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5

THE RETURN TO SOUND AESTHETICS

Neil Verma

In this chapter I follow three lines of thinking on the role of aesthetics in sound studies over the past two decades, asking how the term binds together problems, areas, and projects. The first section considers the rhetorical function of aesthetics, the way its invocation is a signpost for scholars. The second explores how sound studies prompts a rethinking of the concept of the aesthetic, something widely understood to involve the category of beauty as conceptualized through a set of mutually supporting historical intellectual movements (18th-century Western philosophy, academic music appreciation, bourgeois values), a usage of the term currently waning but unlikely to dwindle completely. The third is to show how sound has played a role in the shift from an aesthetics of value to a “media aesthetics,” from a theory rooted in judgment to a theory with an agnostic approach to the merits of individual works, drawing instead from critical theory, media studies, and classical theories of *aesthesis* to consider how sound media (in both their individual specificity and their common mediality) shape how we encounter and process sense-experience in the first place.

I will argue that when it comes to sound studies, these lines of thinking share a point of convergence. In their approaches, contemporary scholars in all of these lines stress the need to preserve a robust sense of sound’s embeddedness within social, cultural and political life, which aesthetics is often accused of ignoring. This is the keynote of the literature: an anxiety that opening the question of aesthetics is liable to force a decoupling with the social, thus betraying a general worry about such a cleavage. Aestheticians seem to take sounds and put them in a kind of museum, away from contexts, disobeying the precept that sound is fundamentally social. As Michael Bull and Les Back (among others) have argued, the tendency to objectify and universalize phenomena – a hallmark of “aesthetic” engagement, to many – is a symptom of misleading distance-based “visual epistemologies” that have guided Western thought for too long (Bull and Back 2003: 4–5). It makes sense, then, to approach sound aesthetics with suspicion, as something that might render social ramifications moot and betray “the sonic” by imputing a boundary between the inner and the outer, the private and the public, that sound itself will not brook. To speak of aesthetics is stressful because it raises the unhappy possibility that those who study “sound” as object and those who study “listening” as an activity might not be able to cooperate as well as they might wish to. Aesthetics thus reminds us of the vexed (but also generative) ways in which the motley group of writers and creators that Jonathan Sterne calls “sound students” ground their critiques (Sterne 2012: 4–5).

Insisting on social, political, or cultural dimensions to aesthetic phenomena, or fretting about the failure to do so, is not unique to sound studies, but rather represents a time-honored gesture in modern thought. In her reading of Kant, Hannah Arendt emphasized that Kant's insistence that judgments of beauty necessarily involve a claim to universal validity (when we say something is beautiful, we are not merely finding it "agreeable" but also believing that others should, too), which compels us to recognize that others have the same faculty as we. Aesthetics is thus a kind of judgment that exists in the presence of others (Arendt 1982). For Walter Benjamin, it was urgently necessary to politicize art to confront the reactionary aesthetics of fascism that valorized war, and this held true for sound media as for other forms in the age of mechanical reproducibility (Benjamin 2002). For Pierre Bourdieu, art and aesthetics were socially instituted through a field of critics, dealers, patrons and others; art moved in a field of cultural production, it existed in states of decipherment by those socially sanctioned to ascribe value within that field (Bourdieu 1994). Art appreciation was a way of understanding classes, capital and how they interact through symbolic value and cultural capital, a perspective that has held sway across the humanities over the past generation.

Since the 20th century, the direction of this thinking has altered somewhat. Rather than recuperating purportedly autonomous art into the social, writers are beginning to approach aesthetic analysis as itself a form of political activity amenable to reflexive humanist analysis. Jacques Rancière has argued that aesthetic thought is profoundly political in that it involves the "delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière 2004: 8). For him, aesthetic acts matter for how they form experience, while also showing an ability to reconfigure subjectivity. Aesthetics is a way of isolating practices behind artwork, but it is also about the modes of perception, regimes of emotion, categories and other ideas whereby that same artwork can be heard and spoken about: "These conditions make it possible for words, shapes, movements and rhythms to be felt and thought as art" (Rancière 2001: x). Aesthetics is political for Rancière not just because it reflects shared sensibilities but also because it distributes the sensible according to a *regime*. Attempting an account of that process is like background noise of sound studies nowadays, which is preoccupied with the power of aesthetics and the aesthetics of power.

The rhetoric of aesthetic return

Because aesthetics involves a set of questions about experience, feeling, taste, and cultural value that are less frequently debated between the disciplines in which sound students are often trained – philosophy, literature, art, critical theory, ethnomusicology, performance studies, cinema & media studies, history, sociology, cultural studies, music – and more hotly disputed within them, a "definitive" entry on aesthetics in sound studies will elude this chapter as surely as it eludes the field itself. Artist Leonard Koren's study of the word as it appears in recent discourse produces a dizzying range: in ordinary speech we use "aesthetics" to refer to superficiality, artistic style, taste, theory of beauty, decadence, a particular creative practice, a cognitive mode, or a language shared by arts communities (Koren 2010). Sound scholars employ most of these usages, from identifying unique signatures (art writers speak of "Cagean aesthetics") to emphasizing cognitive modes (musique concrète writers discuss the "aesthetics" of reduced listening).

If we follow Koren's lead and isolate the "natural meanings" of the term rather than relying on rigid definitions, then another thing to account for is what has been called an "aesthetic turn" in sound studies in recent years. Over the past decade, "aesthetics" has provided writers a point of reference with which they bring sound studies to bear on subjects ranging from "brostep"

culture to feminist electronic music, from practices of 1970s film sound design to discourses surrounding South Asian singing, from the role of improvisation in Black radical tradition to analysis of the responses of users to simulated soundscapes (D'Errico 2014; Rodgers 2010; Beck 2016; Moten 2003). Yet it is unclear just when aesthetics took on this prominence, or which scholarly figure we should associate with it. When it comes to opening up areas in sound studies, acoustic ecology has R. Murray Schafer, sound art has Alan Licht, Brandon LaBelle and Douglas Kahn, film sound has Rick Altman and Michel Chion, political economy has Jacques Attali, radio has Michele Hilmes, cultural history of technology has Jonathan Sterne, listening has Pauline Oliveros, and so on. Sound aesthetics, by contrast, seems to have no bright point of origin, let alone a set of positions recognized by all interlocutors with a stake in the question. In light of this, historically locating *the* aesthetic turn is less important than identifying what underlying logic governs the tendency of aesthetics to return in particular circumstances.

Indeed, aesthetics “returns” for all the authors I just mentioned, each of whom has made contributions to the topic, ranging from Attali’s dialectic of “music” and “noise” and Licht’s taxonomy of the sound arts to Sterne’s influential study of the cultural underpinnings of audible techniques associated with sound reproduction (Attali 1984; Licht 2009; Sterne 2004). Yet these, and others, are not quite taking on aesthetic disciplinarity directly. One candidate for that role is Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1944 “Culture Industry” essay, often used as a touchstone by writers in this area. In that essay, however, the term aesthetics arises less than a dozen times in 11,000 words, usually nested among characteristically Adornian negations – “impoverishment,” “barbarity,” “broken promise,” etc. This is no accident. For Horkheimer and Adorno, aesthetics had been reduced to “style,” which is little more than obedience to social order (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 128–31). Whatever you make of that assertion, to consider it a turn *toward* aesthetics is perverse since its burden is precisely to explore how any aesthetics worthy of the name has been obviated. As Miriam Hansen observed, in the culture industry critique, “The primacy of (industrial) technology prevents, or at least seriously restricts, the development of technique in the aesthetic sense, understood as ‘conscious free control over the aesthetic means’” (Hansen 2012: 215). It is a theory of the absence of creative practice in mass culture, a stillbirth. That is because “aesthetics” is used here mostly as the armature on which a challenge to interwar theory was mounted. The culture industry critique is not about sound aesthetics. Rather, it uses the example of sound aesthetics, and others, as a mediating phenomenon through which to rethink critical theory under capitalism at a particularly salient historical inflection point.

While the substance of Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay may move through our subject negatively, like a shadow, its parallel use of aesthetics in a “mediating” role is a canny way of thinking about why the subject tends to return in discourse every now and then. Rather than a take-it-or-leave-it intellectual terrain, the term “aesthetics” signposts disciplinary breaks, cracks, interventions, and disjunctures. That is surely the case in recent years. Shawn VanCour, for instance, has written of new interest in aesthetics among radio scholars, where the term is understood as “analysis of narrative structure and broadcast genres, methods of spatial and temporal representation, styles of vocal performance, and experiential qualities of radio listening” (VanCour 2013). VanCour argues that aesthetic questions have been raised since at least the 1930s by a variety of thinkers, some of whom were already associated with the term (gestalt theorist Rudolf Arnheim) and others whose work at first seems antithetical to it (social researchers Hadley Cantril and Paul Lazarsfeld). These roots of the current aesthetic turn, moreover, suggest that we renew our interest in the day-to-day work of radio creators, emphasizing “the processes through which particular sets of programming forms and production styles are consolidated, and connecting them to the larger modes of production.” In this way, aesthetics connects objects of study to historical approaches to encourage radio studies to reorient around production studies

methods that follow “below the line” media work. Aesthetics leads, marvellously, not toward the bloodless world of sonic forms, but instead toward the people behind them and the stories they tell about their material practices, alongside detailed observations of how those agendas coalesce into media products.

Other authors have considered aesthetics in order to expose contradictions among scholarly approaches that have broad ramifications for the field. In a tour-de-force essay in the first issue of the *Sound Studies* journal, for instance, Brian Kane has challenged what he calls the “onto-aesthetic” position of writers such as Christoph Cox and Greg Hainge, showing how their preference for sound art that seems to disclose the condition of sound media – to emphasize material support, following a sense of aesthetics linked with critic Clement Greenberg – is problematic (Kane 2015). While it is possible for art to call attention to its medium or sonic mode according to a set of criteria established by culturally contingent factors manifested as a symbolic system shared by critics, it is not also possible for one sonic art piece to be more sonic than another in an ontological sense. Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), Alvin Lucier’s *I am Sitting in a Room* (1969) and Susan Philipsz’s *Lowlands* (2010) all have different ways of aesthetically disclosing their use of recording media, and these may be found more or less meritorious according to different hierarchies of value, but none is more or less “sonic” than the others. Kane has a larger objective in his excursus, too; here he is using the relation between aesthetics and ontology to rebalance the level between “disciplines” that approach sounds as isolated objects, and auditory culture studies, which reveals how contingent value systems give sounds an “ontographic” status that never fully transcends context. Just as aesthetics is a framework for VanCour to make proposals about a production studies approach to historiography, for Kane a confrontation with the relation between ontology and aesthetics opens out to a methodological assertion about the constitutive role of auditory culture, thereby promoting an idea of sound culture studies as a “field” rather than a “discipline.”

The argument also represents an effort to protect ontology and aesthetics from one another, to introduce a sense of social contingency between the two that is often neglected by those who focus on “sound” over “listening” to the point of reifying one or the other. However, that argument is not designed to provide something very much on the mind of Cox, Hainge and others who critically study of sound art – the vestigial imperative to assess the merits of artwork. One thing that the onto-aesthetic regime is good at, after all, is fusing an older sense of aesthetics as an arbiter of value with an aesthetics focused on material supports of particular works. It may be that poor ontology can be derived from Greenberg’s argument for medium-specificity in which artistic “purity” is only a condition that results when the individual arts “have been hunted back to their mediums” where they are “isolated, concentrated, and defined,” but his model at least adduces a modern sensitivity to the traditional set of elitist criteria for assessing its excellence (Greenberg 1940: 305). Whatever else he wanted from art, as Seth Kim-Cohen has emphasized, “What Greenberg wanted was quality” (Kim-Cohen 2009: 5). And the problem of what to do with the aesthetics of quality, a definition that dominated Western thought for two centuries, presents challenges today.

Sound and modern thought

For many, sound aesthetics is a contradiction in terms because aesthetics suggests irreducibly visible experiences linked to the fine arts (Kristeller 1951). Like the notion of the fine arts itself, this idea has historical roots in philosophy, in which aesthetics seems elusive because it is a modifying subcategory crossing relatively organized fields – according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, aesthetics is (emphasis added) “a *kind* of object, a *kind* of judgment, a *kind* of attitude,

a *kind* of experience and a *kind* of value” – where the logic of kindedness frequently rests on the common denominator of visual experience (Shelley 2015).

It did not start out that way. Aesthetics (in its philosophical sense) was inaugurated by Alexander Baumgarten in the 18th century, who adopted this term to describe a field that would assess something that was predominantly textual, with poetry and eloquence. Philosophers who followed this early foray moved to natural phenomena for their preferred examples as the discourse took up the problem of taste. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Kant employed visual instances of sublime natural vistas (mountains, hurricanes, volcanoes) to elaborate his well-known theory, following the work of Edmund Burke. Kant also broadened the perimeter of aesthetic inquiry to incorporate painting, sculpture, and architecture. In his typology of the fine arts, the sound art of music is at the low end, beneath arts that “address themselves to the eye” (Kant 1987: 196–201). For Kant, visual arts involved the movement from determinate ideas into sensations, whereas sonic arts involved the movement from sensations into indeterminate ideas. Not only are they going the wrong way, they are going to the wrong place. Moreover, the unbounded nature of sound undermines the disinterestedness of the auditor’s pleasure, which is what vouchsafes the system that sets aesthetic judgment off from other kinds of judgments for Kant. Because the ear lacks an eyelid, music is like a perfume thrust upon us, which is something quite different from an image at which we might elect to gaze upon or turn away from in contemplation. The latter experience had a seriousness of purpose more significant to Kant and many who followed him.

In the 19th century a variety of thinkers would alter this hierarchy, beginning with the rise of a scholarly tradition in musical appreciation among Romantic critics such as Eduard Hanslick and others responsible for elevating Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms to their current status as masters. Meanwhile aesthetic philosophers began to express an emphatic preference for music and its effects. For Walter Pater, the obliteration of the distinction between form and content that characterized music was the condition to which all arts ought to aspire (Pater 1986: 86). For Schopenhauer, music lacked a mimetic relationship with the world; sound copies not the world of appearances, but the will that subtends it (Schopenhauer 1969: 255–70). Around the kernel of this insight, Nietzsche elaborated a system of aesthetic understanding in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which put sound squarely in a “Dionysian” role. Where images were dreamlike, individuated and Apollinian, sound was intoxicating, painful, primal, yet metaphysically comforting by conveying unindividuated oneness. A rebirth of this spirit was coming through German music (embodied by Wagner) fusing with the tragic hero: “Tragedy absorbs the highest ecstasies of music,” Nietzsche predicts. “So that it truly brings music, both among the Greeks and among us, to its perfection” (Nietzsche 1967: 125). Seeking a rebirth of a fantasized classical mythopoetics, Nietzsche provided an aesthetic language that bridged music and sound studies, as the concept of the Dionysian would remain a touchstone for such divergent authors as Attali and Schafer well into the 20th century.

Today, however, many writers look upon this tradition warily, either because it is inept in analysing the works with which they engage, or because it harbours sinister undertones. Salomé Voegelin has argued that Kant’s best-remembered aesthetic model (that of the sublime) cannot hold up to sound, which does not admit the sense of vast scale over which reason may triumph, since no sound is greater than the act of listening to it (Voegelin 2014: 117–119). Matt Sakakeeny has argued that in its development of the aesthetics of appreciation, the idea of music as “organised sound” (Edgard Varèse’s term) has been inextricably linked with imperialism. “Music” (aesthetic) and “sound” (nonaesthetic) were set apart from one another, recapitulating imperial racial stratifications that writers justly abhor. “Aesthetic distinctions of music and sound” such as those associated with Hanslick, he writes, “were entangled with western scientific standards that worked in tandem to either affirm or deny the humanity of others” (Sakakeeny 2015: 117).

Theorist Jean-Luc Nancy has raised a related point, noting that the 19th-century fascination with the “ineffable intimacy” of music that began with Schopenhauer was imbricated with the rise of European fascism, which perversely turned a musical sensibility into a mode of signification (Nancy 2007: 49–59).

One writer who has wrestled with the legacy of this tradition is Joanna Demers, in her work on electronic music. Acknowledging academic wariness about aesthetics, Demers points to the rhetoric of distinction touted by many listeners when it comes to institutional electroacoustic music, electronica, and sound art. Where academics tend to fall into “Kantian” or “Marxist” camps that focus (respectively) either on the objective autonomy of “beauty” or on the social forces subtending that sense of autonomy, experimentalists that Demers considers tend to hold both views at once. The field “clings to notions of aesthetic superiority and autonomy from market forces even as it regards aesthetic experience as inseparable from culture” (Demers 2010: 141). The heart of Demers’s argument is that music itself has changed, and aesthetics must change with it. “Whereas in art music listeners are expected to pay full attention to the music and ignore almost everything else around them, listening to electronic music, dance music, and popular forms is a composite of sensory experiences” that includes movement, distraction, and other experiences (Demers 2010: 152). To meet this sort of music, she proposes “aesthetic listening,” a mode that permits intermittent focus, external sensory stimuli and appreciation of non-musical sounds. In the past, “musical listening” focused on understanding slowly building formal codes of themes, harmonies, and melodies, but experimental electronic music does not request the intense focus that those codes require, as it tends to repeat small units over long periods of time. For this reason, Demers proposes a reinvention of the term aesthetics that rejects ineffable intimacy while also preserving a sense of aesthetics as the proper register for the pleasure afforded by the work.

Demers provides a picture of sound that is full of bodies, systems, and groupings, a hive of human activity that any aesthetic analysis ought to highlight rather than bracket. If anything is affecting aesthetics these days, it is surely new ideas about sensing sound. Perhaps the most vivid articulation comes from Nina Eidsheim. In her work on the voice and listening, Eidsheim displaces the notion of sound as an external object (a “figure of sound”) and replaces it with a sense of sound as an unfolding phenomenon passing through a series of interactions, what she calls an “intermaterial vibrational practice.” Each sounding that occurs is a unique, unrepeatably unfolding event happening to a body; therefore there is no external musical event to which we can address inquiry, as each body experiences unfolding in its own way, sometimes with radically different results. Eidsheim’s “organological” model also looks to music as a set of interacting relationships between human and nonhuman vibrating materials that transmit or transduce mechanical energies, aiming to move discussion of music “out of the orbit of the knowable and the potentially meaning making, to the material and always already relational” (Eidsheim 2015: 157). Together, Demers and Eidsheim propose new forms of music and of listening that vastly complicate what had once been a relatively straightforward intellectual habit of knowledge through appreciation. It is not that judgments of merit are impossible in the new framework. It is much worse than that – they are uninteresting. Writers working in this idiom, it is no surprise, require another sense of the “aesthetic” altogether.

Toward a media aesthetics

My first monograph explored the use of sonic technical details (distance, volume, sound effects, sound design) as well as formal narrative ones (structure, narration, genre) in a large body of classic American radio plays, drawing on both close listening, focusing on specific moments and

details, and distant listening, focusing on how formal features worked broadly across programs over time. To me it was intuitive to capture these attributes with “aesthetics,” which I put into my subtitle – *Imagination, Aesthetics and American Radio Drama*. Ever since, I have been asked to name the “greatest” radio plays in the period or to defend programs such as *Dimension X* or *The Strange Dr. Weirld* from the accusation of kitsch. The question leaves me torn. On the one hand, I feel eager to put forward the works of Norman Corwin, Wyllis Cooper, and Lucille Fletcher as meaningful art. On the other hand, I have an equally powerful impulse to reject the task of doing so. Kitsch is beside the point; what matters is how these plays reveal cultural sensibilities at the level of the senses, and what they say about the society that produced them. Political values and social expectations circulate through aesthetic choices in this medium as saliently as they do through the manifest subject matter of the plays.

I am not the only sound studies scholar torn between making the case for a sound art of canonical importance, while feeling ambivalent about doing so because the effort shortchanges a broader cultural historical endeavour. From the forgoing sections, it is clear that sound studies has a fraught relation with the legacy of aesthetic philosophy. Increasingly, many writers are beginning to circumnavigate that legacy, particularly those trained in cinema studies and English, where a series of movements, ranging from post-structuralism and media archaeology to New Aestheticism, have come together over the past thirty years to form what we might think of as a “media aesthetics” model in the humanities. Writers in this idiom focus on sensory encounters with sound works or the devices that bear them, and often write about the historical specificity of media as well as the proposal of a state of “mediality” conditioning aesthetic interactions. Writers fixate on particular devices or platforms – the phonograph, the tape recorder, music sampler, or MP3 – providing rich explorations of how we engage with sound and media devices by exhibiting sensitivity to stylistics and the unique capacities of media products, as well as exploring the interplay of affect and sensation that characterizes interactions with sound through one technology over another.

In abandoning the fine arts as such, what I am calling the “media aesthetics idiom” affords more lateral thinking than modes that rely on appreciation or stylistics, something proven repeatedly over the last decade. Alexander Weheliye’s work is an excellent example, tracing how sound technologies and Black popular music shaped one another since the 19th century. He writes, “The phonograph – both as an object and a mechanic ensemble – and many of the culturotechnological formations after it – intimate a prima facie crossroads from and through which to theorize the intricate codependency of blackness and the modern, since this apparatus, in its catechistic naming, technological capabilities, and cultural discourse directs our ears and eyes to the grounds of blackness’s materialization and figuring in the West” (Weheliye 2005: 45). For Weheliye, working in the idiom of aesthetics makes it possible to draw together the practices of beatmatching from DJ culture to give a fresh way of understanding W.E.B. Du Bois’s seminal *Souls of Black Folk*, as the sensibilities that surround one media practice daringly open up those of another. Aesthetics is also a touchstone in Jacob Smith’s recent *Eco-Sonic Media*, a book dedicated to excavating the forgotten history of ecologically green sound technologies. From the aesthetic links between trained roller canaries and discs of trained bird callers to a study of the “dark ecology” aesthetic of radio narratives, Smith shows the history of low-carbon media and provides an aesthetic road map about how to study it (Smith 2015). Scan recent edited collections in sound studies and you will find many examples of media aesthetics sensibilities – a seriousness about engaging at the level of sense-experience, theoretical work on technology, a sense of embeddedness in cultural history, disinterest in canonization of works or performances – to explore music technologies, games, creators, platforms, and devices (Gopinath and Stanyek 2014; Smith and Verma 2016; Théberge, Devine and Everett 2015).

Where does the media aesthetics paradigm come from? Historical texts in its deep roots include Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, Lessing's *Laocoon* and Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, all of which focus more closely on the nature of sense-experience than on what assessments we make of them. It would be difficult to see the approach growing if not for the rise of media theory since McLuhan, the return of phenomenology in the last decade, the rise and retreat of cultural studies, or the debates between determinism and social construction of the 1980s and 90s. One overlooked lineage I would like to highlight comes from recent work on critical theory (Buck-Morss 1992; Hansen 1999). In their engagements with Walter Benjamin's pivotal "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" essay, Susan Buck-Morss and Miriam Hansen have drawn out Benjamin's then-atypical model of aesthetics that focuses closely on how technology can give form to experience. In an age preoccupied with elitist taste, Benjamin turned back to the Greeks. For Aristotle, *aesthesis* had little to do with sublime vistas. Instead, it meant sense-perception as distinct from thought, ascribing to this type of feeling "an interdependent cognitive value to sensory ways of knowing" in the words of Caroline Frick (Aristotle 1991; Frick 2010: 91). This is the oldest meaning of the term, and according to Hansen, Benjamin reaches for it for a reason, circumnavigating the lineage of aesthetic thinking rooted in 18th-century philosophy:

The aesthetic can no longer be defended in terms of the idealist values of the few that make it complicit with the suffering of the many, nor even in terms of style and artistic technique; rather, the political crisis demands an understanding of the aesthetic that takes into account the social reception of *technology*, the effects of sensory alienation on the conditions of experience and agency.

(Hansen 1999: 312)

On Hansen's account, Benjamin believed that the senses cannot escape technology, the apparatus already having become part of subjectivity in the "second fall" of modernity, and puts his energies into how to reorganize its effects around collective innervation.

In a later essay "Why Media Aesthetics?," Hansen writes a series of questions that clarify the urgency that impelled Benjamin's thinking:

Benjamin recast the more orthodox Marxist question of false consciousness in terms of his un/timely theory of "anthropological materialism": How is consciousness, whether false or critical, produced and reproduced in the first place? What is the effect of industrial-capitalist technology on the organization of the human senses, and how does it affect the conditions of experience and agency, the ability to see connections and contradictions, remember the past, and imagine a (different) future? How can the alienation inflicted on the human sensorium in the defense against technologically induced shock (what Susan Buck-Morss has called *anaesthetics*), the splitting of experience into isolated sensations, affects, and sound bites, be undone or, rather, transformed? What kind of understanding—and practice—of art and aesthetics would be needed toward that goal?

(Hansen 2004: 393)

These are the questions that lead to what Hansen calls Benjamin's "gamble" on cinema as a utopian medium, one with the potential to ameliorate distortions of consciousness. It is telling that Hansen refers to the "sound bite" as something in need of transformation in her quote. In sound studies nowadays, there are many who look to sound media for such an opportunity,

seeking in the use of sonic devices, performances, and artifacts the chance for opening new ways of organizing sense–experience against dominant regimes of bits and bites. Perhaps the shift toward a media aesthetics paradigm is neither wholly felicitous nor likely to eclipse the aesthetics of value. But thanks to this way of thinking, aesthetics is a surprisingly hopeful area of sound studies nowadays, a mode of analysis that believes that transformation – big transformation – is possible according to writers who embrace aesthetics as integral to social mission, for those who, like Benjamin, are ready to gamble on sound as a way of feeling and knowing.

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