SOUND AS EVIDENCE: PARADIGMS OF AESTHETIC APPROXIMATION IN AN AGE OF GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS

As witnessed by Walter Benjamin in the early twentieth century, the “state of emergency” in which we still live is not the exception but the rule. In 2018, a research project called Lyden af Danmark (The Sound of Denmark) was launched, aiming at collecting sounds recorded by people living in Denmark. Of 155 recordings and 294 individual sounds uploaded, birds singing and lawnmowers seem to dominate. However, the refugee asylums scattered around the country remain silent (or unrecorded).

From this silence the editorial idea for this special section grew as a question: How can sound-based work or phenomena function as evidence in the situation we are in? Are all the crises we are witnessing crises in representing nonhuman and human relations based on the mediation of data?

The focus of this special section is to look beyond the visual and ask what constitutes evidence and what else may inform it. The section follows a line of inquiry into the construction of evidence as “a moral activity”; the context of representation becomes an essential point of attention when turning data into knowledge. The medium by which data is represented is significant to both our scientific research of data and our scientific understanding of the world, in addition to the common public’s ideas of what data is.

This section presents, in seven different approaches in the hybrid field between scientific and artistic practices, how sound is a constituent of our ideas and understandings of the world as a “constituted” and “transformative reality.” Sound-as-evidence operates a paradigm of aesthetic approximation different from earlier aesthetic paradigms. It depends on technological mediation.

In her contribution, Janna Holmstedt suggests, “the transformative role of sound and listening troubles Western knowledge systems in fruitful ways.” Laura Beloff asks: What does it mean to hear through technological mediation? Louise Mackenzie recognizes that technological layering opens up “possibilities in thinking about how scientific information is interpreted and whether one perspective is necessarily more valid than another.” In this way, scientific and artistic practices are intertwined in the construction of evidence.

When approaching sound as evidence, the paradigm of aesthetic approximation is dependent on technological mediation. It is my claim that aesthetic approximation enables the artist-researcher to approach sound as evidence in more general terms but, at the same time, creates a distance from “the existing” and the “moral process” to which the artist-researcher aspires. I see aesthetic approximation as entangled in (at least) five paradigms of meaning creation, all of them critiquing positivist epistemology and the claim of scientific and technological “objectivity” (see Fig. 1 in the expanded version of this introduction in the online supplements).

As Tullis Rennie demonstrates, “practical philosophical intervention asks each of us to challenge the status quo.” Rennie suggests adopting Salomé Voegelin’s proposed sonic imaginary mode of listening.

Elsewhere, Stephanie Loveless proposes the flaneuserie sonore, feminist soundwalking, as a way to recontextualize the “practices of listening and walking,” and Freya Zinoview and Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda further demonstrate that “to listen attentively to the sonic is to situate oneself at the intersection of geopolitics and sensory perception” in what they term Anthropocene Contact Zones.

All the articles assert the need to reimagine what evidence is—reclaim its politics—through sound.

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Note
This introduction is an excerpt from an extended piece that can be found in the online supplemental materials. Please see www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/30.