

Book review

The Sound Studies Reader

Edited by Jonathan Sterne, Routledge, 2012, 566 p.

The title of this book, *The Sound Studies Reader*, makes you humble. Having been occupied with sound studies for a number of years you hope that you at least might know or know of some of the texts – that you are somehow authorised as a reader in the canonisation of the field.

The field of sound studies still seems to be an open domain, and several publications have contributed to its definition. I am here thinking of Michael Bull and Les Back's, in my view, groundbreaking anthology *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2003), which took as its starting point an investigation into the sense of hearing as something that structures and impacts on our everyday lives. The auditory sense was understood as an overlooked and underexposed source (sense), and many of the contributors were anthropologists for whom the senses constituted a point of access to new, formerly hidden insights. *Audio Culture* (2004) edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner Cox, on the contrary, took as its starting point different compositional practices and their philosophical and historical correlations, and finally we have *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* edited by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (2013). Pinch and Bijsterveld define sound studies as a field involving 'acoustic ecology, sound and soundscape design, anthropology of the senses, history of everyday life, environmental history, cultural geography, urban studies, auditory culture, art studies, musicology, ethnomusicology, literary studies and STS [science and technology studies]' (2013, p. 7), whereas Sterne seems to highlight the sound-ing and *sonically thinking* in his foreword:

Sound studies is the name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the humans sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival. [...] it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world. [...] It reaches across registers, moments and spaces, and it thinks across disciplines and traditions, some that have long considered sound, and some that have not done so until recently (Sterne, 2012, p. 2; emphasis in original).

This quotation is somewhat significant for Jonathan Sterne's approach to the vast field. I believe it can be defined as open-minded, including, generous and curious. In my opinion these are necessary qualities for research, and according to the field of sound studies Sterne does nothing to its constriction. This is underpinned both in the content of the foreword and in the structure of the reader itself. Before I go into that I must admit that I cannot help but admire the enormous, almost frightening dimensions of the book itself. Not only the weight of the book – also the huge number of topics and themes it deals with. It is as if Sterne wishes to open our minds

and ears by pointing to as many aspects of *what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world* as possible.

Sterne emphasises his open-ended approach to the field by designating his foreword *Sonic imaginations*. And this appraising line is repeated when he addresses people who conduct sound studies as sound students – by which he indicates an engagement with alternative methods. As sound studies cross academic disciplines, objects and methods the field calls for reflexivity and open-mindedness. And it is these non-established relations that call for sonic imaginations – a concept that seems to call for phantasy. The concept is intentionally open as it is based on *auditory imagination* (T.S. Eliot), an intuitive feeling for sound as a part of culture, *sociological imagination*, which enables us to understand and shift from one perspective to another, that is, to analyse problems from unexpected and deconstructed standpoints, and, finally, *technological imagination*, which is based on a mindset that enables people to think with technology and to transform their knowledge to what is possible. Sterne explains that sonic imaginations have no a priori privileged use of methodologies, but are guided by blending. And the imagination theme underlies his next question, which is related to sound: Is sound a phenomenon that only exists in relation to the physical world? Can it be described separately from the position of the person that describes it? To be a true sound student in Sterne's sense one must take a step further than merely acknowledging the ear as cultured (Sterne 2012, p. 7) and consider the physicality of sounds – their ontological existence. This is the reason why he includes works that would not normally be considered sound study texts. And this may be the reason for my own lack of knowledge, as I am not familiar with the majority of the interesting texts.

Sterne addresses this matter as he again declines to stake out boundaries as they are often overtaken by contests for academic authority and as he (sympathetically) finds it ridiculous that a single scholar should define a field. This tells us that he gives up a canonical intention for his collection of texts, and this explains what you might consider his scattershot approach: it is intended. Sterne wants to question the field of sound studies itself and to point to a path into 'a growing and exiting field of thought' (Sterne, 2012, p. 11). These intentions are understandable and explain the near absence of an explicit historical dimension, but this may also be the weakness of the book. I shall return to this later.

Sterne defines the challenge of sound studies as the ability to 'think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another – as types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves – whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances or another path into sonic life' (Sterne, 2012, p. 3). To see how this is done it is interesting to look at the chapters of the book, which are: Hearing, Listening, Deafness (issues of audition from diverse perspectives ranging from philosophy, cultural studies to aesthetics and media);

Spaces, Sites, Scapes (issues of environments: soundscapes and sonic spaces as different expressions of territorialisation and power); Transduce and Record (issues of media theory: the technological transformations of sound into something else); Collectivities and Couplings (issues of cultural conditions in relation to broadcast and telephony and other kinds of acoustic communication); The Sonic Arts: Aesthetics, Experience, Interpretation (issues of sound and art); and Voices (issues of articulation of what it is to be human). Together they reflect an intentional order by beginning with *audition*, which is described within different traditions over environment, technology to arts and voices. The chapters almost seem to be structured as a Maslowian hierarchy of needs: the basic audition and environment are settled before we get to the arts and the voices, which must wait till the end of the book. It is not that the texts themselves reflect this way of thinking – but somehow Sterne’s classification of the texts and the placing of the different parts seem to oppose his open-mindedness.

Many of the essays and articles take an original and innovative angle in their approach. I know that the reader is not meant to be read from the beginning to the end – only reviewers do that – but in that process I found that it would have been instructive if the excerpts had been introduced and even better commented. I think the choices made by Sterne are excellent, although I find that the postproduction aspect (Bourriaud) would have been an obvious subject for the arts part. Michael Veal writes in his excellent article ‘Starship Africa’ that Jamaican dub music is constituted by social and historical facts and that we must not forget to illustrate how musical development also helped to transform the culture (Veal in Sterne, 2012, p. 455). Music, I believe, is often underrepresented in sound studies. I understand that it is a matter of prioritisation, but with a background in musicology I find it odd and a bit disappointing that musicology topics are almost excluded from sound studies?

The Sound Studies Reader is an exciting and excellent guide to sound studies as it appears at the moment. But is it a reader? It is to me, but I see more obvious links to media studies than to musicology. And being a sound student myself I would love to include more students into the field of sound study. From this agitating view, I am afraid that musicology students will miss transitions to the field. And this might cause musicology to remain outside the field. One can only hope that the editors of future sound study readers will include more topics relating to musicology.

Charlotte Rørdam Larsen