Nazi Soundscapes

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Afterword: Echoes of the Past

“The memories are coming back to me as I talk about them now and they’ve been buried inside me for a long time. The sounds are now ringing in my ears.”

“Even today I can still hear the sirens. [...] The impact and explosions are still perceptible now. Mainly because of the fear, the anxiousness of the adults.”

“After the war, it took months before I stopped waking up terrified, and no longer ran into the cellar if I heard engine sounds.”

“No, we didn’t have jazz. That was not considered ‘proper music.’ [...] In June 1945 I went to a birthday party where this music was played: Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller. That was ‘Freedom!’ It was the first time I had feeling of being free.”

In the previous chapter, I examined the case of the documentary film Hitler’s Hit Parade with regard to present-day difficulties in remembering and representing the Nazi past. While the film uses an unbroken sequence of (mainly sentimental) hit songs from the 1930s and 1940s, I argued that this continuous soundtrack provided a critical frame for considering the recycling of visual images and film footage from the Nazi era. Rather than suggest that these songs offer a stable historical chronology, I have shown that Hitler’s Hit Parade foregrounds the act of selection and narrative organisation of archival image and sound. In doing so, it also configures a confrontation with the truth claims of the documentary genre and the “prosthetic” media memories of those viewers who themselves do not remember the Nazi period, but have developed accumulated forms of visual memory through popular cultural representations of history (Landsberg 2004: 28). The central role given to melodies and lyrics in the film might seem an unusual strategy, since such popular songs are often conceived as encouraging normative accounts of cultural memory and even a nostalgic interpretation of past eras and events. However, since the manner with which contemporary audiences usually “know” the past is primarily facilitated by the visual, the film offers these songs as a narrative framework that self-consciously draw attention to our mediated acts of listening and viewing.

Recorded sound in Hitler’s Hit Parade did not only offer a straightforward memento, but might be said to perform echoes of the past in the present. In this context, it is important to establish that sound (as echo) tends towards an indexical, rather than an iconographic relationship to remembering. Rather than fixing
a determined linear narrative or image, sound can be drawn upon to prompt certain moods or feelings, and thus differs strikingly from the unaltered and exact reproduction of all heard sounds as per Canetti’s exaggerated earwitness. As an echo sounds out, it usually reflects off different surfaces, causing it to lose momentum or pick up extra information. As such, the echo allows for the alterations produced by its surroundings. This is one of the reasons why the auditory constitution of self (as Echo) has been suggested as a counterpoint to the (visual) Narcissus. In Gayatri Spivak’s account of this myth, the reiterations of Narcissus’ speech by Echo can change the original meaning, independently of her intentions. When taken in terms of subject construction and identity formation – in this case of the earwitness – this myth allows for such components concerned with individual agency in relation to others. Historian Joan W. Scott, too, notes how the metaphor of echo foregrounds selectivity, due to their “delayed returns of sound” (2001: 292). While this selectivity can be used to create a sense of continuity and belonging, the echo is not static and provides room for change. “An echo,” as Scott elaborates, “spans large gaps of space (sound reverberates between distant points) and time (echoes aren’t instantaneous), but it also creates gaps of meaning and intelligibility” (291). It is in this return, by means of repetition, that alterations and changes are made. In an earlier article, Scott (1991) has also argued that scholars should be careful not to treat experience as a privileged category that exists outside of discourse. Instead, Scott invites historians to examine the production of sensory perception, and, consequently, both the individual and social dimensions to experience.

Correspondingly, while present-day recollections by earwitnesses might seem to call upon individual experiences, it is important to keep in mind that sounds – contrary to popular assumption – are not necessarily immediate and intimate. Those who grew up during National Socialism were conditioned and encouraged to perceive auditory experience in social and collective terms. Nazi propaganda discourses played a significant role in shaping attitudes about auditory perception, and Germans were consistently positioned as earwitnesses participating in and belonging to a Volksgemeinschaft (national community), as I have shown in the previous chapters. One of the important related discourses about sound concerned the music and sound created by groups seen as outside the acceptable social order. Such discourses contributed to a dichotomised view of sounds, delineated as harmonious, intimate and socially acceptable on the one hand, and degenerate, chaotic and discordant on the other. During World War II, fear of listening or being heard by others intensified, as I have shown in my examination of “Feind hört mit” campaigns in Chapter Three. At the same time, public discourses and cultural representations were also influential in emphasising the braveness and unity of community in the face of Allied “terror attacks.” It would seem that the post-war characterisation of wartime sounds as memorable is at least partially constituted by the public discourse about Allied bombings, along with post-war representations that have employed the “sonic icons” of sirens to connote air attacks (Flinn 2004: 4; Hillman 2005: 33).

Recollections in the present thus not only reflect a temporal interval, but also a politics of memory. In the case of Germany, it is worthwhile to note the acoustic
metaphors used when contrasting the “silence” of the immediate post-war decades to the so-called memory “boom” since the 1980s. In the 1970s, psychologists Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich coined the phrase “the inability to mourn,” arguing that Germans had collectively “repressed” their Nazi past and their secret attachment to Hitler (1975). However, despite the popularity of this explanation, German society has not necessarily remained silent about the Nazi period during the past sixty years. Among others, historian Michael L. Hughes has shown how a remembrance process continued from the late 1940s onwards, but asserts that Germans often drew on pre-existing Nazi discourses for their role as victims, which minimised “culpability for the war that their sacrifice and solidarity had helped make possible” (2000: 205).9 Similarly, Robert G. Moeller (2001) has argued that the prominent public discourses about prisoners of war and German expellees in the early post-war period should be characterised in terms of a “selective remembering” rather than complete silence. By the 1980s, alongside concerns with Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past), a growing number of scholars recognised an emerging “memory boom” in relation to Germany’s Nazi past.10 These discussions were controversial, particularly in the wake of accusations of revisionism and the Historikerstreit (Historians’ Debate) about interpreting the place of the Holocaust in Germany’s larger historical narrative.11 In the decade following the 1990 reunification of Germany, another trend emerged in public discourses concerning the acknowledgement of German civilian suffering during World War II.12

These recent developments in German public memory debates and popular discourses were critically investigated in Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall’s 2002 publication Opa war kein Nazi (My Grandpa was not a Nazi). A team of oral history researchers conducted interviews across three generations of German families, in order to explore how how personal experience during National Socialism had been absorbed into “normal” family narratives. To document this process, the researchers developed an interview methodology where they showed their participants film sequences from ten amateur films and three propaganda films. The use of visual materials was vouched for as a useful strategy for involving children and grandchildren, who primarily experience National Socialism as mediated through popular culture and stories. This process of negotiating family memories about the Nazi period was described in terms of a “virtual family photo album” (14).13 The researchers’ preconception that photos and films are a neutral method for encouraging a process of remembering is not only visualist, but may overlook the selectiveness or manipulation within these cultural artefacts, as I demonstrated in the case of Hitler’s Hit Parade (2003).14 Nonetheless, one of the significant findings was that the family narratives overwhelmingly centred on the material and personal losses caused by the bombing of German cities, heightening the sense of Germans being victims of “war, manipulation, war imprisonment, deprivation and adversity” (16).15 The influence of institutional and popular cultural narratives in oral history interviews was prominent, given that family members drew on films as illustrations, comparisons and sometimes as distortions of their family stories.
The significance of cultural representations about the past, and the social negotiation of autobiographical and family memory also recall the notion of the echo. Indeed, the echo has been invoked in one of the more recent accounts to grapple with the multitude of subject positions and perspectives during National Socialism. German author Walter Kempowski has become well-known for his critical oral history projects that, as he put it, tried to listen to the “echoes of terror” in present-day German society. Kempowski published a ten-volume “collective diary” titled Das Echolot (1993-2005) – the main title of the book translates roughly as “Sonar” or “Echo-Sounder.” Collected from thousands of letters, diaries, personal documents and photos, the title reflects a sounding out of the depths, divergences and multiplicity of individual experiences in the last years of the Nazi regime (1941-1945).

It is clear that Kempowski’s version of the echo challenges the notion that there could be any unified account of the Nazi era. His collective “diary” suggests that echoes reflect off different surfaces, as the past is recalled in the present. While doing so, they can be subject to interferences, or perhaps a fading out and a forgetting. It is this last aspect, forgetting, that Kempowski seeks to highlight in Echolot. Just as there are many voices working to create the cultural norms and established narrative about National Socialism, attention must be paid to the role of forgetting, to unheard voices, to the evasion of responsibility, or the various desires for a useable past. Echolot offers a comprehensive, if not exhaustive response to the task of negotiating collective memory and the memory boom, with an echo-sounder that tries to get beyond the so-called “noise” of official discourses (Confino and Fritzsche 2002). Literature scholar Susanne Vees-Gulani (2003) has praised Kempowski’s approach, yet she notes that his goal of objectivity is at times problematic. In particular, the use of extracts from key figures like Hitler and Goebbels might imply some possibility for explaining the course of events, and that victims’ voices are virtually absent (with the exception of Victor Klemperer). When foregrounding German experiences of aerial bombing, particularly those cases of trauma and suffering, Vees-Gulani emphasises that such accounts need to be placed in a direct relation to German military aggression and the initiation of area bombing on Guernica, Rotterdam and English cities (2003: 2-4, 7). Even when they themselves were markedly traumatised by exposure to the air war, Victor Klemperer and other Jewish-Germans directly affected saw the attacks as a necessity for ending the war and the terror of the Nazi regime.

In this vein, an important critical literary voice has emerged in the work of Dieter Forte. This author, who was born in Düsseldorf and lived through the aerial war (Bombenkrieg), rejects a nostalgic type of mourning. As a child, Forte suffered from muteness and stuttering due to the fear caused by the bombings of Düsseldorf. He argues that the trauma that he and others underwent must be recognised, as a means of acknowledging the “silent victims” of the war years. However, what is more important for Forte is that Germans should not overlook the violence, repression and culpabilities of the Nazi period. And, for Forte, a shared notion of the past that excludes Auschwitz also reflects an “abnormality.” Commenting on his semi-autobiographical novel, In der Erinnerung (1998), Forte explains:
If we can only see ourselves as victims then we have a completely different understanding of the war and the mass killing of Jews, as a direct result of Nazism, and with respect to the Allied air war on the German population.\(^{18}\)

In Forte’s view, the emergence of a discourse about the *Bombenkrieg* from a German perspective is permissible on the condition that it does not involve relativisation and that one does not forget why the air attacks on German cities occurred. In this way, Forte’s work emphasises the necessity to prevent amnesia by returning to a painful past, yet remaining critical of that era. Ultimately, then, this call for critical modes of remembering reminds scholars to consider how present-day memory dynamics frame contemporary earwitness recollection.

Formulated against the background of these contemporary debates, *Nazi Soundscapes* has revealed the utterly intersubjective nature of auditory experience, which is crucial for implicating the listener in the world and exposing his or her agency through attention patterns. The ethical implication of listening, which was my departure point with Canetti’s account of the earwitness, remained a central issue in my case studies. Listening provides a potential source for developing knowledge, concern about others, and for enabling observation and witnessing. In the course of this study, which has shifted gradually from how sounds were heard to how they are represented and remembered, I have stressed how listening subjects during National Socialism partook in certain aporias, silences and “blindspots.” As such, this study has necessarily confronted prevalent discourses of belonging or national community with simultaneous acts of exclusion, whether in subtle manifestations or organised rites of violence. Shifting away from previous notions of totalitarian control, the study foregrounds the sense of continuity provided by existing national traditions and cultural rituals, along with the role of consumption in relation to consent, complicity and violence.

In other words, this study makes a strategic intervention in current scholarly debates about how National Socialist ideology and propaganda were communicated and negotiated in a modernized public sphere. By studying the soundscape, I have drawn attention to the cultural dynamics involved with mediated sound, listening and urban space across the Weimar and Nazi periods. Through my case studies, I have proposed a nuanced approach to the soundscape, and have shown how sound-related concepts can be used as fruitful tools of analysis for the historical study of cultural and political patterns. These terms were not only singular elements within the Düsseldorf soundscape, but provided a conceptual method for organising my reflections about specific case studies of the Schlageter myth and commemorative forms, urban carnival rites, the wartime city, the sound film and cinema exhibition. These case studies reflect on a diversity of media forms, and thus revealed the truly audiovisual nature of Nazi propaganda and specified its relation to multiple sensory registers.

The process of engaging sound-based concepts, such as resonance, noise and rhythm, as a point of departure and return sometimes produced unanticipated results. In the case of carnival, for example, the persistent counter-culture discourse around this festival initially suggested an anti-authoritarian space, if not outright resistance to National Socialism. Upon closer examination of this event, its sonic...
rituals and radio broadcasts, I found its cultural status to be more ambiguous in both the Weimar and Nazi eras, and taken up by both avant-garde artists and cultural conservatives. This re-reading, based on sound recordings and archival research, provided an understanding of how the Düsseldorf carnival under National Socialism was gradually refashioned into a nationally and racially-defined people’s festival (Volksfestival) whose “noisy energy” facilitated anti-Semitic expressions and even violence. These attempts to appropriate and absorb festival noise, as I have shown, thereby challenge Jacques Attali’s opposition between the Festival (noise) and the Norm (silence).

On a more general level, this study has detailed how various manifestations of sound – whether music, voice, silence or noise – were conceived as amenable tools for political appropriation. In some cases, this appropriation borrowed from existing sonic rituals and music, whereas in other cases I have delineated the emergence of new sonic practices and ritual forms. In particular, I have sought out the continuities and changes in the uses of sound under National Socialism, and with it, the prevalent tensions about sound in contemporary discourses and cultural practices. Furthermore, this study has investigated the implication of sound in terror, surveillance and exclusionary practices. With these guiding insights, I have sought to redress certain visualist assumptions about the exertion of social control and discipline, along with the solely visual basis for racism and discrimination. In order to trace these (sometimes elusive) forms of social control, I have taken the soundscape or acoustic environment to be a dynamic context for individual listeners, which also mediates their interaction with each other (Truax 1984/2001). Listening attention was positioned as an important aspect to the analysis of the soundscape, since it reveals ongoing tensions between the body’s physiological capabilities and the cultural patterns informing listening experience. This focus on attention has helped to understand the role of listening habits in the meanings and significance ascribed to the Düsseldorf soundscape. Nonetheless, while certain insights were adopted from Truax and others, I also redressed the assumptions in soundscape theory about modern sound as being necessarily distracting and dulling to the senses. While mediated sound is an agent of modernity, there is not a causal link to confusion, let alone “schizophrenia” (Schafer 1977/1994).

A final key finding of this study concerns the role of radio and other technologies, such as microphone-loudspeaker systems. In contrast to most studies of radio, I have vouched for the necessity of grounding radio programming within the soundscape at large. In the case of Chapter Three, I show how radio propaganda – like the Sondermeldungen – was systematically placed in the context of larger acoustic interventions in the everyday routines of wartime life in Germany between 1939 and 1945. As such, the medium of radio – and the corresponding fantasy of imagined national community – is positioned in direct relation to the success of siren systems and safety routines in Düsseldorf. In other words, I have acknowledged the attractiveness in employing amplified sound for political purposes, given its potential contribution to collective mood and atmosphere, whether in city streets, the workplace or domestic environment. Yet, I have also pinpointed the difficulties and labour involved in establishing acoustic domi-
nance with mediated sound. A series of case examples – whether the use of fanfares and campaign songs on radio, church bells, sirens, or newsreel soundtracks – have revealed the tension between control and excess in Nazi-era attempts to employ mediated sound for political effect. Such examples have not only raised issues of amplification, repetition and sound quality, but also highlighted ongoing uncertainties during National Socialism concerning the “controlled event” and the risk of oversaturation for listening subjects (as jeopardising their engagement as earwitnesses).

With such tensions in mind, I have tried to make it patent that, just as there is not one single soundscape to be studied by the researcher, in the case of listening, there are also always “competing or co-existing ‘auditory regimes’” (Lacey 2000b: 279). Perhaps it is the transience of sound that makes it so interesting for cultural analysis, as an object that is structurally defined by change and mediation. Indeed, sound, as Steven Connor remarks, always “involves the sense of something happening, here and now; but the very intensity of that here and now happening derives from the fact that it is volatile, always passing away” (1997b: n. pag.). The nature of sound as event means that it is malleable and mediated by its surroundings, but it can also be unpredictable and work against the intentions of those seeking to use it. Although the historical soundscape cannot be recovered in its entirety, its study raises pertinent issues about the wider implications of sound and listening in dictatorial regimes, and against the background of violence, persecution and war. By attending to various aspects concerned with the interplay of modern auditory experience, (mediated) sound and related cultural practices, this study has insisted on sound as a medium that itself participates in social and spatial organisation, and provides a valuable heuristic tool for re-examining the historical past.