Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage
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social campaign to argue for a certain design disposition, with hopes that such a disposition could cycle back and have some sort of impact on the daily lives of those engaged in these new forms of living.

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**Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage.**


This edited collection, produced by members of the Soundscapes of the Urban Past research project at Maastricht University, investigates the urban soundscapes of Amsterdam, London, and Berlin as a window into the cities’ evolving identities over the course of the twentieth century. Given the lacuna of historical recordings of everyday urban experiences, scholars’ access to soundscapes of the past—defined here as both the sonic environments of cities and urban residents’ perceptions of those sounds—is necessarily mediated through written texts, radio plays, and films. Yet because historical actors frequently took note of sounds only when they elicited particularly strong reactions, the authors argue, textual sources referencing the “putative historical realities” of past soundscapes can be analyzed alongside radio plays and films “dramatizing” urban environments (p. 15). This methodological premise undergirds the three principal chapters, which examine patterns in the representation (or “staging”) of urban soundscapes over time and across different media.

In “Shifting Sounds,” the first core essay, four coauthors (Karin Bijsterveld, Annelies Jacobs, Jasper Albers, and Andreas Fickers) analyze novels, films, diaries, and travel writing from the 1920s through the 2000s to uncover the “narrative repertoires . . . used to articulate particular impressions of urban soundscapes” (p. 35). They find that sound has most commonly been deployed to frame scenes of urban arrivals, juxtapose soundscapes of the present with those of the past, compare and contrast urban neighborhoods, and highlight the varied rhythms of urban life. Their second lengthy essay, “Sounds Familiar,” examines the symbolism and narrative function of sound in four different versions of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: the original 1929 novel, a 1930 radio play, the 1931 film, and Rainer Fassbinder’s 1980 television serial. While considering the historical factors shaping the production and reception of each version, the authors’ goal is to demonstrate the value of a comparative “intermedial” approach for studying sound. Radio, sound film, and television may have made possible the creation and mass diffusion of soundtracks for Döblin’s narrative, but
the novel ultimately provides the richest evocation of the soundscape of interwar Berlin. Carolyn Birdsall, who authors the final core essay, “Sonic Artefacts,” tackles the representation of cities in pre–World War II German radio documentaries. Highlighting how techniques of modernist visual collage shaped the structure of early radio reportage, she identifies multiple techniques—from the “wandering microphone” to the “bird’s-eye view”—cultivated by reporters to create auditory images for listeners at home.

The authors then invited leading media and sound studies scholars from Europe and the United States to write six short “expansions” to their core essays. In the most evocative of these contributions, Mark M. Smith challenges researchers to contemplate the sonic importance of water (from lapping rivers to waterpowered machines) in urban spaces; Jonathan Sterne offers a critical reflection on the “soundscape” as an intellectual construct; and Ross Brown considers the importance of staged silence to urban memorial and Armistice Day commemorations. The methodological and topical diversity of the essays together raises provocative questions for sound studies scholars about how to interpret and “listen” to different media for their sonic resonances.

However, readers looking for a coherent argument about the ways urban soundscapes (or their representations) have evolved over time or the distinctive features of a particular city’s sonic environment may be disappointed, as the essays primarily theorize urban soundscapes and listeners’ interactions with them. The introduction outlines a number of key concepts for analyzing soundscapes (“auditory topoi,” “acoustic profiling,” and “audiographs”) and provides a rubric for categorizing sounds (“keynote sounds,” “sound marks,” and “iconic sounds”), yet the subsequent essays employ this terminology inconsistently, while the authors continue to introduce new terms such as “period ear,” the “noisification of music,” and “earwitnessing.” Such classification is undoubtedly useful, but the repeated defining and qualification of these terms becomes belabored for the reader, at times obscuring the main arguments of an essay.

Finally, given the importance of sound to urban cultural heritage and the growing popularity of audiovisual exhibits in twenty-first-century museums, the authors intend for their collection to serve as a “source of inspiration to the museum world” (p. 22). Holger Schulze’s essay on museum audio guides—which insists on the importance of attending to the temporality and corporeality of listening—marks an important step in this direction. Yet the collection falls short of providing concrete suggestions to museums for how they might incorporate the authors’ methodologies into their exhibit designs. Since the members of the Soundscapes of the Urban Past project designed an interactive sound installation for the Amsterdam Museum, one wonders why they chose not to draw on their own personal experiences in more detail. An essay focused on the practical challenges of
applying theoretical concepts to museum spaces would have rounded out this theme nicely. However, audiences in media and sound studies will still find much to debate and engage with in this fascinating new collection.

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The View from Above: The Science of Social Space.

Jeanne Haffner’s The View from Above unfolds through the expert’s view of various landscapes observed from the airplane. Like the camera obscura, the airplane permanently and profoundly changed embodied perspective. During World War I it offered experiments with new forms of intelligence and new strategies of surveillance. In France, military successes led to institutional training programs, and even the use of “air-mindedness” to promote French nationalism in primary schools. Books and linear text lost their exclusive hold on young imaginations. New generations of social scientists with expertise in the integration of aerial photography and traditional cartography emerged with the conviction that society could be better understood from below and from above.

Haffner connects archives and original texts to mark the evolution in twentieth-century France of the use of aerial photography by academic and government agent alike. She links the adoption of technologically enhanced vision to shifts in epistemology, suggesting the two occur together. Her focus is on newly formed assumptions about what can be known about social space. For example, aerial photography introduced the idea that society is embedded in patterned spatial relationships to environments that cannot be seen from the ground. Anthropologist Marcel Griaule, who worked in Cameroon after World War I, used his training in aerial photography to track spatial changes in Dogon villages over time. This gave ethnography, which is an interpretive and subjective method, a layer of objectivity and confidence when it came to conclusions about the effect of the unconscious on lived reality.

An interesting and perhaps less-known feature of this history is the interdisciplinary sensibility of the experts involved. Early applications of aerial photography to social scientific research and urban planning reveal a widely held position that both the view from above and the view from below were necessary to a full understanding of society. Aerial photography, in other words, added dimension to already existing methods of data gathering rather than overturning or challenging them. As with anthropologists today, humans were understood as having both conscious and