Introduction

“The state-subsidised radio sets (*Volksempfänger*) had the purpose of keeping the people acoustically under control.”

 “[The songs] were mainly about *Heimat*, about struggle and loyalty, and ‘we are strong.’ Everything was about Germany being the best and we had to know it. The classroom windows would be opened and we would belt out these songs.”

“When you weren’t expecting guests or visitors and the doorbell rang – or someone knocked – you had a nervous feeling: What will happen? Where was I yesterday? What did I say or do?”

“There were air raid wardens, who were each in charge of several buildings. They would go through the streets and call out ‘lights out!’ to the residents.”

During 2004, I conducted a small-scale survey comprised of oral history interviews with Germans who were children and young adults during National Socialism. Among other themes, what emerged in the interviews was their heightened awareness of sound in everyday urban life, particularly during World War II, and the sense of being *earwitnesses* to that period. These interviews provided a departure point for the current study, inviting further investigation into the implications of sound within Nazi-era control, discipline and terror, and the need to specify the role of radio and mediated sound within fascist aesthetics and cultural practices.

The figure of the earwitness has been introduced in several post-war accounts. Firstly, in the early 1970s, German-language critic and novelist Elias Canetti produced a collection of twenty-six caricatures of personality types, titled *Der Ohrenzeuge* (*1974*)/*The Earwitness: Fifty Characters* (*1979*). In Canetti’s ironic rendering, the earwitness figure has more confidence in heard sounds and the spoken voice, than in images or vision. Canetti’s earwitness emerges as an exaggerated stereotype of a passive listener who “forgets nothing,” sneaks around and stores information for the purpose of incriminating others (*1979*: 43). Canetti’s listener could be read as providing an auditory equivalent of the witness as *voyeur*. This portrayal presents the listening, speaking body in terms of sound recording and transmission technologies, as a “metaphor of memory” (*Draaisma 1990*; *Peters and Rothenbuhler 1997*). In this case, Canetti uses his ironic caricature to mock the notion that the recollection of the earwitness involves immediate access to the past.
Writing in around the same period as Canetti, R. Murray Schafer's influential study *The Tuning of the World* (1977/1994) also emphasised acts of earwitnessing within site-specific contexts. Here the Canadian composer announces *sound* as a field of inquiry, based on the broader concept of the *soundscape*, defined as a “sonic environment.” This concept was based on the premise that the sounds heard in a given place are as distinctive and as important as the things to be seen there. In other words, the soundscape can be studied to gain insights into social organisation, power relations and interactions with urban space. Schafer described his own efforts to systematically catalogue “earwitness” testimony in published works, which would offer insights into historical soundscapes and contemporary attitudes. Correspondingly, Schafer defined the ideal earwitness as an author who lived in the past and who can be trusted “when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known” (6). Schafer’s understanding of the earwitness endorses the authority of historical literature (including fictional novels) for conveying an authentic experience of past sounds. While Schafer’s conception of the earwitness seems to sustain a fantasy of unmediated access to past sounds, the soundscape movement offered the first major academic discourse about sound and listening (in modernity) from an interdisciplinary perspective. It represents a systematic attempt to establish sound as a legitimate object of study, with specific focus on the cultural manifestations of sound and listening.

What these accounts remind us is how eventness, liveness and witnessing have emerged as major categories, both in everyday experience and in academic discourse of the twentieth century. Witnessing, in particular, has been conceived in terms of the eyewitness, with the two words often almost used interchangeably. The result is that witnessing, mediated or otherwise, is often considered in terms of an observer who later remembers in visual and semantic terms. The above-mentioned accounts thus suggest an alternative concept of the earwitness, emerging in the wake of Marshall McLuhan’s claims about the predominance of the oral and aural with the rise of radio and television. Commenting on this “secondary” orality, McLuhan commented that as “our age translates itself back into the oral and auditory modes, we become sharply aware of the uncritical acceptance of visual metaphors and models” (1962: 72). Despite this important recognition of the significance of the auditory, McLuhan’s observation reinforces a visual-auditory opposition. In McLuhan’s technological determinist account, radio was the perfect abstract medium for “retribalising” individuals in the interests of nationalism. He claimed that Adolf Hitler’s appeal was heightened due to radio’s creation of “fountains of auditory space or *lebensraum [sic]*,” which satisfied the contemporary preoccupation with encirclement following Germany’s defeat in World War I (1964/1994: 298). This discourse mystifies radio as an oral medium and perpetuates a post-war tradition that explained National Socialism in terms of the irrational or a return to ancient barbarism.

McLuhan’s comments about radio point to common stereotypes about sound, noise and silence during National Socialism. Noise is sometimes taken as the idea that the official discourses of the Nazi regime overruled all others, acting as a disruption in the signal, as a cancelling out of oppositional voices through censorship and coercion. The noise of the Nazi era, too, is sometimes represented
in what Brian Currid has dubbed the “sonic icon” of Hitler’s shouting voice and the deafening crowds at party rallies (2006: 102). Noise might also be understood in terms of technological disturbance, with gramophone scratches or radio interferences as standing in for the difficulties encountered in sustaining an idea of a monolithic state with complete control over all institutions and aspects of daily life.\(^9\) As for silence, this term has often been employed as a metaphor for the lack of resistance amongst most Germans, described as holding their tongues and “turning a blind eye” or “deaf ear.” This theme also figures in the silencing (if not radical absence) of marginalised groups during National Socialism due to political affiliations, or on the basis of race, sexual preference and religion.\(^10\)

Such clichés highlight the necessity to critically interrogate the use of categories like earwitnessing, and to problematise the academic task of studying the sounds and soundscapes of the past. Two of the main obstacles presented to the researcher concern the ephemerality of sound in the historical archive and the difficulties in accessing earwitness testimony. Indeed, the vagueness or transposability of memories about past sounds has been noted by Shaun Moores in his 1988 essay “The Box on the Dresser.”\(^11\) When conducting a study of memories of early radio use, Moores noticed how easily listeners misremembered details about radio programmes. Not only do most people have a poor long-term memory for voice, but it has been found that rhythm and melody are central to the memorability of lyrics (Sacks 2007: 236-9). For these reasons, I draw on the work of radio scholar Josephine Dolan (2003), who refutes the discourse that, on the one hand, mourns the sound archive due to a lack or loss of recordings, and, on the other, treats the written archive as inferior (even though this is where the majority of material is sourced). Instead, Dolan suggests that the researcher’s act of listening necessarily involves textual sources, since “the listening subject is constituted in relation to a range of cultural competencies that are produced at the interface of written, photographic and aural texts” (70). Similarly, historian Mark M. Smith insists that even if the “real soundscape” or “original recorded sound” would be recovered, it still would not explain how these sounds were given significance or struggled over in cultural contexts. To gain this understanding, as Smith suggests, written records provide the large majority of important insights (2004: 394-405).

The present study takes its cue from such critical approaches to sound and soundscape research, and focuses on Düsseldorf, a medium-sized metropolis close to the western borders of (post-1871) Germany. By contrast, much of the scholarship about modern, urban culture takes the city of Berlin as the epitome of metropolitan life in early twentieth-century Germany, often positioning the city as a text that can be “seen” and “read.”\(^12\) This is not surprising, given the symbolic, political and cultural significance attributed to Germany’s capital city up until the present day. Indeed, for commentators past and present, Berlin is often an abstraction, an idea or a surface as much as a lived, material city. The iconic status of Berlin is, without a doubt, an interesting case, but often given an overdetermined position within scholarship. While Düsseldorf is perhaps a less obvious choice, the city is relevant to my study for a number of reasons. The city was both an industrial centre and cultural hub for the Rhineland region, with
its architecture varying from an old city centre to newer buildings and housing developments. In the 1920s and 1930s, industrial development and subsequent migrations (from other parts of Germany and Europe) had led to an increasingly mixed demographic, with roughly half of its population having been born elsewhere.\textsuperscript{13} Although at first glance, Düsseldorf might seem to be on the periphery of Weimar and Nazi cultural politics, its longer reputation as a site for exhibitions and cultural events may have, in part, influenced decisions by the Reich Music Chamber to hold several key events there, such as the 1938 \textit{Entartete Musik} (degenerate music) exhibition and the inaugural \textit{Reichsmusiktage} (National Music Festival) in 1938 and 1939. While these and other events provided Düsseldorf with the opportunity to increase its profile (as a “Gauhauptstadt” or regional capital city), the city remained in competition with Cologne and nearby cities that were equally eager to gain recognition during National Socialism. The potentially marginal status of Düsseldorf will prove important to my study of sound, not least due to efforts to establish the city’s ideological significance under National Socialism, which, as I will show, had varying degrees of success. In what follows, the specific context of modern urban sound, listening attention and sound technologies will be introduced, along with methodological issues concerned with source materials, conceptual tools and the task of periodisation.

\textbf{Modern Sound and the Metropolis}

In Germany, modern sound was associated with the intensification of urban life between the late 1800s and the 1920s, as a result of industrialisation, population growth and density, as well as modern transport, communications and entertainment technologies. Urban sounds were louder and there were more of them: motorised traffic, clocks and church bells, whistles, horns, carpet beating, horses and carts, food sellers, tradesmen, mechanical music, newspaper sellers, postal horns, buskers and beggars featured in most German soundscapes, often well into the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{14} Interview testimony reveals the ongoing prevalence of horses in urban streetscapes during the 1930s, while car traffic was the exception rather than the rule in smaller towns. Inner-city residents were accustomed to the regular arrival of deliveries, signalled by bells or street cries, such as fishmongers, who promoted their wares by calling out “Fresh herrings! Buy your fresh herrings!”\textsuperscript{15} Salesmen often went from door to door and sold small repair items, such as shoe-laces, rubber bands and buttons. There was more self-repair of items, but also goods were often recycled; scrap collectors signalled their presence by ringing a bell and crying out “Iron and paper goods, we collect everything!”\textsuperscript{16} The onset of the Depression was described in terms of an increase in street performers and beggars. Sometimes buskers would perform in the courtyards of apartment buildings, and residents would throw coins down for them. Organ grinders would operate musical organs in the street, while one interviewee recalled a distinctive busker who formed a one-man band, with an accordion, a drum on his back, and two pans.\textsuperscript{17}

Not only was there an increased intensity and volume of urban sounds, but
they changed the way people listened, developed competencies and made sense of their surroundings. These changes in listening are directly related to the rise of modern forms of technology. Along with the visible impact of industrialisation and new transport networks, technological change was also associated with popular (and often noisy) sensations like the moving image, hot air balloons, car racing, Zeppelin airships and aeroplanes. Mechanical music from the 1800s included a range of sonic attractions, such as barrel organs, piano accordions, pianolas and the gramophone. The outbreak of World War I in 1914, too, has been described in terms of a technologised “brutalising” of the soundscape (Tourne 2004). The overpowering sounds of modern warfare – with shells, guns and artillery – were produced at an intensity unlike anything experienced or imagined before. This soundscape, dominated by the “technologized sonority” of warfare, was the basis for distress, and often lasting trauma, for those subjected to its relentless noise and overwhelming of the self.  

The conditions of World War I, and Germany’s surrender in 1918, provide the sonic precedent to the historical period examined in this study: from the 1920s through to the end of World War II in 1945. While I do not go into further detail about World War I itself, its aftermath in Germany provides the initial context for Chapter One. This first case study concerns the mythology and commemorative practices for a former German soldier, Albert Leo Schlageter, who was sentenced to death in 1923 during the French military occupation of the Rhineland. The following chapter extends the consideration of Nazi agitation and commemoration to a broader context of a “festivalisation” of the everyday, by examining the case of the traditional carnival festival, its sonic ritual elements and the impact of radio broadcasts in the 1920s and 1930s. While the first two chapters both span the Weimar and Nazi periods, the third chapter focuses specifically on the wartime soundscapes of German cities between 1939 and 1945. The fourth chapter has an extended sense of periodisation, of longue durée, which traces notions of sound-image relations from Richard Wagner in the nineteenth century to the Weimar and Nazi periods, before turning to audiovisual representations of National Socialism in the present.  

The importance attributed to sound technologies in the twentieth century is also a reason for my choices in periodisation. My emphasis on mediated sound involves, on the one hand, a recognition of the increased sounds of daily life, which I have noted above in relation to modern industrialisation and urbanisation. On the other hand, there is the technologised mediation achieved by sound technologies. Indeed, modern sound media such as sound telegraphy, phonography and telephony already emerged as significant cultural factors in the late nineteenth century. In the period following World War I, which I examine in this study, there was an increased preponderance of mediated sound, due to advancements in microphone and loudspeaker systems, radio broadcasting, film sound devices and recording systems, which facilitated “preserved music, acoustic lecturing, and staged worlds of sound” (Zielinski 1999: 151). However, mediated sound does not only involve such recording and transmission devices. Sound is a temporal-spatial phenomenon that – in all cases – relies on air pressure and reflective surfaces to make itself heard. Always involving some kind of mediation,
sound is bound up with both human and non-human actors, and is variously influenced by atmospheric conditions and its spatial situation.

Mediated sounds were undoubtedly part of the broader conditions of modernity that redefined temporal and spatial relations in society and individual perception. In Marshall Berman’s account, the changed experience of time and orientation in the period around 1900 marked a “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal” (1983: 15). Sociologist Anthony Giddens, too, observes a phenomenological concept of modernity, as it pertains to the modern self:

Modern social life is characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances. (1991: 2)

Based on this premise, I will now briefly sketch out several key arguments about the general conditions of modernity for the case of Germany. This is called for, since this term not only entails a changed experience of social life, but also a category of periodisation. Historian Adelheid von Saldern distinguishes two main trajectories within historiographic debates: firstly, the recognition of modernity as an intellectual discourse dating back to Enlightenment thinking, which sometimes stresses the positive associations with its philosophical ideals; and secondly, as a series of social and cultural changes in the period around 1880-1930 (2002: 2-3). In the case of Germany, von Saldern highlights the conflicting responses to cultural modernity, particularly in the 1920s, and the subsequent attempts under National Socialism to provide its own (often contradictory) “synthesis” (3). The relationship of National Socialism to modernity has been a contentious point of debate in post-war historiography. An instructive approach can be found in the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000a), who has sought to highlight National Socialism as within the definition and general conditions of modernity, albeit as the reflection of a radical development within this category. I also take my cue from historian Michael Prinz, who has challenged the primary emphasis on Nazi “intentions” in historical explanation, urging instead to draw out longer-term patterns in modernity and modernisation across the political caesuras of 1914-18 and 1939-45 (1997: 21-31). These scholars posit the social processes underpinning Nazi violence and genocide as bound up with, rather than opposed to, the history of German modernity.

As for the understanding of modernity within the cultural realm, the changes wrought on daily life have not only been defined in terms of a perceived newness, but also in terms of the predominance of visual culture, described by Guy Debord as the “immense accumulation of spectacles” (1970: 2). Nonetheless, the pace of modernity, and its effects on selfhood in the decades around 1900, was also intertwined with the auditory realm, if not a technologically-informed “auditory self” (Connor 1997a, Ronell 1991, Kittler 1992, 1999). Indeed, the status of modern sound, as Nora Alter and Lutz Koepnick emphasise, is
bound up with the organs, instruments, and machines that produce it, and it cannot be isolated from the media that record, disseminate, and transform it. Sound links human subjects to each other. It contaminates power or utopian fantasy, passion or critique. But it always does so with the help of historically contingent tools of articulation and mediation. (2004: 4-5)

This remark indicates some of the ways that sound is implicated in broader questions of mediality, intersubjectivity, identity, perception and power relations, which are among the themes that I will highlight in Nazi Soundscapes. The consideration of modern sound requires the scholar to not only pay regard to modernity’s so-called crisis of experience, with concerns about distraction, social disintegration and alienation in the experience of social life, but also how modernity “emancipated sound from place, but it also produced many forces that hoped to reconnect the sonic to particular times and locations” (Alter and Koepnick 2004: 15). Indeed, the following analyses take note of precisely this tension between sound as disruption or interruption and the concurrent attempts to contain sound on the basis of community and the national. Such tensions, as I will show, often played out in urban space, and in attempts to define distinctions between the private and public spheres.

In the specific case of radio, German commentators like composer Kurt Weill soon described broadcasting as “one of the most essential elements of public life” (1926). Yet, the state-administered license system that began in Germany in 1923 was also perceived as limiting the (utopian) potential of radio. Critic Rudolf Arnheim, writing in 1933, suggested that radio had changed older concepts of community based on physical proximity, and could provide comfort to those experiencing “separateness and isolation” (1933/1972: 232). As a result, his central concern was whether the radio listener could be persuaded into “a proper state of receptivity” (150). Arnheim uses the (classical) music concert as a benchmark for correct listening attitudes, with radio attracting only a “superficial,” “passive” or “sporadic” listening attention, particularly given the general habit of leaving the radio on while performing other tasks (8). This distracted listening is passive and “kills all mental initiative” (263). In Arnheim’s words, the listener never sits “idly” in front of the loudspeaker, but does all sorts of useful and useless things at the same time. Just as a man feels that he is left helpless in a void as soon as there is no demand made on his ear, so conversely, when he is listening his hands start twitching and his eyes begin looking for the newspaper. The concentration which is enhanced in church or concert-hall by the entire situation must be fought for by the listener against his surroundings, and he rarely succeeds in doing this. Wireless is a permanent guest, and such people are notoriously “made no fuss of”: life goes on as if they were not there. (268)

This view shows striking parallels with the concern of cultural theorist Theodor Adorno that radio changes the experience and the nature of music, with the potential to change “the very essence of the music” and induce a “retrogression
of listening.” Arnheim’s critique is formulated more explicitly in pedagogical terms, suggesting that listeners need to be encouraged in developing “the right attitude,” characterised by a concentrated and disciplined listening stance. This concern with listening attention and distraction, and their specific operations in the Weimar and Nazi eras will form an important part of my reflections. I will now situate this discourse within the broader frame of genealogies of modern sound and acoustics, with attention to theories and practices of listening. The question of historical specificity will motivate my subsequent evaluation of soundscape theory and its problematic understanding of modernity and technology.

**Modern Modes of Listening**

The emergence of modern modes of attention is by no means a straightforward narrative, but can be charted in a variety of social, cultural and technological frameworks, each with their own specific practices and discourses concerning the status of the auditory. I will now focus on several key accounts concerned with the emergence of modern modalities of listening attention, before addressing how soundscape theory configures the relationship between technology and listening attention.

Numerous scholars have pointed to the emergence of new cultural and scientific understandings of modern acoustics during the nineteenth century. In *The Audible Past* (2003), Jonathan Sterne outlines several fields where the foundations of modern listening can be delineated, in particular, modern medicine (1760s-1900s) and sound telegraphy (1840s-1900s). Sterne considers doctors and telegraphers as developing new “techniques of audition,” such as auscultation, which revealed sound as a key source of professional knowledge. In the realm of scientific research, the work of German physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz, especially his *Sensations of Tone* (1863/1954), has been heralded as introducing “the era of sound” (Rieger 2003: 183). In this study, Helmholtz employed new technological devices like the tuning fork, glass resonators and the phonautograph, in order to establish the ear’s functioning as a distinct sense. Helmholtz established a “physiological acoustics” based on the mechanical functioning of the ear. Helmholtz, it has been argued, treated sound as a determined *effect* that could be created irrespective of its cause, and he offered a theory of hearing as sympathetic vibration that would be borne out in later sound-reproduction technologies. (Sterne 2003: 66)

In other words, Helmholtz worked to define the functioning of the hearing sense, and this physiological study of the ear formed an important influence and a precursor to Edison and others who later modelled sound technologies on these principles. Moreover, this theory of how the ear responds to sonic impulses regardless of their sound source (or aesthetics) undermined a long-standing discursive distinction between musical sound and noise.
In Sterne’s account of modern listening, we are reminded to consider the rise of professional fields of expertise for “reading” sounds as signification (telegraphy) or symptoms (medicine). However, in what follows, I will not only address the semiotic dimensions of modern listening, but also that of listening affect. To elaborate on this dynamic between the affective and semiotic, I will now turn to Sigmund Freud’s technique of psychoanalysis as a modern theory and practice of listening around 1900. While most explanations of psychoanalysis indicate the role of spoken narrative for reintegrating a patient’s split or disturbed subjectivity (with its “talking cure”), the psychoanalytic treatment situation has rarely been discussed in specifically sonic terms, as a theory of listening.

Roland Barthes and Jonathan Crary offer two significant responses to this issue. While both scholars’ work has been characterised by a primary interest in visuality and modern techniques of the gaze (in photography and optical devices, respectively), they have each taken an interest in the emergence of modern listening modalities in Freudian psychoanalysis around 1900.

In Roland Barthes’ 1976 essay “Listening,” the author argues that an “entirely modern” form of listening emerged with the rise of twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Freud’s recommendations for psychoanalytic practice describe a listening stance that seeks out both semantic and affective modalities. Such a listening, according to Barthes, attends as much to someone’s voice as “the content of his discourse […] we catch ourselves listening to the modulations and harmonics of that voice without hearing what it is saying to us” (255). According to this conception, psychoanalytic listening is firstly a process requiring heightened sensitivity, which depends on what Freud called an active, mobile or “free-floating” (gleichschwebend) attention, which scans between the various verbal and non-verbal signals. This technique appears to be suited to the physiological basis of hearing, which as Michel Chion establishes, is not fundamentally continuous:

We need to correct the formulation that hearing occurs in continuity. The ear in fact listens in brief slices and what it perceives and remembers already consists in short syntheses of two or three seconds of the sound as it evolves. We don’t hear sounds, in the sense of recognizing them, until shortly after we have perceived them. (1994: 12-3)

Listening is thus granted a new agency for staging intersubjective encounters, and it is seen as providing a “back-and-forth movement” between the unconscious and language. Freudian psychoanalysis therefore not only has import for a specific understanding of modern listening, but also participates in the emergence of new notions of perception and attention during the late nineteenth century.

In his 1999 study of the historical project of creating attentiveness, Jonathan Crary argues that Freud had conceptualised the distinction between critical attention and diffuse attention by around 1900. Critical attention involved the rejection or indeed repression of certain thoughts before they become fully conscious. Diffuse attention, necessary for the patient and analyst, was reliant on a psychic state Freud described as “mobile attention.” To describe this diffuse attention necessary for psychoanalytic practice, Freud himself employed the telephone as a trope for the intersubjective encounter with the patient:
[The analyst] must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone lines which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor’s unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious, which has determined the patient’s free associations.\(^{32}\)

In other words, the intersubjective encounter with the patient required the analyst to modulate in response to the available auditory information, which was used for a subsequent narrative reconstruction.\(^{33}\) In spite of this technological analogy, Crary notes that Freud himself did not attribute changes in perception to the historical emergence of new technologies. Instead, Freud’s psychoanalysis positioned attention within a framework of unconscious drives inherent to man’s biological instincts.\(^{34}\) Nonetheless, the availability of sound technology like the telephone as a metaphor for listening attention offered Freud a form of two-way communication for conceptualising the analyst-patient encounter.\(^{35}\)

Rather than constituting a fundamentally new development that completely undermined traditional forms of experience, modern distraction can be seen as on a continuum with attention. Crary thus realigns the readings of distraction by German critical theorists such as Georg Simmel, who conceived of modernity as unsettling the integrity of social interaction. For Simmel and fellow German scholar Theodor Lessing, the barrage of voices, sounds and machines in modern cities caused those in urban environments to tune out, and become indifferent to their surroundings.\(^{36}\) Theorist Walter Benjamin once referred to distraction and concentration as “polar opposites,” while Adorno’s model of autonomous listening firmly situated distraction in terms of “regression.” Likewise, in the realm of scientific psychology, scientists were unable to categorically dissociate attention from forms of distraction, which Crary reads as a ruling out of attention from the “modern dream of autonomy” (1999: 45). On this basis, Crary responds to influential commentaries about modern distraction as rupturing social cohesion, while Barthes points to a dynamic conception of listening that invokes both semiotic and affective modalities.

These genealogies of modern sound theories and related professional practices remind us of alternative conceptions of listening – at least in the case of Freudian psychoanalysis – where attention and distraction were not merely a cause for concern, but employed as techniques of analysis. This precedent gives me cause to critically revisit the early soundscape theory of Schafer (1977/1994) – whose notion of the earwitness I introduced above – and Truax (1982). The work of these scholars remains important, particularly since they remind us that listening patterns are culturally and socially formed, and that they are interlinked with historically specific physical spaces and urban contexts. However, since the inception of the soundscape movement, these key figures have rallied against modernity as the foremost cause of increased noise pollution and depleted listening awareness. In what follows, I will first engage with Schafer and Truax’s work to specify their suspicion of modern technology and the problems with their attempt to historicise (radio) listening. In response, I will introduce recent critical
accounts of (early) broadcast radio and phenomenological theories, which respectively address the historical dynamic between attentive and distracted (radio) listening, and highlight a broader concept of listening as auditory experience.

Theorising Listening Attention and Sound Technology

R. Murray Schafer’s foundational text *The Tuning of the World* poses the central question: what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when these sounds change? (1977/1994: 3-4). The study itself is primarily concerned with tracing a history of aurality in view of the declining condition of the soundscape in Western society (76). Schafer invests in an historical chronology that locates a loss of listening skills with the onset of modernity, which explains his investment in the “earwitness” as providing testimony about the past. According to Schafer, the average listener needs to be cured of “sound fatigue,” due to the overstimulation and nervousness of modern society (253). Schafer proposes solutions for the malaise of modern noise pollution by outlining two interdisciplines: *acoustic ecology* (diagnosing problems) and *acoustic design* (counteracting these “negative” effects). He conceives of this interdisciplinary project as including multiple perceptual modes, and acknowledges the ear as “but one sense receptor among many” (12). However, due to his desire to reinstate the importance of listening, Schafer maintains a firm sensorial binary, perceiving a conflict between the visual and auditory realm, where only sound can offer an “antidote to the visual stress of modern times” (214, 237). Preoccupied with the conventional realm of the aesthetic, which he interprets as the “contrast between the beautiful and the ugly” (146), Schafer’s discussion of the affective potential of sound thus remains limited to a few brief observations about culturally-specific “sound preferences.”

A more nuanced study of listening can be found in Barry Truax’s *Acoustic Communication* (1984), which criticises the prevailing scientific approach to sound in acoustics that only addresses the physical qualities of sound. Instead, Truax endorses Schafer’s call for an interdisciplinary approach to the cultural and social meanings produced by sound phenomena. He introduces a “communicational model” to shift from the concept of sender-receiver to a dynamic between individual, sound and the environment. Truax maintains that listening patterns are culturally and socially formed, since acoustic experience “creates, influences, and shapes the habitual relationship we have with any environment” (13). Thus, Truax is explicit in designating a soundscape as a listening environment, formed by people and their listening habits. When supplementing acoustics with a semiotic approach to sound, Truax is concerned with scales of attention in various listening modalities. He emphasises attention, since listening involves “the search for meaningful information in the incoming stream of data provided by the audition system.” Truax introduces three types of listening, ranging from active attention (*listening-in-search*) to an intermediate mode (*listening-in-readiness*) to an unconcentrated mode (*background listening*). He is careful to note that listening alternates between these three categories of listening attention, which
exist on a continuum. Behavioural patterns can also change, as can the sensitivity to sounds, with thresholds shifting as sound pressure changes on the ear (15). Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that, similar to Schafer’s preference for natural sounds being more “meaningful,” Truax’s analysis maintains that distracted listening is a lesser form of attention. Background listening is situated on the bottom rung in the hierarchy of listening categories provided by Truax, as merely the “most basic function of listening-detecting information about the environment through acoustic cues” (1984/2001: 21). Although Truax tries to nuance this implication by noting that background listening can nonetheless be seen as a cognitive process, this type of listening is still conceived as a basic mode from which other modalities of attention emerge, and as lacking the complexity of analytical listening (listening-in-search).

In the end, both Schafer and Truax construct a somewhat pessimistic narrative about historical change. Within this early soundscape theory, the modern soundscape since industrialisation has been low-fidelity, noisy, undefined, disruptive and isolating, and therefore needs to be changed. In expressing his dissatisfaction with the present-day soundscape, Schafer specifies the main problem as the existence of the “interrupted acoustic spaces” created by electric and electroacoustic technologies (8). More specifically, Schafer coins a term for the negative effects of electroacoustic production: schizophrenia. According to Schafer, schizophrenia is the split effect that occurs between the original context of the sound and its reproduction in multiple forms. With the establishment of transmission and storage media, Schafer argues, there is a fundamental transformation:

We have split the sound from the maker of the sound. Sounds have been torn from their natural sockets and given an amplified and independent existence. Vocal sound, for instance, is no longer tied to a hole in the head but is free to issue from anywhere in the landscape. (90)

In this extract, it becomes clearer why electroacoustic sounds pose such a threat to Schafer’s conception of the natural soundscape. Voices are no longer tied to their source, denying both the labour and identity of the uttering body. The sounds themselves are given an agency away from their source, which causes a loss of referents and meaning. With this loss of control over contextual meaning, Schafer implies that the sounds can no longer be properly experienced or understood. While I agree that we can talk of changed sounds and power relations, it does not automatically suggest that there is “confusion” on the basis of mediated sound. This disparaging vision of electroacoustic communication is thus preoccupied with the “false” relationships created by sound reproduction. This interpretation has been significantly revised by scholars such as Michael Bull (2000), whose empirical and theoretical research vouches for the creative aesthetic and narrative experiences rendered by personal stereo usage in contemporary urban life.

Turning to the specific case of radio, Schafer despairs that the interruptions created by broadcasts produced the first “sound wall” by isolating the individual and providing a kind of background wallpaper or ambient noise. It is thus
not only recorded sounds in general, but specifically modern radio programming that introduced “contradictions into modern life and has perhaps contributed more than anything else to the breakup of unified cultural systems and values” (94). While the first broadcasts of the 1920s were intermittent presentations with breaks, Schafer argues that the 1930s and 1940s resulted in all-day programming and an “unsettled connectivity” (94). His reader should thus realise that the rhythms of radio are too fast-paced. It is therefore interesting to note that Schafer also attributes to radio the potential to teach people how to slow down to the “natural rhythms of life” (235). This is one of the greatest paradoxes in Schafer’s thinking, since although he frequently blames technology for creating hearing loss, he also concedes the generative potential of audio technologies. In addition, the inconsistency of Schafer’s argument is suggested by his stress on the necessity of recording technology for soundscape analysis and soundscape compositions (237-45).

Like Schafer, Barry Truax’s discussion of electroacoustic technology is premised on the historical emergence of the mechanical reproduction of sound as displacing the temporal-spatial fixity of sound as an event. Truax’s work establishes an historical arc for listening attention, spanning from radio’s inception to the present day. According to this schema, radio was clearly demarcated as a communal event in the 1920s and 1930s. The audience gathered around the radio, centrally placed in the household, and listened in “rapt attention” to mediated sound (1984: 210). Radio’s capability for inducing sustained listening attention, according to Truax, was an important factor enabling the abuse of sound technology by Hitler under the auspices of National Socialism. This straightforward rationale disavows the historical process of negotiating the conditions for radio listening, which assumes that “attention” was given to Hitler’s voice regardless of ongoing technical problems or listener agency. By contrast, my chapters will indicate that concentrated listening attention was desired but not always achieved, let alone an inherent quality of the medium. In some cases, as I will show, events like carnival were predicated on creating noise and enjoyment of sonic overwhelming, which itself could also be amenable to the aims of having a nationalised festival under National Socialism. Unlike Schafer and Truax, then, in my own case studies, I try to precisely draw out the tension between sound as a distraction or interruption, and sound as a way to integrate individuals into community or national frameworks.

In the case of the early wireless, Steven Connor has observed that poor signal quality did involve an “intensification and thickening of the transactions between foreground and background, signal and noise, hearing and listening” (2006: 11). In other words, the various interferences required both the activity of the listener and a distracted scanning of the available signal. Likewise, the introduction of government-regulated broadcasting in Germany in 1923 did not automatically produce “rapt attention,” but resulted in the active participation of the radio listener for negotiating the limitations of the new medium. To some degree, then, we might say that the first years of radio seemed to require and encourage an attentive listening, since listeners strained to hear the broadcast sounds. For instance, as music historian Christopher Hailey observes of early German radio:
The poor quality of early broadcasts demanded the listener’s commitment and aural involvement to compensate for shortcoming of transmission, and performers, composers, and programmers had to adjust their aims to the limitations of the microphone. Radio was a “hot” medium that demanded significant technological and imaginative interaction. (1994: 35-6)

Drawing on McLuhan’s notion of “hot media” as those requiring more user involvement, Hailey describes how German radio broadcasting in the 1920s often had problems with microphone recording, limited broadcasting range and signal interference, as a form of the “mobile attention” described above.48 Radio’s aural presence and visual absence demanded that radio announcers had to learn new forms of address and keep discussion concise and coherent (Hailey 1994: 34). Listeners also initially used headphones and the instability of frequencies meant that most radio owners needed to continually readjust tuning while listening.49 However, as early as 1927, radio commentators noted that their listening sensibilities and expectations of mediated sound quality had changed in the few short years since 1923, leading to more diversified modes of listening attention (see Schrage 2005: 226-7). Instead of categorically designating the first decades of radio as inducing passivity or a concentrated listening, it is also important to remember that the activity of readjusting signal tuning has continued to the present, although mainly discontinued since the introduction of digital tuning devices.

In view of these historical examples, the development of radio as a medium was not inevitable or inherent, but rather a product of multiple technological, industrial and social factors. The abovementioned studies by Connor and Hailey are not dismissive of distracted listening, but rather suggest the role of radio in an ongoing renegotiation of listening attention during the twentieth century. As demonstrated here, both Schafer and Truax’s analyses give an unsatisfactory reading of the past, mistakenly characterising the modern listening condition almost exclusively in terms of loss and desensitisation. On the one hand, Schafer’s concept of modernity develops a pathology of modern listening as schizophonic and nervous. On the other hand, the implicit hierarchy of Truax’s model infers that distracted listening is a recent and overwhelmingly negative phenomenon, exacerbated by modern audio technology.

There have been a number of critiques of Schafer and Truax’s tendency to restrict their definition of sound in accordance with concentrated listening and musicological principles of harmony. Eric Clarke has warned against such a privileging of a model of concentrated or autonomous listening, since it “only represents a fraction of listening modes” (2005: 144).50 While soundscape theory attempts to explain various perceptual modes of listening, the reliance on limited semiotic explanations for the significance of sound in social and cultural contexts remains insufficient. Indeed, as sound scholar Paul Carter argues, soundscape theorists routinely discount the performative character of sound production, transmission and reception: speakers, hearers and listeners participate in an immersive act of making sense at that place, a process which depends minimally on the sound’s semiotic load. (12)
In other words, acoustic ecology fails to conceptualise listeners as engaged in a dynamic relation of both listening and speaking. By contrast, I will introduce a phenomenological understanding of listening experience that appears better equipped to address both the corporeal basis of listening and sound’s affective charge in various social and cultural contexts.

“Listening” may thus be too restrictive a term to do justice to the corporeal basis of the listening experience. Indeed, I find the notion of the auditory more useful, since it includes both listening and hearing. Paul Rodaway’s *Sensuous Geographies* (1994) offers several key perspectives for establishing listening in terms of its corporeal and affective qualities. Firstly, he clarifies that the strict division between hearing as passive and listening as active is inadequate. Auditory perception, in Rodaway’s terms, necessarily involves the entire sensing body, rather than a merely isolated reception through the ears (83). According to this understanding, auditory experience is not only embodied but also multidirectional, since the auditory system is “exteroceptive (picks up direction of sound event) and proprioceptive (registers the sounds made by the individual)” (91–2). Following Rodaway, the auditory experience of sound phenomena can be better understood as a corporeal process configured by various modes of listening, hearing and speaking (in combination with other perceptual processes).

Rodaway’s views demonstrate an affinity with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s contention in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002) that we perceive the world through our body and senses, in his attempt to critique a Cartesian split between the mind and body. Merleau-Ponty argued that corporeal perception is immersive and three-dimensional, and thus produces an experience where “the world is around me, not in front of me” (1964). Here the body is approached as an integrated whole, rather than divided into separate components, thus creating an intersensorial conception of embodied perception, allowing for correspondences between the senses.\(^51\) As Merleau-Ponty elaborates, the senses interact in perception as the two eyes collaborate in vision. The sight of sounds or the hearing of colours come about in the same way as the unity of the gaze through the two eyes: in so far as my body is not a collection of adjacent organs, but a *synergetic system*, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world. (1945/2002: 271-2. My emphasis)\(^52\)

Drawing on such insights from Merleau-Ponty, Rodaway’s recasting of listening and hearing as auditory perception establishes a phenomenological approach that attends to the global dimensions of sensory experience. As such, we might note the ways that hearing is often disconnected from what we see, and is often telling us where to look or thus narrow our visual attention. While the senses are posited as distinct fields, they operate and interact within a general structural frame of the body. This perspective posits an important break from treating the listening act as merely decoding or categorising, but rather conceives of a whole-body experience that creates a “resonant” subject (Nancy 2007).\(^53\)

Phenomenologist Don Ihde stresses that the process of listening may take
place against a global bodily framework, but he also conceptualises auditory experience in terms of attentional focus (1976: 15). According to this perspective, sound is continually present, even when the subject is not aware of it. The sounds in a given situation can be interpreted as offering an invitation to perception, since attention is the frame within which listening takes place. While the whole body can (potentially) engage in the registering of auditory perception, the ear is the “focal organ of hearing” (45). When Ihde investigates the specific phenomenological qualities of sound, he highlights the themes of temporality and spatiality. The temporal quality of sound as event can be seen as an “envelope” defined by having a beginning and an end (102). The spatial dimensions to sound are usually recognised according to its direction or intensity, or if it is the sound of something. As Ihde points out, when the precise location of sound can be determined, sound is spatially poor. Yet, when sound is spatially rich, it can “flood and intrude upon my consciousness” (232). This range of spatial qualities is dependant on the subject’s sense of agency over available sensory stimuli.

The emphasis from phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Ihde on the global nature of perception (and the interaction of various sensory fields) might pose a challenge to my call to dwell on the construction of auditory experience within a particular historical setting. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty demonstrates a sensitivity to the historical and cultural dimensions of sensory registers, underscoring the way that individuals are embedded in a “perceptual tradition,” which they negotiate in the present moment (1945/2000: 277). However, there is a problematic tendency in Merleau-Ponty’s theorising insofar as it still constructs a universal subject. For this reason, soundscape theory remains an important methodological intervention for insisting on the cultural and historical specificity of sound, its embeddedness in material landscapes, and involvement in power relations. Nonetheless, in my case studies phenomenological perspectives are employed to reflect on auditory experience and affect, as well as to supplement soundscape theory’s insistence on the semiotic meaning of sounds. Moreover, my analyses avoid simple oppositions between the auditory and visual, given that all media are mixed media, and draw on mixed sensory modes (Mitchell 2005). This critical response to both soundscape and phenomenological accounts of listening – in terms of the historicity of modern listening and its basis in auditory and corporeal perception respectively – provides a rationale to outline the specific academic context and choice of case studies for this examination of historical sound and soundscapes.

Researching Historical Soundscapes

The field of historical sound and soundscape studies has had a remarkable upswing from the 1990s onwards. Writing about Victorian-era music hall performance in 1996, Peter Bailey called for further research into non-visual culture, not least since historians “habitually invoke the ‘sights and sounds’ of an era as necessary objects of their enquiry, but the latter rarely receive more than lip service” (1998: 211). Bailey’s appeal to scholars to fully thematise sound in their
reconstruction of past cultural contexts also draws attention to the limits posed by the historical archive. Archives primarily consist of written and visual documentation, with some limited sound recordings that originate from the late nineteenth century onwards.55

In the ensuing period, a number of key works have appeared that are explicitly concerned with the historical study of soundscapes. One of the first major studies, by historian Alain Corbin (1994/1998), analysed the debates about church bells in the French countryside and their structuring of time, power, meaning and identity in the early nineteenth century. James H. Johnson (1995), working on roughly the same period, writes about the process by which Parisian audiences became silent when attending musical performance, tracing changes and continuities in social expectations and manners, along with understandings of music performance and listening behaviour. Literature scholar Bruce R. Smith (1999) has studied the soundscape of early modern England, concentrating on the experiences of a people whose acoustic environment required listening competencies and modes of interpretation that differed vastly from the present. Historian Mark M. Smith’s social history of nineteenth-century America traces the soundscape of slavery, the modes of listening and meanings attributed to certain sounds, as well as how sound was bound up in power, race and identity in the lead up to the Civil War (2001). Questions of power and control are also intrinsic to two additional historical studies of relevance for my work. Karin Bijsterveld (2001; 2008) has delineated the symbolism of sound and technology within early twentieth-century campaigns against noise in American and European cities, which charts out both contemporary debates and a longer historiography of Western attitudes towards noise and silence. Emily Thompson (2004), writing on the same period in North America, attends closely to themes of control and power in relation to changes in urban sound, modern technology, acoustics and architectural design, and with it, evolving attitudes and professional practices based on prevailing cultural understandings of noise.56

These pre-existing soundscape studies provide useful reminders to situate specific cases as part of broader cultural patterns and political realities in the historical period in question. In the present study, I use sound-related concepts as heuristic tools, but also adopt a cultural history approach to my sources. I also revisit other historiographic interpretations of National Socialism, particularly those that assume the primary importance of visual culture and symbolism within its cultural politics. Not only do I try to respond to a visualist historiography, but my interest in aural culture necessarily requires me to expand the range of the many pre-existing studies of music and radio in the Nazi period.57 Moreover, I endeavour to situate these cultural phenomena (radio, music, voice) in terms of the acoustic environment of their performance and reception, and thus reflect on how (mediated) sound can interact with urban space and engage listening attention. This emphasis on the relationship between the listener(s), sounds and their spatial environment is also informed by recent work in cultural geography, much of which starts from the premise that “meaning is produced in the encounter between human subject and place, and other human subjects and a range of material artefacts” (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004: 676). Against this broader
background, two central concerns of this study pertain to, firstly, the contribution of radio and mediated sound to fascist aesthetics and cultural practices, and secondly, how sound was implicated in control, discipline and terror.

For the case studies, I engage with audio-visual sources like archival radio recordings and film footage, yet I also draw on radio station magazines, newspaper articles, archival files, diaries, published documentation, theoretical writings and the oral history interviews mentioned earlier. In doing so, I draw attention to the contexts, gaps and silences in the sources used in my analyses. This is particularly necessary with sources derived from the Nazi era, due to censorship and the predominance of ideological positions in public discourses and media channels. While the available sound materials are quite limited (much of them were lost, or were not recorded or preserved in the first place), I do not conceive of my reliance on textual and secondary sources only in terms of lack or absence. Indeed, soundscape studies of present-day contexts accept that their empirical field work does not recover the soundscape in its entirety. The material nature of the sources, furthermore, gives cause to reflect on the mixed medial status of the media technologies examined as well as the sensory modalities involved in the case studies.

In the first chapter, the specific events created around the martyr Albert Leo Schlageter will be explored, with respect to the ways in which music and sound were utilised by the National Socialists in public spaces to control urban space and rework identity formations. My argument is that, although the party subdued the urban soundscape with terror and coercion in the first months of 1933, the staging of mediated sounds within public rituals involved a great deal of trial and error (despite the claims of propagandists otherwise). I frame my examination of Schlageter commemorations in Düsseldorf by calling upon Don Ihde’s phenomenological concept of the “auditory imagination” to theorise acts of listening and the voice within auditory perception. As part of this inquiry into the contribution of sound to Nazi spectacles, I will reflect on the uses of “resonance” for organising the people, popularising mythology and disciplining the senses. While the analysis refers in particular to (popular) song lyrics, the emphasis remains on the resonant and rhythmic qualities of these cultural products in performance. Accordingly, the concept of “affirmative resonance” is introduced as a tool for analysing the role of sound in the creation of resonant spaces within urban environments, whether through collective singing and cheering, loudspeaker technology, or in the call and response interactions between a speaker and a crowd. This analysis, moreover, will draw out the tensions between the party’s investment in organic experience and architectural monumentalism, and their uses of mediated propaganda, publicity strategies and modern design.

In the second chapter, I expand on my interest in change and (dis)continuities in the production of space, ritual and listening attention during the first Nazi years. However, in this case, I examine the broader process of what I term a “festivalisation” of the everyday, which I explore through a somewhat unlikely case for Nazi appropriation: the boisterous annual carnival festival in Düsseldorf. In analysing the sonic components, rituals and uses of public space in interwar Germany, I explore how and why local carnival sounds (and their associations with Heimat and Volk culture) were appropriated for nationalistic purposes. Here, I
not only engage with theories of the festival and its sounds (Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Attali), but also challenge the notion of carnival as an all-inclusive, temporally and spatially confined ritual. I further specify the contribution of radio broadcasts to the nature and experience of the “festival,” by dispersing its sounds and music to new sites of reception. By examining how the sounds of otherness were staged in carnival, I will argue that carnival’s noise began to resemble and overlap with anti-Semitic rites of violence, as part of a broader marking out of exclusion within the festivalised, urban soundscape.

These first two chapters focus on the cultural dynamics in the interwar period, taking note of the “sonic brawling” and political agitation in the Weimar years and the subsequent discourses of nation-building (such as “the call” or “Germany awake!”). In contrast, the third chapter deals with changes within the Düsseldorf soundscape following the outbreak of war in September 1939. Here, I examine a case study of “special announcements” (Sondermeldungen) in order to reflect on how radio was used to manipulate listening attention and stage a mediated experience of national celebration, with radio listeners as earwitnesses. I not only reflect on the ideal of the “imagined listening community” (with reference to Benedict Anderson), but also on the temporal-spatial organisation of the urban home front through sound. I investigate how alarm systems and acoustic forms of control and surveillance (such as eavesdropping) comprised key structuring elements in the changed wartime soundscape. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s visualist account of modern techniques of control, I analyse the tensions between sound as a disciplinary practice (official measures) and sound as an unpredictable disruption to everyday life (air attacks and their aftermath). The analysis emphasises the feedback and eventual contradiction between the claims of radio and the soundscape at large, as well as the adjustments made by listening subjects when negotiating the space of the darkened and threatened city.

In the fourth chapter, I remain with the theme of Nazi-era attempts to control urban space. My case, too, deals with a darkened space of listening; yet in this context, I begin with the legacy of Richard Wagner’s music-theatre in Bayreuth and his “Gesamtkunstwerk” concept. I critically revisit the legacy of Wagner for the sound cinema and for notions of national community under National Socialism, as revealed by Düsseldorf’s film and cinema exhibition history. The analysis identifies a set of key sonic metaphors, and focuses in particular on the concepts of “symphony” and “rhythm” in Walther Ruttmann’s work across the Weimar and Nazi eras. Furthermore, a specific concept of “rhythmic harmony,” as I argue, attributed to sound an important role in attempts to condition the cinema and spectator attention, and with it, investments in the cinema space as a site of festive gatherings (and exclusions) of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft (national-racial community). Nonetheless, my approach emphasises the ongoing risks and problems with cinema sound, particularly given the sonic interruptions of the World War II soundscape in Düsseldorf. Finally, the persistence of synthesis or “synchronisation” as a metaphor for totalitarian control in the present day motivates my analysis of a contemporary film (Hitler’s Hit Parade, 2003), which asks how film sound might challenge established audiovisual stereotypes about National Socialism and its historical development as a foregone conclusion.
In *Nazi Soundscapes*, I present and examine various types of sound, or even the tensions between certain categories of sound, and how they figured and were reconfigured within the urban soundscape. It is difficult to entirely dispense with certain clichés about National Socialism and its related sonic icons. However, this study attends to the intersection of (mediated) sound, listening experience and urban space as a means of unpacking the significance of sound in German social and cultural life in the early twentieth century. Of primary concern here is the role played by modern technologies of sound in shaping listening experience and conditioning urban spaces. In other words, my focus on urban space reflects an endeavour to acknowledge the conditions in which listening and sound-making take place, and the spatial characteristics influencing sounds as such. While I offer the reader a broader context of sounds in space, along with their cultural-historical specificity, this study also places emphasis on the affective and semiotic dimensions to these sound events within auditory experience. Listening attention will not only be discussed here in terms of a crisis of experience, associated with modernity and urban distraction, but considered as a way to critically evaluate Nazi-era appropriations of sound and sound technology across a range of urban spaces, and the designation of Germans as “earwitness” participants in the experience of national community.