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Media Parasites, Specificity and the Unheard

Unhearing

Ever since Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877, sound has skipped across a series of technical supports: tin and wax cylinders, electromagnetic waves, shellac and vinyl discs, magnetic wire and tape, CD, MP3 and other digital formats. Sound reproduction technologies constitute a difference between original and copy, between direct and technically mediated audition. In fact, such dichotomies may be described as a result of reproduction itself. In his book *The Audible Past* Jonathan Sterne Sterne provides a close reading of Walter Benjamin's theory of technical reproduction and understands authenticity and originality as results of reproducibility.[1] Without the technical medium there would be no copy, but neither would there be the "distinctive form of originality" retroactively created by the process reproduction itself.

"The idea that sound reproduction technologies separated sounds from their sources turns out to have been an elaborate commercial and cultural project." he concludes.[2] As always, the recording industry capitalizes on the relation between original and copy promoting an ongoing perfection of fidelity and truthfulness: "The progress narrative is ultimately untenable: the transformation of practices and technologies stands in for a narrative of vanishing mediation, where sources and copies move ever closer together until they are identical."[3] Thus, fidelity can be described as a strive towards the ideal state of ultimate medium transparency. However, the listener's experience of technical mediation as either transparent or opaque may vary according to the historical context. Sterne argues that the concept of fidelity today is removed from the concept as it was understood at the turn of the twentieth century, he also emphasizes that "after 1878, every age has its own perfect fidelity."[4] According to Sterne, the ideal of a vanishing mediator "would continually be set in conflict with the reality that sound-reproduction technologies had their own sonic character".[5]

Paul DeMarinis described the sonic character of analogue recording media such as the phonographs record players as follows:

> [T]he sound of the recording apparatus itself… presented both a subtler set of problems and a new and paradoxical sort of territory of its own. The rumblings of the mechanism, too, register upon the wax, and the texture and grain of the wax has its own raspy voice, a voice that sang along with every diva and accompanied every chance sound passing by the microphone. Surface noise, channel noise, the song of long ago and far away, presented a gift in disguise to the recordist and artist alike. This noise is an audible indication that information is being sent. In effect this "noise-floor" is the sound of silence of any given channel.[6]

As they enter the focus of attention, these unintended medium-specific noises, which DeMarinis identifies as 'autobiographical', make the medium appear opaque. They are usually 'unheard' in the strive for medium transparency. Sterne speaks of *audile techniques*, with which listeners construct an auditory field with interior and exterior sounds - "a way of abstracting some reproduced sounds (such as voices or music) as worthy of attention or "interior," and others (such as static or surface noise) as "exterior".[7] Fidelity entails a constant battle between those noises and unwanted artefacts. Noise is to be suppressed and excluded from the channel with the idea that the latter ultimately disappears into immediacy.

Media Parasites

Michel Serres' theory of the "parasitic" nature of media helps to further understand the relationality of signal and noise.[8] It takes the basic scheme of Claude Shannon's information theory as a point of departure, where a message is transmitted from a sender to a receiver:

> Given: two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate, it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed. It is only mediation.[9]

As Serres emphasizes, communication requires the presence of a channel to mediate between two different stations and noise is recognized as an inevitable precondition of transmission. The message has to move through a middle, which appears not only as a conduit, but as a transmitter, transformer or "transducer", as Sterne calls it, which irreversibly modifies the message.[10] Serres' philosophy of communication precisely focusses on the middles, medians and transformative in-between spaces.

In French, *parasite* can mean static/white noise in a circuit, an uninvited guest, or an organism that lives off its host. Serres argues that they all have the same basic function in a system. His primary argument is that the relationship between a parasite and its host serves as a useful model for all forms of social, cultural and technological mediation. Based on Shannon's general schema of communication systems, noise - the 'third term' of communication – is always present in the channel.[11] It is taken as a constitutive element of mediation itself: "There are channels and thus there must be noise."[12] Therefore, parasites or intruders are anything but exceptional: "There are always interceptors who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world."[13]

The Greek root of parasite: para (next to), sitos (grain) means "next to a grain", "next to a nourishing host". Not unlike biological and social parasites, the informational parasite occupies a channel and emerges by taking from it. Instead of seeing communication as a two-way relation between sender and receiver, Serres argues that every channel also contains a third parasitic relation, which constantly threatens to disrupt and irritate the communicative relation – the parasite acts on the sender-receiver relation. Serres adds, however, that such disruptions are potentially productive as they add to the complexity of the relationship: "Theorem: noise gives rise to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain. This parasite interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again."[14] It is important to understand that the parasite is not in itself productive, it rather forces its host to react and adapt. In this way are media circuits transformed into dynamic systems by parasitic contamination. Parasites allow the intrusion of unpredictable behavior. Thus, noise becomes an integral part of the ecology of communication.[15]

> [T]he parasites are always there, even in the absence of a signal. Only the noticeable signal cancels them. They are inevitable, like white noise. White noise [bruit de fond] is the heart [fond] of being; parasitism is the heart of relation. White noise is the base - 'white space,' as it were; the parasite is the base of the canal traced on this space.[16]

The parasite's relation to a communication system is constitutional, "we know of no system that functions perfectly, that is to say, without losses, flights, wear and tear, errors, accidents, opacity".[17] An aesthetics of opacity thus addresses the parasitic losses of the medium in use.

Expanded Phonographs

Christian Marclay's *Record Without A Cover* from 1885 is an example for foregrounding the performative aspects of medium opacity (see Fig. 01, 02). *Record Without a Cover* was sold without any protective package and furthermore one of the record's sides is printed with the instruction "do not store in a protective package". The other playable side of the album contains one single and untitled track. The beginning section of this track contains recorded scratches of other vinyl records, which slowly grow louder before leading into jazz drum samples and fragments of recorded music — *Caravan* by Duke Ellington is a clearly recognizable sample amongst various other recorded, looped, scratched and manipulated sound snippets from electroacoustic and orchestral recordings.

By issuing the record without a cover and instructing the buyer to *not* protect the vinyl, Marclay virtually guarantees that the record will quickly accumulate marks and scratches caused by its inevitable handling.

Fig. 01: Christian Marclay — *Record Without a Cover* (1985). Original black vinyl record released on Recycled Records in 1985, with instructions printed onto the record.

Fig. 02: Christian Marclay — *Record Without a Cover* (1985). 12-inch picture disc on white vinyl reissued on Locus Solus (Japan 1999), with the instructions printed onto the record.

Whereas the convention demands to protect the record's "sensitive" surface as much as possible, Marclay's records explicitly requests the opposite:

> It was a record that threatened everything you were taught about records and how to handle them. It even threatened your needle. You couldn't be a passive listener, you had to be involved. It was intriguing, unstable. It was a record about records.[18]

Not only will the surface of the vinyl have accumulated different scratches every time it is played back, but its copies also turn into unique artefacts. What began as mass-produced and virtually identical objects would slowly diverge from one another, becoming singular, ever-changing works. "Recorded sound is dead sound, in the sense that it's not 'live' anymore." As Marclay himself says:

> *Record Without A Cover* was about allowing the medium to come through, making a record that was not a document of a performance but a record that could change with time, and would be different from one copy to the next.[19]

Obviously, this is a process that no record can escape, but we have developed perceptual techniques in order to differentiate between "undesired" aural artefacts and meaningful sound. In contrast, Marclay conceptually highlights the record's deterioration by drawing attention to it: "You can't ignore that you are listening to a recording."[20] And by printing the aforementioned set of instructions he turns handling and playback into a performance.

Another example conceived in the same year is Roger Miller's *POP Record / Evolving*. Side A features a recording he had made in 1985 for the project that consists entirely of noises and scratches sourced from the between-track "silence" gaps of pop records of artists ranging from James Brown and Billy Holiday to Xenakis to Black Sabbath to an unidentified sci-fi record from Japan (see Fig. 03).[21] Each time the vinyl disc is played, the recorded noises and scratches are accompanied by sounds produced by the needle encountering new actual scratches on the record's surface — the record is thus constantly evolving and regenerating itself. On the surface of the B side of this record, Miller used a screwdriver to inscribe the first three and the last measures from the fugue of *Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G minor BWV 861* (see Fig. 04) directly into the vinyl — in lieu of conventional record grooves. On the engraved surface, Miller also left his fingerprints, which were consequently copied and will eventually encounter new fingerprints resulting from the handling of the record.

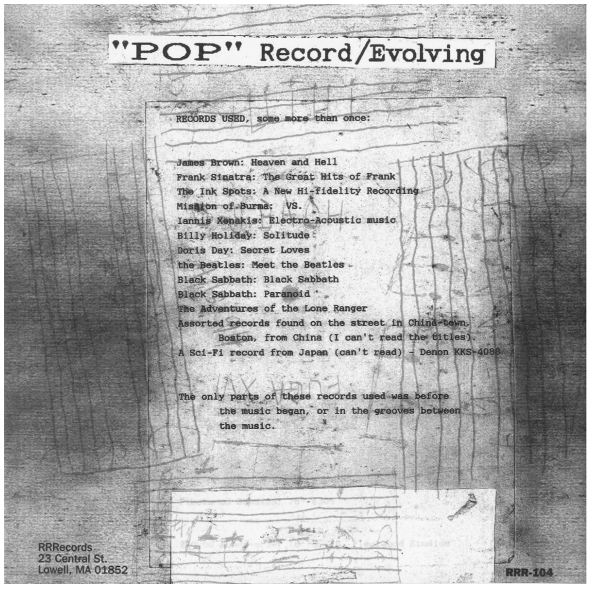


Fig. 03: Roger Miller — *POP Record / Evolving* (1985). Back cover.

Fig. 04: Roger Miller — *POP Record / Evolving* (1985), Side B.

Both Marclay and Miller's records strategically blur the difference between artefacts of mediation and their pre-recorded doubles. Intended and non-intended scratches will eventually coexist as a palimpsest creating an ambiguous soundtrack: "There is confusion between what's intentionally recorded and what is damage on the surface of the disc."[22] It is precisely the ambiguity that makes their records stand out. Using techniques of remediation (the re-recording of the records' scratches and noises), they provoke a shift in perspective back and forth between opacity and transparency, the intended and the unintended, the listened for and the listened away from, signal and noise.

Marclays and Millers works are "records about records" as they reflect on sonic events and listening experiences unheard of before the advent of sound recording techniques. These unheard-of sounds, which would not existit without recording media, have been described by Paul DeMarinis as the „shadow of technology":

> [T]hese sounds would not exist if the recording had not been made. I call this the shadow of the technology, and it is this shadow world that I examine in The Edison Effect.[23]

DeMarinis discussed surface noise in particular with reference to a series of works he developed between 1989 and 1996 that comprise *The Edison Effect*. In this series, phonographic cylinders, 78 rpm records and gelatin dichromate holograms of such records are scanned with laser beams and photoelectric sensors.[24] With *The Edison Effect* DeMarinis aims to extend the notion of touch associated with the needle that follows the groove of a record and thus produces a sound:

> The central image in The Edison Effect is of the fusion, or conflation of looking and listening. The beam of a laser for me is much like the visual ray that was, in ancient times, believed to emit from the eye permitting the viewer to see by touching with his eyes.[25]

DeMarinis also associates narratives derived from the recorded music (e.g. Johann Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz - An der schönen blauen Donau, Walzer, op. 314*) with particular technical manipulations. In the case of *Al and Mary Do the Waltz* (1989), a laser beam scans an Edison wax cylinder with the *Blue Danube Waltz* spinning on a paint roller (Fig. 05). The beam traverses a fishbowl containing two live goldfish (Fig. 06) that occasionally interrupt the laser and "produce uncomposed musical pauses".[26]

Fig. 05: Components for Paul DeMarinis' *Al and Mary Do the Waltz* (1989): custom-made phonography player, wax cylinder, laser and fishbowl containing two live goldfish. © Paul DeMarinis.

In The Edison Effect, Paul DeMarinis reconfigures the phonograph and alters the constraints we usually associate with this apparatus. The record is expanded as a medium: "The arrangement of optics, motors and light allow random access to the grooves of the record, permitting distortion, dis-arrangement and de-composition of the musical material."[27] Within this framework of media-archaeological reconfigurations, each work of this series reflects different dis-arrangements and decompositions afforded by early sound inscription and playback technologies.

Fig. 06: Detail from Paul DeMarinis' installation *Al and Mary Do the Waltz* (1989). © Paul DeMarinis

Yet different reconfigurations of audio recording technology have been carried out by artists in the digital domain. Drawing on Matthew Kirschenbaum's differentiation between *forensic* and *formal materiality*, it is important to acknowledge that digital technologies have their hardware-based materialities, but algorithms may aswell just model formal structures and interfaces. Forensic materiality refers to the level of chips, circuits and hard disks and the notion „that not two things in the physical world are ever exactly alike".[28] Formal materiality, on the other hand, refers to the symbolic level of digital algorithmic objects. The user experiences this materiality to the extent that the digital objects bring their own constraints and possibilities with them.

Jens Brand's use of data sonification can be regarded as an exemplary artistic approach in this respect. His *Global Player* (usually stylized as *G-Player)* from 2004 is a device based on data sonification algorithms. It functions like a record player, but instead of vinyl LPs it scans the surface of the Earth using a virtual needle. The *G-Player* is able to locate the positions of officially known satellites. Its sound is generated in real time following satellite orbits matched against a topographical database of the Earth.[29]

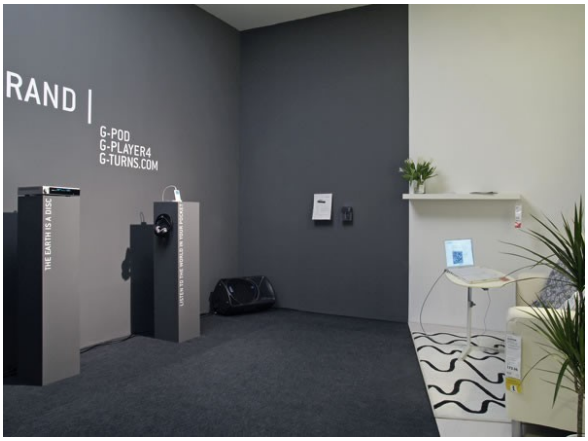
Following the formal regiment of a phonographic needle, the satellite scans the surface of the Earth, and translates the topography into sound as if it were following the grooves of a vinyl LP. Using digital modelling, the phonographic structure is scaled up to cosmic dimensions. The display on Brand's *G-Player* shows the name and type of the selected satellite (military, weather or telecommunication, etc.), its altitude and the coordinates of its orbit on Earth (longitude and latitude).

Fig. 07: Jens Brand — *G-Player* (2004). User interface for version 4 of the device. Image © Oliver Schwarz.

Satellites probe the surface of the Earth in the same way a needle would follow the groove of a record. But in contrast to a phonographic trace, the Earth's surface has never been encoded and therefore Brand's sonification device receives a "signal" that has never been sent. It is the subtext of this work that alters the sonic experience of meaningless noise. It is not the sound itself, but Brand's meticulous artistic framing which makes us believe that we are "listening to the earth".

Inspired by Apple's branding of consumer electronics, Brand staged the launch of his "product" dressed as a salesman in a slick, corporate-looking trade fair booth equipped with IKEA furniture (still bearing their price tags) and indoor plants (Fig. 7). Brand's work draws an ironic caricature of present-day technical supports and their promises of usability and usefulness.

Fig. 08: Installation view of Jens Brand's *G-Player* (2004) as presented at SOUND//BYTES, Edith Russ Site for Media Art in Oldenburg (Germany) in 2007. Image © Franz Wamhof.



Everything about the G-Player carries the imprint of an industrially produced commodity, thus commenting on technological capitalism and fashionable commodified blackboxing. Brand's project ironically mimics corporate identities and state-of-the-art technology and at the same time circulates a more than outmoded myth: *The earth is a disc*.

Revisiting Medium-Specificity

As discussed above medium-specific practices in sound can be understood as a critical interrogation of audio media itself. Far from being regarded simply as an extra-musical tool for the preservation of music, technical media are understood as catalysts for aesthetic thinking and innovation. Medium specificity in music and sound art thus insists on the fact that the materiality of recording and playback media continues to shape artistic practice. Since the mid-2000s, analyses in the fields of musicology and sound studies have been published internationally, covering the history of media-musical practices ranging from Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch's gramophone-specific music (1930) to the strips of magnetic tape in Nam June Paik's *Random Access* (1963) to the glitching and skipping compact discs of Yasuano Tone (1984) or Oval (1993) and eventually to Kim Cascone's "'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music" (2000).[30] This said, just how far the notion of medium specificity is implicitly based on essentialist and normative ideas presupposing that media possess fixed, essential properties has hardly been addressed in sonic theory. These debates originate primarily from visual arts discourse, they can nevertheless enrich the theorizing of medium-specific practice in sound.

Arguments around the idea of medium specificity can be traced back — avant la lettre — to 18th-century debates within Western art theories. Some theorists in France, England and Germany saw mimesis as the common principle of all arts — Charles Batteux's 1746 treatise *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle* may serve as an example. Others were beginning to express doubts as to the validity of this concept. In his theoretical pamphlet *Laocoon: An essay on the limits of painting and poetry* (1898), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argued not only against the premise that there exists a single principle in art but also for categorical distinctions between synchronous modes of articulati-

on (plastic arts, painting) and diachronous modes (literature, theatre, music).

Lessing's plea for a distinction between art forms was taken up by Clement Greenberg in his essays "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"[31] and "Towards a Newer Laocoon"[32]. The influential theory of Greenbergian modernism coined the concept of medium specificity. While Lessing's terminology was centred around the notion of art forms, Greenberg in 1960 famously introduced the idea of a unique *medium* possessed by each art form.

> Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more certain.
> It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.[33]

For Greenberg, a source of æsthetic value in terms of a guarantee of standards was to be found in the substrate of an artistic medium and in certain conditions derived from it — in painting: flatness and opticality.[34] Greenberg's concept of medium specificity demands that these allegedly essential properties be exemplified in art. But, as one of Greenberg's critic Noël Carroll pointed out, "painting was not invented to celebrate flatness" and, further, "the idea of the artist discovering new ways of using the medium would make no sense if the medium were designed for a single, fixed purpose".[35] Also, the medium essentialist fails to acknowledge intermediality in the arts, i.e. the media interactions, combinatorial practices, remediations and transformations already prevalent in the artworks of Greenberg's contemporaries (notably John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Fluxus — artists and practices with which he was, of course, quite familiar), not to mention its presence in today's ubiquitous digital intermedia formats.

It does not come as a surprise that Greenberg's normative pull on what is suitable to do with a medium has been widely criticized, because it entails a narrow fixation of essentials. Greenbergian theory, says Michael Fried, implies the

> notion that modernism in the arts involved a process of reduction […] until in the end one arrived at a kind of timeless, irreducible core (in painting, flatness and the delimitation of flatness). The implication of this account was that such a core had been the essence of painting all along, a view that seemed to me ahistorical.[36]

Rosalind Krauss also distanced herself from Greenberg's position by defining media as changeable and differing structures, arguing that medium specificity is neither to be found in a rigid set of essential features nor can it ever be completed or exhausted. Instead, she regards medium specificity as a set of rules and conventions derived from (but irreducible to) the given physical materiality of a medium:

> The specificity of mediums, even modernist ones, must be understood as differential, self-differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support.[37]

Krauss' critique was highly influential in opposing the fixity of Greenberg's notion of the medium.[38] She challenged medium essentialism with her non-reductive account and with what she defined as *differential* specificity. Krauss also introduced the idea of a *technical support* „as a way of warding off the unwanted positivism of the term 'medium'"[39] and as a way of problematizing the loaded concept that „a medium is purportedly made specific by being reduced to nothing but ist manifest physical properties".[40] For Krauss, technical media are always stratified and layered, composite and aggregative. Accordingly, the term technical support „welcomes the layered mechanisms of new technologies that make a simple, unitary identi cation of

the work's physical support impossible."[41] Moreover, technical supports remain open to and even encourage artistic repurposing and reconfiguation.[42]

This claim stands in stark contrast to Greenberg's essentialist assertion that a medium's material properties dictate its proper artistic usage. In Krauss' account medium-specific practice „wrest[s] from the support a new set of aesthetic conventions to which their works can then reflexively gesture, should they want to join those works to the canon of modernism."[43] As Erika Balsom pointed out, that „[w]hat is most at stake for Krauss in this return to the medium is the generation of recursive structures […]."[44] Balsom explains that Krauss' notion of recursivity aims at reconstituting autonomy by sealing off the work and its technical support from mass-cultural commodification. While Balsom acknowledges that differential specificity and recursive interrogation are no longer aimed at the transparent, ahistorical self-identity once accorded to modernist media, she still regards medium specificity as a means to „fullfill what Krauss sees as the desired function – namely, a commitment to an enduring modernism."[45] In a similar reading of Krauss' conception, Ina Blom Blom puts emphasis on the distinction between modernistic „self-reference" and „recursivity":

> Where the concept of self-reference is easily misread as solipsism, the concept of recursion places emphasis on the fact that reflexive attention to the properties of an artistic medium does not reproduce this medium as self-identical, but as a different instantiation in each specific case.[46]

Unlike Balsom though, Blom argues for an updating of the modernist preoccupation with medium specificity in order to resist the erasure of critical differences in present-day information economies.

Unfortunately, Krauss did not provide further clarification on her concept of the relation between the layering of conventions and the physicality of technical supports. At the same time however, she put this relation at the center of medium specificity's recursive structure, „for the nature of a recursive structure is that it must be able, at least in part, to specify itself."[47] The emphasis Krauss puts on the relationality of conventions and technical supports is comparable to more recent recent discussions on *technological affordance* in media ecology, media anthropology and communication studies.[48]

Technological Affordance

Technological affordance addresses the complex entanglement of media-technical environments and human agents. The term "affordance" was originally coined by ecological psychologist James Gibson in order to explain how agents (human or otherwise) take action based on perceptions of the utility of components of their environment.[49]

For Gibson, affordances refer to action possibilities or potentials available in an object or environment. These potentials are relative to the action capabilities of an agent. Pertinent examples in natural environments are caves, which afford shelter, or technical artefacts such as doorknobs, which afford the opening of doors. However, an affordance may exist independently from the agent actualizing or even recognizing it. At the same time, "any affordance is only actualized when it is acted upon. […] Affordances thus exist independently of human intention but can nevertheless not materialize without them."[50] According to Gibson, affordances are actionable properties between the world and an actor that have, in certain cases, become conventional; in other cases they remain to be discovered. Gibson's line of thought led to the conclusion that affordances should be conceived as relational dynamic entities embedded in the interactions of agents with objects and envoronments. This is why the concept of technological affordance can be of intertest in theorizing medium specificity — it offers an approach beyond essentialist reduction and fixation. Technological affordances emerge through interaction (experimentation, adaption) with technical environments. In this view, the materiality of technical objects influences but does not determine schemes of action. The affordance perspective suggests that neither techno-determinism nor social constructivism is sufficient to explain the multifaceted use of technical objects.[51] Thus, in line with Krauss' notion of differential specificity, an affordance perspective might offer a broader framework for approaching medium-specific practices in the sonic arts than modernist æsthetic reductionism.

Conclusion

The artistic works described here have shown different ways of reflecting medium specificities of phonography. However, it is not merely the features tied to the objects in use, which are reflected in the works, but rather their affordances: the relational link between technical object, artistic use and outcome. Christian Marclay and Roger Miller use remediation strategies in order to produce a record about records. Paul DeMarinis uses optical extensions for the scanning of phonograph records inspired by the ancient concept of tactile vision, resulting in a performative intervention of animal agents and uncomposed musical events. Jens Brand uses digital data sonification resulting in a quasi-phonographic playback of the earth's surface.

Each of these works may be considered to be medium-specific, but not in the sense that they reveal or display certain properties of their technical support. In fact, media purism would be misguided in view of the inherent diversity encountered in extended media assemblages. A reductionist viewpoint would not be able to address the complexity of artistic re-configurations of media and would necessitate ignoring the reflexive layers that medium-specific practices may introduce. Instead, a differential and relational perspective might help to further shape and outline a concept of medium specificity that is not only historically informed but also aware of its theoretical shortcomings.

Endnotes

1. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 220.
2. Ibid., p. 25.
3. Ibid., p. 222.
4. Ibid., also see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 98-99. Chion argues, that the notion of high fidelity (commercial product, reality effect) should not be confused with high definition (quantifiable technical property, hyperreal effect), which again has little to do with the experience of "direct audition".
5. Ibid., p. 225.
6. Paul DeMarinis, Artist talk delivered at ICAD 1997. The Fourth International Conference on Auditory Display (Palo Alto CA, USA, 3 November 1997). Available at http://pauldemarinis.org/texts/OldWellWritings/ICAD1997.docx [Accessed 20 January 2020]
7. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past,* p. 25. Sterne explains the term audile technique as follows: "As a noun, it refers to a person in whom 'auditory images' are predominant over tactile and visual stimuli. An audile is a person in whom auditory knowing is privileged over knowing through sight. As an adverb or adjective, it means 'of, pertaining to, or received through the auditory nerves' or 'of or pertaining to' the noun sense of audile", p. 96.
8. For more contemporary readings of Serres' book in relation to avantgarde practices in sound and media art see MarieThompson *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2017) and Arndt Niebisch, *Media Parasites in the Early Avant-Garde: On the Abuse of Technology and Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012).
9. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*. Lawrence Schehr, trans. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 79.
10. Serres points out: "You don't need much experience to know that goods do not always arrive so easily at their destination. There are always intercepters who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world." Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 11.
11. It is important to note here, that Shannon does not distinguish between meaning and information. What is transmitted is not the message, but simply a signal, from which the message has to be reconstructed or decoded on the side of the receiver.
12. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 79.
13. Ibid., p. 11.
14. Ibid.
15. See Arndt Niebisch, *Media Parasites*, p. 5.
16. As seen from a Kittlerian perspective: "Articulateness becomes a second-order exception in a spectrum of noise." Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone. Film. Typewriter, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young , Michael Wutz, trans.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 23.
17. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, pp. 12–13.
18. Christian Marclay and Yasunao Tone, "Record, CD, Analogue, Digital." In *Audio Culture: Readings in modern music*. Edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York NY / London: Continuum, 2004), p. 346.
19. Rob Young, "Don't Sleeve Me This Way." Interview with Christian Marclay, *The Guardian*, 14 February 2005. http://theguardian.com/music/2005/feb/14/popandrock [Accessed 20 January 2020]
20. Michael Snow and Christian Marclay, "Michael Snow and Christian Marclay: A Conversation." In *Replay Marclay*. Edited by Jean-Pierre Criqui. Paris: JRP/Ringier, 2007, pp. 126–136. 129.
21. In December 1985 one single copy was issued as Fun World Product 003. The disc was re-released — with the Side B etching — in December 1998 by RRRecords (RRR-104).
22. Michael Snow and Christian Marclay, "Michael Snow and Christian Marclay: A Conversation", p. 129.
23. Shun-ichi Shiba [No title]. Interview with Paul DeMarinis. ICC Journal (1997). English manuscript available at http://pauldemarinis.org/texts/OldWellWritings/InterviewbyShunichShiba.docx [Accessed 20 January 2020], p. 4.
24. https://vimeo.com/149040741 [Accessed 20 January 2020]
25. Shun-ichi Shiba [No title]. Interview with Paul DeMarinis, p.4.
26. Paul DeMarinis cited in Ingrid Beirer, Carsten Seiffarth and Sabine Himmelsbach (Eds.). *Paul DeMarinis: Buried in noise,* (Heidelberg/Berlin: Kehrer Verlag, 2010), p.129.
27. Ibid., p. 127.
28. Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination,* (Cambridge, London MIT Press, 2008), p. 10.
29. For a discussion of Brands work with regard to sonic cartographies, also see Wilm Thoben's contribution to another issue of this journal. Wilm Thoben, "Das Spiel mit der Erde. Klangkartographische Aspekte in den Arbeiten von Jens Brand", in: kunsttexte.de/auditive_perspektiven, Nr. 2, 2013 (5 pages), https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/7539/thoben.pdf [Accessed 20 January 2020].
30. See Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How technology has changed music,* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press [2004], revised edition 2010) and Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The sound of malfunction,* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009).
31. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch,In *Art and Culture. Critical Essays,* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3–21.
32. Greenberg, Clement, "Towards a Newer Laocoon." *Partisan Review* 7 (July–August 1940), pp. 296–310.
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Abstract

The auditory experience of technical mediation is related to certain perceptual techniques we have developed in order to differentiate between meaningful sound and undesired parasitic artefacts. The act of 'unhearing' undesired sound is motivated by ideologies of transparency and fidelity. 'Unhearing' the unwanted results from what Jonathan Sterne identified as a continuous conflict between the idea of technology as a vanishing mediator and the reality that audio media have their own sonic character. In contrast, medium-specific practices in sound try to address the sonic character of their medium. Medium specificity, however, is a concept that has a history. This article reviews its theoretical implications with roots in visual arts discourse in order to develop a perspective on medium-specific practice in sound. Drawing on the concept of technological affordance the author discusses works by Christian Marclay, Roger Miller, Paul DeMarinis and Jens Brand who make use of sound (re)production technologies as an artistic medium.

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