

INTRODUCTION

BY THE EDITORS

THE MEDIUM OF SOUND, LONG PLACED IN A SECONDARY POSITION TO THE VISUAL WITHIN cinema and media studies, has experienced a considerable increase in scholarly attention over the past two decades. When the journal last dedicated an issue to the theme of sound media (“Sounding Off,” *Velvet Light Trap* 51 [Spring 2003]), its focus was exclusively on film sound and film music, with particular attention to synchronization, points of audition, and audiovisual counterpoint. While such issues remain pertinent to contemporary scholarship, “Sounding Off” was also a reflection of the state of sound media studies at the time of its publication—a state defined by the scholarship of Michel Chion, Rick Altman, and Claudia Gorbman and even by the continued prominence of Hans Eisler and Theodor Adorno’s 1947 monograph, *Composing for the Pictures*.

In the past decade, however, not only have investigations into the study of film sound greatly expanded, but studies of radio, popular music, and other audio media have also become more firmly established within the media studies discipline. While scholars like Chion, Altman, and Gorbman continue to serve as driving forces for the field, there has been an audible groundswell of historical and theoretical work that considers sound to be more than just one of many stylistic attributes of film and media productions and that treats the history of sound’s recording, storage, and playback practices as their own industry and social phenomena. Works that illustrate these newer directions include Steve Wurtzler’s *Electronic Sounds* (2007), which traces the industrial formation of audio engineering corporations, and Karin Bijsterveld’s *Mechanical Sound* (2008), which studies the social problems with noise between 1875 and 1975. Other important works include—but are by no means limited to—Emily Thompson’s *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2004), Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003) and *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2012), and Susan Schmidt Horning’s *Chasing Sound* (2013). Further, while sound studies often cohere around the fields of film and media studies, it now spans the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, numerous scholars have observed that a “sonic turn” is under way in disciplines as wide-ranging as cultural studies, American studies, history, philosophy, art history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, cultural geography, architecture, and science and technology studies. By its very nature, sound studies is inherently interdisciplinary: like sound waves themselves, the study of sound crosses boundaries and transgresses academic divisions and theoretical paradigms. An increase in this diverse field of sound studies can be seen in the recent and highly interdisciplinary anthologies *The Sound Studies Reader* (Jonathan Sterne, 2012), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, 2011), and the nearly 1,600-page *Sound Studies* (Michael Bull, 2013), all of which document the intellectual history of the field’s many theoretical concepts. This wide range of work encourages us to revise our assumptions about sound as an

DOI: 10.7560/VLT7401

aesthetic medium; its social, cultural, and political nature; and its past, present, and future position within the fields of film and media studies.

This issue of the *Velvet Light Trap* aims to join this ongoing conversation and build upon the new lines of inquiry that have emerged out of the intersection of sound, media studies, and other disciplines during the last decade. The articles collected here cover topics as diverse as vocal and whistling performances, aesthetics and rhetoric of “bad” sound mixing, the fascination with antiquated sound media, and the cultural evaluations of radio dramas.

Craig Eley begins the issue by tracing the historical developments in the cultural attitudes surrounding turn-of-the-century performances and recordings of whistling. He first considers its musical and nonmusical associations with a variety of “others,” including African Americans, homosexuals, and the working poor. He also traces the gendered implications of white professional performers who drew on American environmental attitudes and the rhetoric of “nature” and “the natural” as a way to distance themselves from these stereotypes and establish themselves as legitimate artists and educators.

In her essay on office wives in postwar radio detective dramas, Catherine Martin argues that certain ideals of femininity and temporary professionalism circulated through the cultural functions of women’s voices and radio’s influence as a medium that reinforced the domestication of women’s labor. Martin analyzes Effie Perine in *The Adventures of Sam Spade* (1946–51) and Claire Brooks of *Let George Do It* (1946–54) to demonstrate how they were competent and valuable assistants, but they dismiss and devalue their labor as feminine, effortless, and subordinate to their ultimate goal of becoming wives and mothers.

In her essay on the function of voice in Italian neorealist film, Elizabeth Alsop contributes to ongoing reevaluations of neorealism by employing the Italian concept of *coralità* (chorality) in order to demonstrate the pervasive use of choral configurations that construct fantasmatic and imaginary social groups and that convey a sense of amplification in their cinematic presence. Alsop argues that these strategies of vocal amplification serve to heighten the Italian neorealist film’s emotional impact, as well as to dramatize populist critique by emphasizing the *coralità* of marginalized or silenced groups, particularly working-class women and children.

Andy Kelleher Stuhl’s essay examines the recording practices of audio engineers and producers, focusing on the analog fetishism that has developed in popular music recording cultures over the past three decades since the emergence of digital sound technologies. Through an analysis of online communities for professional recordists, Stuhl contributes to the growing bodies of sound studies research on production cultures, technologies of sound, musical performance, and discourses of authenticity and aesthetic judgment in audio media. He argues that sound recordists are pushing back against the technological determinism of analog fetishism by elevating the value of live musical performance in the sound-recording process—even if doing so comes at the expense of the recordists’ own credit for the resultant recording.

In “Toward a Genosonic Lens,” Amanda Nell Edgar addresses the discursive construction of the word “screech” and its recent uses by radio “shock jocks” to describe both the congressional testimony of Hillary Clinton and a recorded vocal performance that had been misattributed to Beyoncé Knowles. Edgar offers a method of analysis that utilizes digital audio software like PRAAT and Audacity in order to circumvent the gender biases that frequent our listening of a woman’s voice, and in doing so Edgar concludes that the voice should be reconceived as extension of body and language.

In her article, “Theorizing ‘Bad’ Sound,” Nessa Johnston analyzes the sound in a cycle of independent films nicknamed “mumblecore” due to the critical acceptance that these films feature “bad” sound. Johnston analyzes several of these films—including Joe Swanberg’s *LOL* (2006) and Aaron Katz’s *Quiet City* (2007)—and offers a formal definition of what critics mean when they consider these soundtracks to be of poor quality. Further, Johnston demonstrates that the aural aesthetics of mumblecore cinema function not only rhetorically to distinguish these films for their excessive “indie-ness” but also thematically to emphasize the communicative struggles of the young adults depicted in mumblecore cinema.

This issue concludes with a special section dedicated to the October 2013 #WOTW75 online collective listening experiment that commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of Orson Welles and the *Mercury Theater on the Air*’s famous “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast (1938). Curated and introduced by Neil Verma on behalf of the media studies

websites *Sounding Out!* *The Sound Studies Blog* and *Antenna: Responses to Media and Culture*, this section reproduces a cross section of the nearly two thousand social media posts that were accumulated during the live three-hour online audio event. This archive of real-time responses to the event attempts to capture the experience of listening in a way that's simultaneously old and new.

If the 2003 issue "Sounding Off" reflected a period when sound studies was a subfield of media studies, then "On Sound" reflects the current moment when sound studies has emerged as its own distinct field of academic study. As this issue demonstrates, sound is now a necessary context for a more comprehensive understanding of all media practices.