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Rethinking Sound - an ontological perspective

Introduction

In scientific and journalistic texts on music the issue of sound is always present. In German language the term "sound" emerged in the 1970s first as a synonym for timbre, later on other elements got included such as musical genres, artists, compositional aspects and technical means of production. This emergence was a reaction to the increasingly electrified styles in which sound became the primary carrier of meaning. This poster suggests a distinction between "unamplified tone" and a concept of electrified and recorded "sound" that is useful for the analysis of popular music, its practices, perception and aesthetics.

Definition

The German word "Klang" means the unamplified tone of an instrument like an acoustic guitar in an acoustic environment. There is no technological transformation of the instrumental sound or its musical staging in an audio recording.

Sound, in contrast, could be defined as a technological, mediated, culturalized and every musical phenomenon comprising sonic material. Sound is technologically transformed by amplification or recording. An acoustic guitar in a natural room isn't considered as sound, but it is as soon as it is recorded and produced, an act of cultural shaping of sound. The same applies to electric instruments like the electric guitar: as it already is amplified and the natural tone transformed, you can speak of an electric guitar sound with all its cultural connotations.

Relevance

Sound adds several qualities to musical aesthetics and effects and to cultural and communicative meanings. It is an analytic means to understanding popular music combining musical, cultural, historical, ideological and ethnographical aspects that are neglected in a purely musicological or cultural studies perspective. It can bridge the methodological gap as it draws upon the musical structure, the contexts of production and reception and the communicative intentions and makes those perceivable on the musical surface. Sound mediates, constitutes and reflects lifestyle or a specific subcultural attitude, it can express political critique, identification, and it shapes the emotional and aesthetic perception of music.

The transformation of amplification and recording modifies the original source. Every production practice meaningfully shapes the sound. Whether the result is intentional or a random product of the recording context, it allows a deeper understanding of the musical as well as the sociocultural circumstances of the production and the artists behind it. Characteristic sounds are used as sonic signatures that mark identification and distinction, comment on cultural events, express feelings, wishes and desires or display authenticity. These sonic signatures can be both either generally understandable or highly subversive and exclusive.

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Perspectives on sound

1. phenomenal object

Sound can be a phenomenal object like an instrument or album sound, or a musical style or genre. Those can be described and negotiated. Coming from the same cultural context and similar musical background, people share these sonic experiences. Still, every person perceives the distinctive sounds at least partially different.

2. media technology

Sound can be the hardly determinable material existence of such phenomenal objects that are recorded, produced, stored and reproduced through media technology. What follows, the transformed sound is the musical medium of reception. The technology is just a technical requirement for the communicative and expressive function of sound in the relationship between artists, producers, individual listeners and cultural groups. As technical encoding and transmission can't be perceived as music, it is sound that mediates the musical structure, the produced timbres, feelings and inscribed contexts. Sound is the medial, musical and meaningful interface of all levels of musical interaction.

3. individual perception

Sound as an ephemeral phenomenon is subject to individual cognitive construction and perception. Sound can only be perceived based on the individual disposition, listening experience, mood, situation, level of awareness and other factors. In its perceptual existence it is hardly possible to be cognitively grasped, it is more perceived or felt. Hence, sound is no objective phenomenon but highly subjective because it depends on the reproduction technology, the listening context, room acoustics and personality. Consequently, subjective phenomenal presence as well as subjective and culturalized interindividual meanings all come together and form a state of infusible concurrence. Through this oscillation sound can take effect on the listener and transport meanings and emotions.

Ontology of sound

All of these three perspectives blend together in musical reception and shape our understanding of sound. Yet, it is only the sound as phenomenal object that seems to be graspable and potentially objective. That is why sound is often reduced to this. However, the two other aspects are of much more interest because they shape what can be perceived as "quasi objective" musical phenomena effects.

Sound is an interpretative mental construct that results from the symbolic decoding of technological transformed music. Drawing on Charles Peirce's epistemological concept of the interpretant, sound is perceived tied to a mixture of shared and individual listening experiences, knowledge and contexts. The processing of this mental sound construct is based upon musical enculturation. Quasi-objective sound phenomena merely are shared experiences, which can be understood as the perceivable top of an iceberg.

Actually, sound is the all-comprising concept of cultural connotations and individual interpretations that are hidden behind the concrete object. Sound can't just be explained with the phenomena, it has to be regarded epistemological. Then, sound becomes a profound analytical concept to understanding the cultural practices of popular music, its aesthetics and ethnographies combining the psychological mechanisms of the individual with the sociological circumstances of cultural groups, the music and their producers.