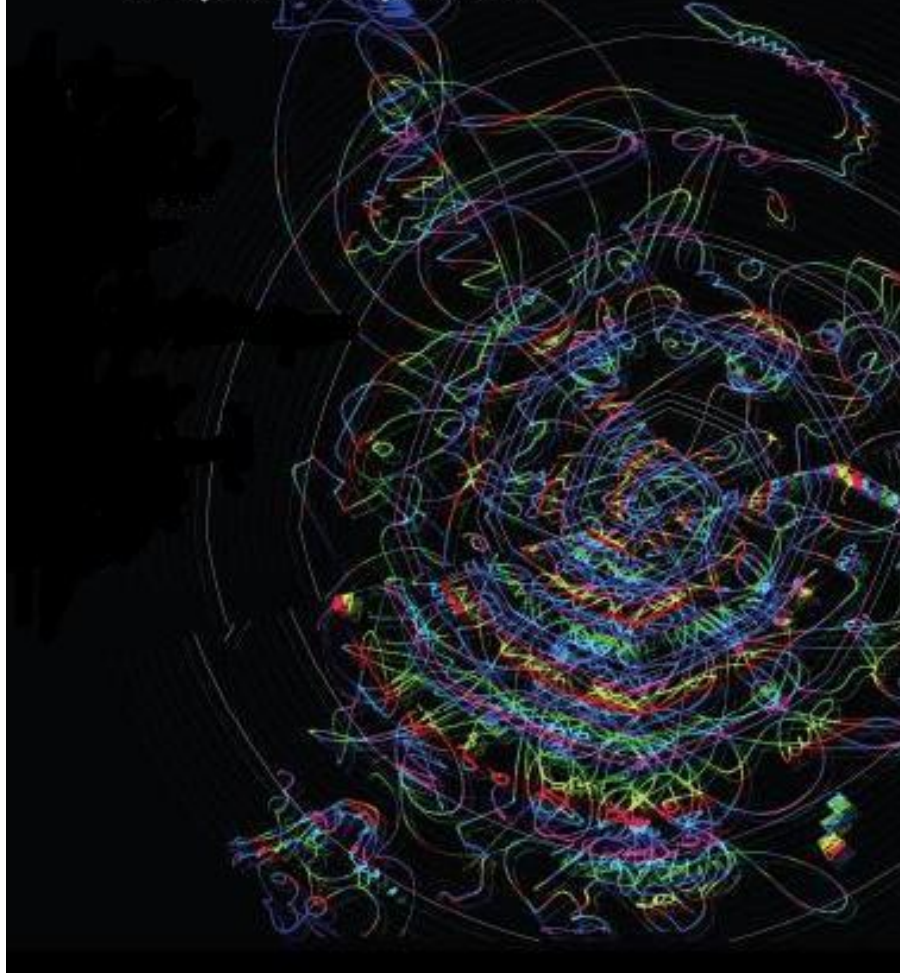


Listening In, Feeding Back

An Interdisciplinary Conference on Sound
A two-day event at Columbia University
with special concert performance



Conference Organizers:

David Novak, *Columbia University*
Ana Maria Ochoa, *Columbia University*

Co-sponsored by
Society of Fellows in the Humanities
Center for Ethnomusicology
Department of Music
Department of Anthropology
Donald Keene Center
Center for Jazz Studies

For more information, please visit the conference website:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/societyoffellows/listeningin.html>



13 and 14 February 2009

All talks to take place at 301 Philosophy Hall

Concert to take place at Miller Theater

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/societyoffellows/listeningin.htm>

Listening In, Feeding Back Schedule of Events

Friday, February 13

Panel 1:

Listening, Feedback, and Composition (3:00pm-5:30pm)

Moderator: John Szwed, *Columbia University*

- 1) "Musics Between Noise and Silence"
Otomo Yoshihide, *Independent Composer/Performer, Tokyo*
- 2) "Feedback in Experimental Music:
Folding Electricity, Space and Time Upon Itself"
James Fei, *Mills College*
- 3) "Bufo Variations"
Steven Feld, *University of New Mexico/University of Oslo*

Introductory Remarks (5:30pm-6:00pm)

David Novak, *Columbia University*

Ana Maria Ochoa, *Columbia University*

"Listening In, Feeding Back" Concert Performance

(8:00pm-10:00pm)

James Fei, Kato Hideki, Nakamura Toshimaru Trio

Alvin Lucier

Otomo Yoshihide

Saturday, February 14

Panel 2:

Sensing Sound, Text, and the Voice (9:00am-11:30am)

Moderator: Will Slauter, *Columbia University*

- 1) "Listening to 'The Burrow': Kafka and Acousmatic Sound"
Brian Kane, *Yale University*
- 2) "The 'Transparent Envelope':
Proust, Hahn, Listening, and the Voice"
Elizabeth Travassos, *University of Rio de Janeiro*
- 3) "Earlips: On Mondegreens and Mishearings"
Steven Connor, *Birkbeck College*

Panel 3:

Feedback and Public Circulation (11:45am-1:45pm)

Moderator: Ellen Gray, *Columbia University*

- 1) "Feedback, Experience, and Subjectivity in Japanoise"
David Novak, *Columbia University*
- 2) "Street Noise in the Egyptian Blogosphere"
Charles Hirschkind, *University of California, Berkeley*
- 3) "The Fedora, the Jogger, and the Watch:
Mimesis and Brokerage in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance"
Louise Meintjes, *Duke University*

Lunch Break (1:45pm-3:00pm)

Panel 4:

Technologies of Listening (3:00pm-5:00pm)

Moderator: Thomas Porcello, *Vassar College*

- 1) "Tuning in:
The Car Radio and the Rise of the Mobile Listening Booth"
Karin Bijsterveld, *Maastricht University*
 - 2) "Sound and the City:
Mimicry and Phonography in South India"
Amanda Weidman, *Bryn Mawr College*
 - 3) "Sound Reproduction after Noise:
Perceptual Coding and the Homology of the Fields, 1955-79"
Jonathan Sterne, *McGill University*
-

Abstracts

Karin Bijsterveld

“Tuning in: The Car Radio and the Rise of the Mobile Listening Booth”

Since the late 1990s, car manufacturers increasingly stress their cars’ interior tranquility. Chrysler advertises the Voyager for its “whispering stillness,” and a recent Toyota television spot features a professor leaving a noisy library to find peace and quiet in his car. Moreover, the rise of car audio sets has enabled drivers to create a highly personal sonic bubble that enhances their feelings of control while traveling (Bull 2003). Yet how could the car, once a noisy vehicle driven by an explosion engine, evolve into a mobile listening booth? I will answer this question by studying the introduction of car radio, notably Philips car radio, and the rise of interior sound design in Europe between the 1990s and now. The car radio’s use and meaning shifted from an artifact that had to bring people to the car—by attracting those outside the car, or by acting as a virtual companion—to an instrument that helped drivers to mentally block out their fellows on the road. At the same time, car sound construction shifted from reducing noise to creating target sounds for specific groups of drivers.

I will use an “archeology of the innovator’s anthropology” to understand how Philips practically and conceptually embedded the car radio in the European mobility culture. Second, I will focus on the symbolism of sound and changing listening practices to understand the shifting appropriations of car sounds by drivers and others. Underlining the “feedback” or interrelationship between listening to the car engine and to the car radio will be part of this storyline. Finally, I will use Gerhard Schulze’s theory on the event society to understand the increasing interest of car manufacturers in interior car sound design.

Steven Connor

“Earlips: On Mondegreens and Mishearings”

Hearing has the reputation of being more inclusive, less subject to limit, prejudice and partition than other sensory modalities, and therefore perhaps standing in a less dominative or appropriative relation to things. But the fact of mishearing shows that hearing does not in fact lie obediently open to the world. The purported plenum of sound has always in fact been sliced, stretched, strained, mal-appropriated, by an incorrigibly error-prone ear. This talk will be a reflection on the different forms which such ‘mondegreens’ or slips of the ear may take, in sound, music and speech. It will keep half an ear throughout on the virtuoso uses of paracousis in the ‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’ section of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, which lathers up an eddying, sudsy wash out of the ‘missed understandings’ of two hard-of-hearing Dublin laundresses: ‘Can’t hear with the waters of. The chittering waters of. Flittering bats, fieldmice bawk talk. Ho! Are you not gone ahome? What Thom Malone? Can’t hear with bawk of bats, all thim liffeying waters of.’

Steven Feld

“Bufo Variations”

The paper describes Bufo Variations, a recent CD recording-to-playback project in Accra, Ghana, featuring performance by multi-instrumentalist Nii Otoo Annan with environmental sound composition by Steven Feld. Ten times, with ten different sets of instruments, Annan recorded to playback of Feld’s six minute piece comprised of sounds of Bufo regularis, the common West African toad. Using the toads as a calculator, stimulus, and click track, Annan’s dubs perform the polyrhythmic math that generates hundreds of rhythm families and structures of variation. Is this what Goldberg Variations would sound like if Bach grew up in West Africa listening to toads and devoted himself to the mastery of polyrhythm? Listening to Annan’s Bufo Variations with or without the toads opens up a range of issues from indigenous mathematics and the musical intimation of infinity, to the place of improvisation in contemporary African experimental music.

Charles Hirschkind

“Street Noise in the Egyptian Blogosphere”

Focusing on the political blogosphere in Egypt, this paper explores how bloggers have pioneered new language forms and video styles in order to articulate an arena of political life they refer to as “the street,” conceived of as a space of state repression and political violence, as well as one of popular resistance and political activism. Through stylistic innovations in vernacular Arabic and film, Egyptian bloggers render visible and publicly speakable practices of state violence that other media outlets cannot easily disclose due to censorship, practices of harassment, and the threat of arrest and torture. In discussing the sensory epistemology informing these blogging practices, I give particular attention to the way traditions concerning the sonority of the Arabic language and the relation of written to spoken forms are exploited and reworked by some of Egypt’s most prominent political bloggers. I also examine how these language practices find a visual and aural analogy in the grainy cell-phone video recordings found on many of Egypt’s political blogs. This paper analyzes such practices in relation to emergent forms of political agency and contestation in contemporary Egypt.

Brian Kane

“Listening to ‘The Burrow’: Kafka and Acousmatic Sound”

“The Burrow” remains something of an exception in Kafka’s late work, for it seems to resist two contexts that are often deployed in Kafka exegesis: 1) Deconstructive readings tend to focus on issues of textuality, reading the “passages” of the burrow as a double entendre: the construction of the burrow becomes an allegory for the constructedness of the text. But these readings neglect the sonorous aspects of the tale, the “pfeifen” or “whistling” heard inside the burrow. 2) Sonorous readings tend to lump “The Burrow” in with “Josephine” and “The Investigations of a Dog.” Although sound is theorized, often as a destabilizing force, sonorous readings of the late work generally neglect the differences between the production and reception of sound, focusing exclusively on the former. In addition, they address sound in a wholesale manner, which cannot account for the specifically acousmatic setting of “The Burrow.” In this paper, I will attempt to read Kafka’s “Burrow” in light of acousmatic theory. At the same time, I will try to show how this theory can be enriched through close attention to Kafka’s tale. In particular, Kafka’s understanding of “acousmatic” sound reveals a complex overlapping of various axes: sensory (the eye and ear), genetic (cause and effect) and affective (certainty and anxiety).

Louise Meintjes

“The Fedora, the Jogger and the Watch: Mimesis and Brokerage in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance”

This paper focuses on moments of encounter between mediating figures and ngoma singer-dancers in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. What does a British cultural promoter ask of the singer-dancers? What do singer-dancers take and give? Ngoma dance has a particular history of having been made “musical” through cross-cultural staged performance and studio production. This history sets the possibilities for contemporary relationships with cultural brokers at the same time as it secures enduring aspects of ngoma aesthetics. The complexity of the transcultural dynamics of mutual listening in/feeding back that shape ngoma aesthetics prompts me to wonder about the adequacy of notions of cross-cultural collaboration and mediation in analyses of ngoma practice.

David Novak

“Feedback, Experience and Subjectivity in Japanoise”

This paper will describe an electronic music genre called Japanoise that was formed in the US-Japan exchange of recordings, beginning in the late 1980s through the millennium. Here I describe Japanoise as a production of feedback that incorporates experiences with the unevenness of cultural globalization, and sounds out the crucial role of media circulation in emplacing new musical subjectivities. Feedback is a powerful metaphor for circulatory experiences -- of musical authorship, listening, reproduction and representation – as well as noisy interruptions, shared distortions, and the personal affects of sensory overload. In Japanoise, feedback is also a key performance practice that generates a heightened mode of listening among its practitioners. Feedback links the separated publics of Japanoise within the amplified conditions of musical identification and subjectivity in recorded music and its lopsided transnational exchange.

Mark M. Smith

“Sound Teaching and the Contexts of Listening”

Scholarly histories of sound and listening are burgeoning. We now possess fine studies of sound in colonial America, the history of noise in the twentieth century, and acoustemology in the Middle Ages, among others; major historical journals, including the *Journal of American History* and the *Journal of Social History*, now take the history of sound seriously and have, in the past three years alone, published several articles on the topic. It is, arguably, a good time to be an historian of the senses generally, of sound, listening, and silence specifically. Despite our progress, historians of sound have failed to comment in any real detail on its importance to a central part of their professional lives: their teaching. For better or worse, our professional duties go beyond the production and dissemination of scholarly work; many of us also teach students and, in our capacity as public intellectuals, are also called upon by museums to suggest how to introduce sound to the general public. But how, precisely, should we teach the history of sound? This paper explores some of the “wrong” turns that appear to be creeping into such endeavors and suggests how best to teach the history of sound in a suitably, even radically, historicized fashion which eschews the temptation to encourage students and the general public to “consume” and “recover” the sounds of the past and, instead, underscores the importance of context in trying to understand the history of sound.

Jonathan Sterne

“Sound Reproduction After Noise: Perceptual Coding and the Homology of the Field, 1955-1979”

MP3s get their small file size through a process called “perceptual coding.” An MP3 encoder scans a sound file, estimates which parts of the recording will be inaudible to the ear, and disposes of those parts, thereby making the resulting MP3 file considerably smaller than the “same” song on a compact disc. In this talk, I will trace the origins of the ideas behind perceptual coding, and show how they traveled from psychoacoustics to communications and computer engineering in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the key insights of psycho-acousticians and engineers during this period carry strange and interesting parallels to key writings on music and sound in the humanistic tradition, most notably by Roland Barthes and Jacques Attali. The paper considers what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the homology of the fields” among psychoacoustics, engineering, aesthetics, architectural acoustics, and political economy in an attempt to explain why perceptual coding emerged when it did, given that the technology and the theory were available for at least a decade before the process was first realized.

Elizabeth Traverso

“The ‘Transparent Envelope’: Proust, Hahn, Listening and the Voice”

It is surprising to find out that in the academic field of music the voice is still considered a frontier. As has already been noted, there is a *décalage* between musicological approaches to tonal and temporal organization, to musical form and syntax, and to musical instruments – on the one hand –, and to vocal qualities and vocal styles – on the other. If there isn’t a “vocology” analogous to organology, what are the reasons for this imbalance? Why is the voice the last frontier of musicological rationalization?

This paper presents a contribution to the analysis of the places the voice has assumed in modern Western ideology. I will present some of the ideas on listening and voice put forward by Marcel Proust (through the voice of Marcel, the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu*). Among the many reasons for that choice is the fact that Marcel represents the ideal “native” in our quest for the native’s point of view: besides his well-known passion for music, his friends diagnosed in him an “auditory hyperesthesia.” Continuously describing other’s voices was one of his main *démarches* in mapping the social world and trying to gain access to the others’ selves in order to keep in tune with the monde. Describing degrees of transparency and opacity in the sounds of voices, Marcel, the hyperesthetic listener, shows us, among other things, that the musicality of voice ciphers a relationship between social actors. Proust was an intimate friend of the singer, composer and critic Reynaldo Hahn. Both of them, witnessing the rise of schizophonia and scientific musicology, are prolific commentators of singing, dramatic declamation and speech. What can we learn from Marcel Proust’s and Reynaldo Hahn’s vocology? How did they listen to and feed back each other?

Amanda Weidman

“Sound and the City: Mimicry and Phonography in South India”

From 1902-1903 until the mid-1930s, commercial sound recording in South India focused not only on music but also included a genre known as vikatam, a Tamil vocal/verbal art involving impersonation and vocal mimicry, featuring a single male artist enacting multiple roles. The subjects of these vikatams ranged from mimicry of sounds, like “Imitation of Birds” or “Imitation of a Passing Train,” to the dramatization of social interactions: for example, “Brahmin Going to a Dancing Girl’s House,” “Teaching a Dancing Girl Music,” “Madras Beggars,” “Country People Settling Fees with a Lawyer,” or “Street Scene in Madras.” By offering listeners of an emerging urban middle class the capacity to play and replay otherwise ephemeral everyday scenes of public city life, or of the private escapades of characters defined as “other,” vikatam records fixed those potentially assaulting voices as sounds to be contemplated. This paper will address three aspects of these recordings. First, examining several of the recordings in detail, it will explore how the colonial city of Madras was represented through sound. Second, it will address how these recorded performances, with their pretensions to realism, created an analogy between the mimicking capacity of the voice and the recording capacity of the phonograph. Third, it will discuss the kind of listening practices these recordings invited, as listeners were placed in the position of omniscient overhearers separated physically and socially from the voices on the records.

Otomo Yoshihide

“Music: Between Noise and Silence”

I will speak about my recent creative work of the past several years, addressing in particular my experiences with a new Japanese musical style called “onkyo,” which was created at a small Tokyo space called Off Site at the turn of the millennium. The extremely quiet performance developed at Off Site inspired me to think about listening, noise, and silence in new ways, and to reconsider the relationships between improvisation and composition. Musicians typically think more about time than space. But when I started to listen to silence and noise, I began to think about two different senses of space in music’s vibrations: the physicality of music occupying space, and the space of the situation between the listener and the performer.

Since my work at Off Site, I have been focused on the ways these relationships of sound and space reflect on social relationships of place, especially in the very special conditions of the “ensemble” for musical creation. In discussing my recent installation, entitled “Ensemble,” at YCAM in Yamaguchi, Japan, I describe how interactive ensembles are compositions of people brought together to connect with visitors in further plurality. “Ensembles” can be multidirectional contexts that reflect social situations of production; they can probe into both the possibilities and impossibilities inherent in the relations between person and person, person and object, and person and machine. I will speak about my participation and organization of several different ensembles and consider the variety of creative people in these groups, including amateur musicians, children’s groups, and physically challenged musicians.

Speaker Bios

Karin Bijsterveld is professor in the Technology & Society Studies Department, Maastricht University. She has recently published *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (MIT, 2008). With José van Dijck she has co-edited *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memory, and Cultural Practices* (Amsterdam UP, forthcoming).

Steven Connor is Director of the London Consortium Graduate Programme. He is a writer and broadcaster, who has written much about sound and hearing, including the book *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. A book entitled *Next to Nothing: An Historical Poetics of the Air* is forthcoming.

James Fei (b. Taipei, Taiwan) moved to the U.S. in 1992 to pursue a degree in electrical engineering. He has since been active as a composer, improviser and electronic musician. Fei teaches Sound Art and Intermedia at Mills College.

Steven Feld’s acoustemology and sonic ecology projects range from rainforest New Guinea (1975-2000), to European bells (2000-) to jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra, Ghana (since 2005). He teaches at the University of New Mexico and the University of Oslo.

Charles Hirschkind is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. His research interests concern religious practice, media technologies, and emergent forms of political community in the urban Middle East and Europe. He is the author of *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (2006), and co-editor (with David Scott) of *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (2005).

Brian Kane is an Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Yale University. His compositional and theoretical work addresses questions of listening and new music from an interdisciplinary perspective, working in the intersection of compositional practice, music theory, and philosophy. He has composed acoustic and electronic music for a variety of ensembles, both in America and Europe.

Kato Hideki is a Japanese-born composer/bassist/multi-instrumentalist, who lives in New York City. He is the co-founder of Death Ambient with Ikue Mori & Fred Frith. His other groups as a leader are: Green Zone with Otomo Yoshihide & Uemura Masahiro and OMNI with Nakamura Toshimaru & Akiyama Tetsuji. As a bassist, he has worked with Eyvind Kang, Zeena Parkins, Marc Ribot, Michael Schumacher, and John Zorn, among many others.

Alvin Lucier performs, lectures, and exhibits his sound installations extensively in the United States, Europe and Asia. He regularly contributes articles to books and periodicals. His own book, *Chambers*, written in collaboration with Douglas Simon, was published by the Wesleyan UP. In addition, several of his works are available on Cramps (Italy), Disques Moutaigne, Source, Mainstream, CBS Odyssey, Nonesuch, and Lovely Music Records.

Louise Meintjes is Associate Professor of Music and Cultural Anthropology at Duke University and author of *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Duke UP, 2003). She is working on an ethnography which situates Zulu ngoma song and dance in post-apartheid South Africa.

David Novak is a postdoctoral fellow at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University. His work considers the circulation of popular media and sound technologies in relation to cultural practice, especially in contemporary Japan and the U.S. He is the author of *Japanoise: Global Media Circulation and Experimental Music* (Duke UP, forthcoming), and is a performing musician and sound engineer.

Nakamura Toshimaru has been producing electronic music on the self-named "no-input mixing board," after long unhappy years with the electric guitar. The name describes the method of his music. "No" external sound source is connected to "inputs" of the "mixing board." Nakamura is mostly an improviser, occasionally a composer for dancers and an instrumentalist for compositions.

Ana Maria Ochoa came to Columbia University in the fall of 2003. She is currently editor of the Latin American branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, IASPM, and member of the editorial board of *TRANS* which is the Journal of the Iberian Society for Ethnomusicology (Sociedad Ibérica de Etnomusicología, SIBE).

Otomo Yoshihide was born in 1959 in Yokohama, Japan. He is a musician, composer, turntable and electronics player and guitarist. Otomo's current projects include Anode, Cathode, Filament, and Otomo Yoshihide's New Jazz Orchestra (ONJØ), among others. He is also known as an innovative composer of film soundtracks, and as a writer for his wide-ranging essays on music.

Mark M. Smith is Carolina Distinguished Professor of History at the University of South Carolina. He is author or editor of a dozen books, including *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (2001), *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History* (2007), and is General Editor of *Studies in Sensory History*, published by the University of Illinois Press.

Jonathan Sterne teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies and the History and Philosophy of Science Program at McGill University. He is author of *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke UP, 2003), and numerous articles on media, technologies and the politics of culture. His next book is tentatively entitled *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*.

Elizabeth Travassos is Associate Professor in Anthropology and Ethnomusicology at the University of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). She is the author of *Os mandarins milagrosos: arte e etnografia em Mário de Andrade e Béla Bartók* (1996) and *Modernismo e música brasileira* (1999).

Amanda Weidman is Professor of Anthropology at Bryn Mawr College. Her work explores the intersections of voice, performance, and technology in the context of classical and popular music in South India. She is the author of *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Duke UP, 2006), and is currently working on a historical and ethnographic project on female playback singers in the Tamil cinema industry. She is also a Karnatic violinist.