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Workshop

Voices in Motion

Audio Letters as ‘Sonic Memory Objects’ in Migration Processes

15th of June

Abstracts

Thomas Levin

Future Auditions: On Gramophonic Voice Letters and the Inscription of the Absent Other

While all forms of epistolary are marked by the unavoidable risks of postality – letters get delayed, damaged, mis-delivered, lost, etc. – voice letters are subject to a very particular range of challenges. Among the many uncanny aspects of recording an audio message, one of the most striking is the absence of a proximate, real-time listener. Not surprisingly, many audio letters register this lack by means of a variety of rhetorical strategies that articulate medium-specific imaginaries of both production and reception. This lecture will examine and reflect upon such compensatory practices through a series of close readings of selected gramophonic voice letters from the Princeton Phono-Post Archive.

Eva Hallama

Voice Letters as Substitutes for the Missing in the SONIME project

In the SONIME project we collect, restore and analyse audio letters sent from and to Austria from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1990ies. A focus lies on the sonic experiences that the technologies of the voice letter evoked especially during periods of flight, migration and mobility. I want to explore how voice letters have been a way of staying in touch over long distances and to what extent the acoustic letters did represent and also re-create the absent persons as ‘sonic memories’ as they carried their voices over distances and time. Using the example of selected audio letters from the SONIME research project, I will analyse aspects of the cultural technique and practice of communicating via audio letters.

Anette Hoffmann

Cautious Comments on Extractivism in the Kalahari Recordings of 1908

In 1908, the Austrian anthropologist Rudolf Pöch travelled in southern Africa with the aim to amass a collection of objects, human remains, photographs, ethnographic film, and sound recordings related to people he described as Bushmen. In order to achieve this aim, he relied on the support of two Naro-speakers who were his assistants, translators and guides. One of them commented on his own situation as a farmworker and as a guide, as well as on the effect of colonial extraction has on the natural environment. His name was (probably) /Xosi Tshai. Some of his recordings were translated from Naro by Job Morris in 2018. My paper presents some of his recordings and offers a reading which contextualises these recordings as a response to extractive research practices during the colonial war of 1904-8 in Namibia.

Daniel Leix Palumbo

The acousmatic question and the datafication of voice intimacy as the source of biometric control at the border

From the voice letter to the telephone to the audio interactions of today's digitised contexts, voice finds in its acoustic dimensions a primary resource in machine-mediated local and transnational communication. The acoustics underpin the relational nature of voice not only by activating language into utterances, but also by infusing it with degrees of intimacy. Furthermore, the acoustics of voice induce listeners to try to infer the identity of a speaker by asking Nina Eidsheim's acousmatic question "Who is this? Who is speaking?". But what if, in the name of policing the digital fortress of Europe, the intimacy evoked by the acoustics of voice becomes harnessed to delegate the acousmatic question to a machine? This question brings us to the identity checks conducted by the BAMF (German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) within asylum procedures in Germany. Since 2017, the BAMF has used voice biometrics to analyse the accents of undocumented asylum seekers to indicate their country of origin and, consequently, determine their eligibility for asylum. By analysing BAMF's official documentation and other secondary data, this presentation looks at how border authorities adopt various strategies to emotionally involve asylum applicants to elicit a 'truthful' performance of their accent and allow the technology to 'efficiently' detect it. The presentation finally shows how these practices operationalise a process of identity-making that, relying on a normative and reductionist idea which defines the acoustics of voice as a marker of geographic origin, performs bordering power by othering and endangering migrants.

Wajid Yaseen

Tape Letters: Migration on Tape

In this talk, Sound Artist and Artistic Director of Modus Arts, Wajid Yaseen, provides an insight into the Tape Letters project. Tape Letters is a social history project which aims to highlight the use of audio cassette tapes as an unorthodox mode of long-distance communication by families in Britain and Pakistan between 1960–1980. The comprehensive outreach programme, undertaken as part of the project, has uncovered over 40 surviving cassettes sent and received by this community and ensured their long-term preservation by adding them to an archive held at the Bishopsgate Institute in London, alongside over 100 oral histories undertaken by those who used this method of communication.

The project involves a multi-disciplinary team who have produced a wide range of outputs, including a six-part radio documentary series, a photography series, a WebXR-based online exhibition, and a poetry collection. These have all included the use of Pothwari (an oral-only language spoken in many British-Pakistani homes) as well as English, allowing for inter-generational discourse and engagement from those within the community and the wider general public.

www.tapeletters.com

Panayotis Panopoulos

The memory of voice: Phonographic archaeology, ethnography and performance between anthropology and contemporary art

Found and bought years ago at an Athens flea market by visual artist and avid record-collector Panos Charalambous, a body of 19 rare acetate 78 rpm. records, made in the United States in the late 1950s by the Greek migrant Konstantinos Chronis and his family, triggers a series of ethnographic and artistic encounters that bring out the role of vocality and phonography in the production and reproduction of memory. Konstantinos Chronis, who migrated to the USA in the beginning of the 20th century, sent these private recordings to his brother and his family back in Greece as a form of vocal letters, including folk songs and nostalgic narratives, family news and highly emotional promises about seeing them once again. Anthropologist Panayotis Panopoulos traces the social life of these records backwards, meeting their original receivers, members of the family and co-villagers of Konstantinos Chronis in Athens and the mountainous village of Roino in Arcadia region, Peloponnese. Vocal traces of more than half a century ago, probably considered forever lost, return to stir up memory, which was also the strong stimulus for the records' production in the first place. The artist's intention in the project to resurrect the voices of the dead among their living relatives and village community meet the anthropologist's interest to reassess the experience of the records' reception and social life, in a performance of ethnographic/ artistic DJing, through which the recorded voices address their original receivers once again in a meaningful gesture of mending a broken chain of contact and communication.

Natascha Muhic and Christoph Freidhöfer

Vinylograph – An Automatic Voice Recorder

Vinylograph is a state-of-the-art record-cutting machine that allows you to record your voice or music onto vinyl in real-time. With a high-quality microphone and a precision cutting head, the Vinylograph captures the sound waves of your performance and etches them onto a vinyl disc. Each record produced by the Vinylograph is unique, capturing the essence and emotion of the moment.

The Vinylograph is inspired by the Voice-O-Graphs, also known as "Record Booths," which were popular in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. These booths were small, coin-operated recording studios where people could record their voices onto a disc. However, the production of these booths ceased worldwide by the end of the 1960s, and they disappeared from the streets.

Vinylograph aims to revive this lost opportunity for people to publicly record their voices onto vinyl and preserve their memories for years to come. The machine was developed by Natascha Muhic and Christoph Freidhöfer, who founded Vinylograph OG in 2018. By combining the traditional charm of vinyl with cutting-edge technology, the Vinylograph is an innovative addition to the audio recording industry.

Curriculae Vitae

Christoph Freidhöfer is an artist, mechatronics engineer and object and apparatus builder. He creates moving and interactive machines, installations, works of art, and sound for himself, for the world, and most importantly, for other artists and musicians. Since 2018, he has been running Vinylograph OG with Natascha Muhic.

Eva Hallama is principal investigator in the research project SONIME “Sonic Memories – Audio Letters in Times of Migration and Mobility” at the Museum of Science and Technology and the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna. She studied history at the University of Vienna. For her PhD project about Nazi-Delousing Camps in Eastern Europe she received a scholarship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and was Junior Fellow at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna. She also worked as a curator for sound installations and oral history projects.

Anette Hoffmann is senior researcher at the Institute for African Studies and Egyptology at the University of Cologne. She works on acoustic collections as sources of colonial history since several years; she has curated exhibitions and produced sound installations on the basis of her research (anettehoffmann.com). Her current research engages with questions around the articulation of language and race in early German linguistics in South Africa.

Kerstin Klenke is head of the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She studied ethnomusicology, social anthropology and theatre, film and TV studies at the Universities of Cologne and Vienna and worked at various universities in teaching, research and academic management positions, before joining the Phonogrammarchiv in 2019. The regional focus of her research is on Central Asia and the Caucasus, where she has spent extensive periods of fieldwork for her PhD and PostDoc projects. Her thematic interests include music and politics, critical archive studies and the history of ideas in ethnomusicology.

Thomas Y. Levin: The media theorist, curator and collector [Thomas Y. Levin](#) is a professor at Princeton University where he teaches critical media theory, sound studies, and cultural history. The translator and/or editor of three books on the work of Siegfried Kracauer, including the critical edition of *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Harvard UP, 1995), Levin is also the co-editor of [CTRL \[SPACE\], Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother](#) (MIT Press 2002) and [Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Age of its technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media](#) (Harvard UP, 2008). Since 2011 he has been working on [a long-term research project on the media archaeology of voice mail](#) for which he built the [Princeton Phono-Post Archive](#), the world's first large-scale research collection of audio letters.

Sylvia Mieszkowski is Professor of British Literature at the University of Vienna, and deputy-speaker of the interdisciplinary research platform GAIN (Gender: Ambivalent In Visibilities). Here most recent publications are: “Transparent and the Optics of Gendered Identity” in: *Journal of Gender Studies*. (2023) and “Compassionate Projection: Zadie Smith’s *The Embassy of Cambodia*” in: *Journal of the Short Story in English* 75 (2022).

With Birgit Spengler, Lea Espinoza Garrido und Julia Wewior, she co-edited two special issues on Migrant States of Exception 27.2 (Jan 2022) and 27.3 (Jul 2022). Currently, she is co-editing with Sandra Mayer, Kevin Potter and Gizem Doğrul a special issue on Refugee Tales for the European Journal for Life-Writing Studies (forthcoming 2023).

Natascha Muhic studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Her diploma 2016 was the Vinylograph, which she realised together with Christoph Freidhöfer. As the manager of the music offspace SSTR6, she works on duplications of sound recording media: at the Vinylograph sessions, music is recorded live and cut onto vinyl in real time, which is why artists* and the audience can usually participate directly in the production process in an intimate setting. In spite of the clear focus on music, cross-media collaborations and projects also often start at this address. In 2021, Muhic made a documentary film about the Vienna Krandaubeln, "A Window on the River".

Daniel Leix Palumbo is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. His current NWO-funded PhD project (2022-2027), entitled "From Spoken Audio to Digital Identities: How AI impacts the interpretation of information communicated by the sound of voice", researches the use of voice biometric technology for decision-making in European asylum procedures. More specifically, it explores the datafication of the sound of voice as an emerging practice to construct identities and control borders.

Panayotis Panopoulos was born in Athens in 1967. He teaches at the Department of Social Anthropology and History of the University of the Aegean since 2003. His research interests concern the anthropology of music, sound, and performance. His ethnographic publications focus on the symbolism of sound and hearing in modern Greece, the study of local cultural associations and the role of musical performances in the symbolic construction of place. He has also conducted research on the culture of the Deaf community in Greece and he has collaborated in several projects with visual artists.

Luisa Simonutti is a Research Director in the history of philosophy at the Italian National Council for Scientific Research (CNR) in Italy. Her interests cover numerous aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy and religion. She focuses on the political-theological debate, translation, and philosophy (on thinkers such as Biddle, Spinoza, Locke, and Bayle etc.). She also deals with the influence of Arab-Islamic thought on European thinkers, especially 17th century English, and the cultural transfer between Europe and the Mediterranean Basin in early modern times. She is Leader of the WG2 Ideas in motion, in COST Action CA18140-PIMo. <http://www.ispf.cnr.it/persone/luisa-simonutti/>

Giovanni Tarantino, PHD Habil, Chair of the COST Action PIMo, is Senior Research Lecturer of Early Modern History at the University of Florence, Research Associate at the CNR Institute of Mediterranean Europe History in Rome, and Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Humanities of The University of Western Australia. Recent publications include: 'Falling In and Out of Place: The Errant Status of Solitude in Early Modern Europe' (The Routledge History of Loneliness, 2023); 'The Sky in Place of the Nile: Climate, Religious Unrest and Scapegoating in Post-Tri-dentine Apulia' (Environment and History 2022) and, with Paola von Wyss-Giacosa, Through Your Eyes: Religious Alterity and the Early Modern Western Imagination (Brill 2021).

Wajid Yaseen is a sound artist who takes an interdisciplinary approach to produce installations, live performances, acousmatic music, graphic scores, and sound sculptures. He is the Creative Director of the sound art research cooperative Modus Arts, the co-founder of the destructivist Scrapclub project, and the director of the Ear Cinema project. His work has been exhibited and performed at the ICA Gallery, Arnolfini, Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Whitechapel Gallery, Laban, and the Freud Museum.