits* (both from 1977), which, however, have little to do with the modern approach to sound studies today, the flowering of the discipline occurred in the early 2000s: scholars such as Jonathan Sterne, Emily Thompson, Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld showed with their seminal works a path that many others have since undergone. Nevertheless, while this tradition of studies has been in existence for almost a decade in Anglo-Saxon and German academic circles, it is a different story in Latin countries, where the academic tradition has been slow to embrace this new interdisciplinary field of study. As a result, in countries such as France and Italy, the sound studies are often flattened into the field of media studies; on the other hand, perhaps because of the academic laziness that tends to leave the study of one’s own past to a single country, there are relatively few published studies, even in international context, that deal with the history of these countries from a sound studies perspective.

In light of this scenario, the initiative of Jonathan Thomas, who has been conducting

a Marię Skłodowska-Curie research project on Italian popular propaganda music during fascism at the University of Bonn since 2023, is particularly noteworthy. The project, entitled *REDIRE – Recorded Sound Propaganda of the Italian Fascist Regime*, examines the production and dissemination of fascist propaganda recordings from a historical perspective, while drawing extensively from the field at stake here.

The workshop *A Political History of Sound Technology*, held in Bonn on 21 June 2024 at the Department of Musicology / Sound Studies of the University of Bonn, can be regarded as one of the initial outputs of Thomas's research. On this occasion, broadening the field of investigation from Italy to a global context, the theoretical framework was further developed, with a particular focus on the question of whether it is possible to discuss the politics of sound technology from a cultural perspective. The workshop convened researchers from disparate yet frequently intertwined disciplinary fields, such as history, anthropology, media studies, and musicology, who collectively explored the multifaceted social, geographical, and historical contexts of a diverse array of objects. Through this collaborative endeavor, they sought to delineate a network of temporal, spatial, cultural, and political trajectories.

In his introduction, Thomas emphasized how sonic media should be conceived of as political agents. Indeed, sound technologies challenge the very categories of time

and space, which potentially allows for the manipulation of reality when directed by a political agent. However, it is pertinent to question whether sound is already the result of a mediation process, or whether sound is to actively mediate contents, symbols, and values. In other words, is sound the agent or the object of a mediation process? The aim of the meeting was not to present an exhaustive mapping of the political applications of sound technologies. Instead, it offered a selection of illustrative and promising cases for analysis, providing insight into the issues under discussion.

Three different panels tried to suggest possible answers to the workshop's main questions. The first one, « Spaces and territories », featured historians, musicologists, and media scholars investigating the relationship between sound technologies and the environment from multiple perspectives. Matthew Kerry discussed the use of sonic devices during the Spanish Civil War; Elodie Roy suggested a link between record production and environmental activism ; whereas Jedediah Sklower focused on the sonic propaganda of the French communist party after WWII, stressing the shift in the very idea of culture within few generations of militants. The common element that emerges from such diverse examples is the ambiguity of the political use of sound technologies, whose content – whether projection or acoustic reality – may be subject to multiple and even contrary interpretations and manipulations.

In the second panel, devoted to « Programming », two different forms of planification of listening were discussed: Max Alt and José Galvez traced a convincing link between 21st century streaming and early datafication systems of music listening in the 1930s, while Carolyn Birdsall discussed the role of wartime radio, focusing on Radio Luxembourg during WWII. Although both case studies understand the term « political » in very different ways (in the first case it is a matter of persuasion for commercial purposes by private individuals, in the second, of political purposes by a State authority), the manipulative potential of sound technologies, especially in the processes of planning and organizing the act of listening, be it private or collective, clearly emerged from both.

As suggested by its title, the final panel « Archives and memories » closed the workshop with a reflection on the political value of sound archives. Britta Lange's contribution, which took its cue from a project she conducted in Berlin on the archives of WWI prisoners, and which resulted in the volume *Captured Voices. Sound Recordings of Prisoners of War from the Sound Archive 1915-1918* (Kadmos 2022), suggested a deontological reflection on these repertoires, focusing on the political value of (re)listening. In a similar fashion, Claire Scopsi questioned the sound collections of immigrant voices preserved in France, wondering how such repertoires should be dealt with, catalogued, preserved and made usable. In both contributions,

it became clear that the political potential of sound technologies lies not only in the intrinsic content of the recordings, but in the very act of preservation and listening. Furthermore, the act of listening, shaped by cultural and historical contexts, particularly in the context of contemporary discussions on colonialism and identity, highlights the political nuances embedded in these recordings, which may have been perceived as secondary at the time of their creation.

Indeed, it is precisely the fluidity of the term « political » applied to sound technologies that is one of the most interesting results of this workshop. Rather than an immutable historical category that can be investigated like an archaeological object, the relationship between technologically mediated sound and politics appears as one with blurred, shifting contours. Ultimately, can the political investigation of mediated sound be considered a tool of historical analysis that can observe the events in question in an unexplored light? Certainly, the open issues arising from this study meeting will be a stimulus to continue and enrich the variety of research presented during the event.

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