Review: Wolfgang Ernst, *Sonic Time Machines: Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity*

Stephen Cornford
Oxford Brookes University

Abstract

This is a review of *Sonic Time Machine: Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity*, Wolfgang Ernst's first book to be published directly in English.

Keywords

acoustic space, sonic, sonicity, temporality

Sonic Time Machines
Wolgang Ernst
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Sonic Time Machines is Wolfgang Ernst's first book to be published directly in English. It follows the 2012 publication of *Digital Memory and the Archive*, an English language collection of his essays edited by Jussi Parikka, who is also co-editor of the Recursions series of which this book forms a part. The slim volume was coincidentally synchronous with the 2016 publication of *Chronopoetics*, a translation of Ernst's best-known book. It arrives therefore at a moment of peak interest – in English-speaking media theoretical circles at least – in Ernst's micro-temporal and technocentric approach to media archaeology.

Readers familiar with *Chronopoetics* will be aware that Ernst does not use the term 'time machine' in the same sense as HG Wells, but rather to refer to temporally operative media, which is to say all audio–visual recording technology. Ernst's use of the word 'sonic', and its neologistic derivative 'sonicity', are significantly more complex, at times possibly

Corresponding author: Stephen Cornford. Email: cornfordstephen@gmail.com
Extra material: http://theoryculturesociety.org/

even controversial, and a discussion of these forms the crux of the first part of the book. This part, subdivided into four short chapters, comes across as the most radical of Ernst's writing to date. The originality of his thought and the occasionally problematic nature of some of his claims make it the most engaging read.

Thereafter follow two further parts. Part II focuses on the relationship between cultural content and technical medium, as seen through two fascinating field trips. The first of these sets out to recreate the siren songs on their supposed location in the Li Galli islands of south Italy and finds Ernst musing on the material echo between the wax used by Odysseus to protect his fellow sailors and the beeswax coating of phonograph cylinders centuries later (p. 63): 'did the wax with which Odysseus sealed his companions' ears implicitly record the siren songs?' (p. 65). The tone struck here seems uncharacteristically lyrical, coming across as a media theoretical equivalent to David Toop's (2011) work on the prehistory of sound art via depictions of listening in painting. Part III, the longest of the three, concentrates on the various temporal technicities of audio media, both analogue and digital. These chapters include some prototypical Ernstian examples (the optical re-sonification of phonograph cylinders, the non-discursive scratch of gramophone audio) alongside some entirely new ground, such as a convincing polemic in favour of 'sonic analytics', an algorithmic mode of search and retrieval of audio files based around neither metadata nor melody.

Those who have read *Digital Memory* will not be surprised by Ernst's stylistic idiosyncrasies that are referred to in the foreword by Liam Cole Young as a modular, non-narrative, staccato style (p. 15). The 'introduction' reads more like an essay in itself, there is a largely refreshing lack of signposting throughout and, with the exception of the final page (where Ernst appears unable to resist a touch of convention), a refusal to sum up. Instead we have a recursive and fragmentary approach through which Ernst's argument appears interpolated among technical details, media historic tales, personal anecdotes and a comprehensive set of apposite (if sometimes frustratingly casual) references. As a result, reading the book becomes an archaeological exercise in itself with clarity around the use of key terminology accruing gradually. For example, it is not until well into Part II that Ernst suddenly offers a concise definition of 'the three media-archaeological layers for analytic differentiation of sound as event' (p. 66), clearly distinguishing the sonic from both the acoustic and the musical. And not until the penultimate page that he establishes a momentary but enlightening opposition between sonority and sonicity. This refusal of linearity is also occasionally evident in the overall structure. So Chapter 8, which comprises six particularly lucid pages distinguishing sound in its simultaneity from the sequential nature of alphanumeric symbolism, would seem more appropriately placed in

Part I, but instead takes the form of a reprise before the final two chapters.

The volume would have benefited from a more scrupulous proof-read as there are times when the signs of a working document glare through. This is unfortunate as it means Ernst's charming linguistic trickery – temporality appears variously as tempor(e)ality, temp/orality and temp*aura*lity – brushes up against awkward compound conjunctions such as thatwhich and byof. There are also two occasions when whole phrases are repeated, bringing to mind the skipping of the gramophone needle, a media-technical schism which is notably absent from his analysis of the co-existence of the cultural content of the phonograph recording with its frictional mediality in Chapter 7.

Ernst's central, albeit dispersed, thesis develops two ideas, both of which he cites from McLuhan (1997). Firstly, that 'with the emergence of the phonetic alphabet the ears from oral culture became deaf in favour of visual recording and transmission of knowledge' (p. 100). Ernst seeks to set the terms for a redress of this sensory imbalance in culture generally and media theory in particular. He therefore places the sonic in opposition to not only the visual, but also the alphanumeric. Crucially, this establishes a dichotomy between the recording and notation of music: 'sonicity takes place as a physical vibrational event that is distinct from mere symbolization' (p. 24). This further enables a definition of the inscription of sound, whether physically into analogue media or in the binary code of digitized audio, as *implicitly sonic*.

This notion of *implicit sonicity* brings us to the second of McLuhan's ideas, namely 'the intrinsically acoustic structure of electronic mediascapes' (p. 25). However, although drawing consistently on this idea of acoustic space, Ernst uses the term *sonicity* to distinguish it from the physical event of acoustic sound. Sonicity is therefore defined as the implicit existence of sound or the sonic, the latter of which – in Ernst's usage – is better described as the *sound-like* than that which is explicitly sound*ing* or *of-sound*. This allows Ernst to claim that 'the concept of sonicity is suspended from the privileged anthropocentric perspective in favour of its capacity for exploratory and open access to implicit sonospheres' (p. 31), and it is here that unravelling his thinking becomes problematic.

While some of his examples certainly ring true, such as the 'inherent sonicity of the video image' (p. 28) which, citing Bill Viola (1990), he claims is due to the 'vibrational acoustic character' (p. 27) of video and its shared genealogy with electromagnetic sound recording, there are others, such as the sonic nature of the internet (pp. 33–34), which are questionable. For, while the enveloping, simultaneous data environments of wi-fi and 3G certainly display the characteristics of McLuhan's acoustic space, the flow within the broader fibre-optic network and the html code which structures our online experience are both decidedly linear and sequential.

This reveals a central double bind of Ernst's argument, one which he appears to embrace for all its inherent contradictions: that his definition of the terms of a non-anthropocentric media analysis rests on a thoroughly anthropocentric opposition of eye and ear.

So, although Ernst expands the notion of the sonic to include 'continuous and discrete vibrational and frequential dynamics of all kinds' (p. 21), thus apparently opening the entirety of the electromagnetic spectrum beyond traditional anthropo-sensory divisions, he also asserts that 'the hearing apparatus is much more sensitive to micro-time-critical processes than the eye' (p. 40). This appears to return to a definition of temporality within our perceptual resolution rather than claiming the eye to be equally micro-temporally sensitive but only within the visible range of 'ultra-high frequency electromagnetic waves called ''light'' and ''colours''' (p. 27).

Ultimately, in spite of such occasional inconsistencies, Ernst's theorization of the sonic provides an essential contribution to the ongoing auditory turn in contemporary theory. By arguing for a sonic epistemology of media, Ernst considerably expands the scope of this turn beyond the acoustic, the musical and the explicitly audio-technical. This approach is framed throughout as a media archaeological ear, one that is neither limited to human cultural listening (musicology) but includes the noise of the medium itself, nor to phenomenological listening but includes media technology as active listeners (optical re-sonification).

One of the most arresting passages of the whole book comes when this distant media archaeological ear suddenly (and deliberately) slips into first-hand narrative. Ernst describes a research trip to retrace the steps of Albert Lord in recording South Yugoslav oral poetry using a Webster Wire Recorder. Ernst, with the help of a Serbian radio station, tracked down an aged *guslar* and set out to record him using the same medium, which had 'turned up unexpectedly from the vaults of Berlin's Radio Art shop' (p. 76). Ernst is clearly stunned by the encounter, but not, as we would expect, only by 'the almost surrealist . . . correspondence between the string being bowed and the recording wire made of steel' (p. 76) so much as by the poet's lack of deference to the technology. Instead, the guslar 'looked directly into my eyes . . . what I was seeing and hearing was not a sound-machine but rather the power of an individual in the state of poetry' (p. 76). There exist now two recordings of this encounter. The electro–technical rendering of acoustic–physical fact is magnetically inscribed in the wire, the oral–linguistic recording of the cultural–subjective encounter is retold in these pages. This retelling, in spite of its silence and reliance on alphabetic symbolism, remains implicitly sonic and certainly retains something of the social intensity of the performance. In presenting us with the latter, Ernst reveals a surprising kernel of humanism at the heart of the project: 'precisely the coldest

media-archaeological ear was listening to the most magical of all sound machines' (p. 76).

References

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Stephen Cornford is a media artist and experimental musician. He is Senior Lecturer in Sonic Art at Oxford Brookes University and a PhD candidate at Winchester School of Art.