

Zakharine, Dmitri; Meise, Nils (Hrsg.): *Electrified Voices. Medial, Socio-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer*. Göttingen: V&R unipress 2013. ISBN: 978-3-8471-0024-9; 416 S., mit zahlr. Abb.

Rezensiert von: Josephine Hoegaerts, Abteilung Geschichte / Modernity and Society, 1800–2000, KU Leuven

In „Electrified Voices“, Dmitri Zakharine and Nils Meise have brought together a dizzying array of contributions on voice recording, reproduction, transmission and manipulation in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The volume is based on a conference held at Konstanz University in 2011, and reflects its interdisciplinarity – gathering work in media studies, history and anthropology, but also that of musicians and film directors. The result is a very varied volume, and contributions range from personal reflections on the repertoire and possibilities of the theremin (Lydia Kavina's text) to explicitly scholarly and systematic analyses of TV-announcers' voices in the 1930s (Zakharine's contribution). They also range from the very abstract to the very concrete. Barry Truax' reflections on the voice in the soundscape presents an „information based communication model“ (p. 70) of an almost universal scope, a theoretical engagement with existing communication models such as the signal transfer model to deal with the „neo-orality of contemporary media“ (p. 68). His text, and some other contributions provide new perspectives – and indeed 'models' – on the 'abstract vocality' that has according to the editors replaced the voice as it has become electrified and a-corporeally reproduced (p. 11). These contributions contrast with other, very specific analyses of very specific mediated voices, such as for example Nicola Dibben's entrance into the intimate sphere of voice and microphone, where the recording of the minutest characteristics and mannerisms of the voice heightens its (perceived) emotionality and individuality, contributing to the public image of the celebrity singer (p. 107–122).

Especially in the more concrete case-studies, the collections' chronological and geographical breadth becomes evident. The

book spans the twentieth century, and contains material on the United States, the United Kingdom, Western and Central Europe as well as Russia. In comparative contributions, especially, such as Konstantin Kaminskij's paper on the 'Voices of the Cosmos', this geographical variety provides new insights: sound studies has been mainly focused on acoustic technology's interaction with Western modernity, and Kaminskij's essay shows that pioneering acoustic experiments in the former Soviet Union are not only interesting in their own right, but that changes in the acoustic images of, for instance space or human and extraterrestrial voices have influenced each other across the iron curtain (p. 273–290). The book's disciplinary, chronological and geo-political variety results in a rich tapestry of knowledge on a subject that has not garnered a lot of attention ('sound studies' has opened the humanities and social sciences to sound, but rarely specifically to the voice). It is therefore a varied introduction to the multiple facets of the E-voice, but also a fairly fragmentary one. In his introduction, Zakharine forwards no less than six electricity-based methods to deal with the voice: „voice recording, voice reproduction, voice transmission, voice reception, voice montage & voice synthesis“ (p. 11) and then proceeds to sketch the mainly chronological structure of the book. The six modes of electrification identified do indeed appear throughout the succession of the „roaring twenties“, „shouting thirties“, „icy fifties“, „storming sixties“, „metallic seventies“ and the „calculating late modernity“ (p. 21–27). Yet, precisely because this complex understanding of vocality and electrification has to be accommodated, the presentation of subsequent, well-defined decades seems a bit contrived. If the different contributions have one communal message, it is not so much one of linear change but rather one of cacophonous simultaneity of different sounds and their different reception (be it through mediatization or converging cultural tropes). This point is perhaps less present in the first part of the book – which focusses on the role of the voice (including the E-voice) as a sign of subjectivity, or indeed a reference-point for 'humanity' – but is repeated across almost every contribution in the

second and third part of the collection, where the role of communities in creating, transmitting and understanding voices unavoidably draws attention to social multiplicity – whether attention is drawn to gendered, national, politically charged or extraterrestrial voices.

Because of its rather introductory and wide-ranging nature, the book's main goal seems to be to show the importance of the electrified voice in the twentieth century, to gauge the impact of vocal sound on the development of audio-visual media and vice versa. Golo Föllmer's contribution on radio's „channel identity“ is perhaps the clearest example of this purpose. In developing methods to analyze radio cultures „as 'sound cultures'" (p. 326), Föllmer draws attention to the tangible and economic consequences of vocal sound and its reception on radio. Other contributions, though perhaps less explicit in stating this goal, offer equally convincing arguments for the inclusion of an analysis of voice-recording and transmission in research on audio-visual media. Kate Lacey's essay on the political saliency of the voice in Germany in the 1930s, when the radio rose to prominence, is a case in point. Her study of voice on the radio and the rise of female voices in the public sphere goes far beyond the history and politics of radio per se, and shows that acoustic configurations interacted with political changes and evolutions in the make-up of 'the public'. She shows that voices, their sounds and the ability to listen to them as an individual or as a part of the community are important for our understanding of political agency, especially in the era of electrified voices (p. 134). Introducing the concept of a public „listening out“ in the politically active role of a critical public rather than listening to a particular show or station, she stresses the mutuality of speech (between speaker and listener) within the public sphere, thereby recalibrating the idea of voice in political terms (p. 131).

It is in these types of essays, which draw upon the concepts of sound studies and the methodology of their respective disciplines to demonstrate the impact of the electrified voice at a particular place and time (1930s German radio, Cold War science fiction, Amazonian

magic) that the book is at its most convincing. In bringing together other essays of a vastly different nature, the editors have gathered contributions that are interesting in their own right but do not always manage to 'speak' to the rest of the volume. The presentation of digital tools for the analysis of electrified voices by Hans-Ulrich Wagner and Christofer Jost (both in German) come to mind: both offer a hands-on approach to audio-visual material, but an „Erfahrungsbericht“ as Jost calls it, on the use of analytical tools seems out of place in a volume that – according to its introduction – „bridges a gap between socially objectifying and hermeneutic approaches by providing media analysis as a missing link“ (p. 16). Together with the models of analysis presented in the contributions by David Sonnenschein and Barry Truax, these texts present a useful practical toolbox for E-voice analysis, but they do not contribute to the chronological story presented in the rest of the volume. The variety in disciplines, genres and subjects, then, is the volume's greatest strength but also its weakness. One cannot help but think that in attempting to span the 'whole field' of the electrified voice, this volume is trying to do too much, and loses some of its conceptual punch in the process.

HistLit 2014-3-082 / Josephine Hoegaerts über Zakharine, Dmitri; Meise, Nils (Hrsg.): *Electrified Voices. Medial, Socio-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer*. Göttingen 2013, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.08.2014.