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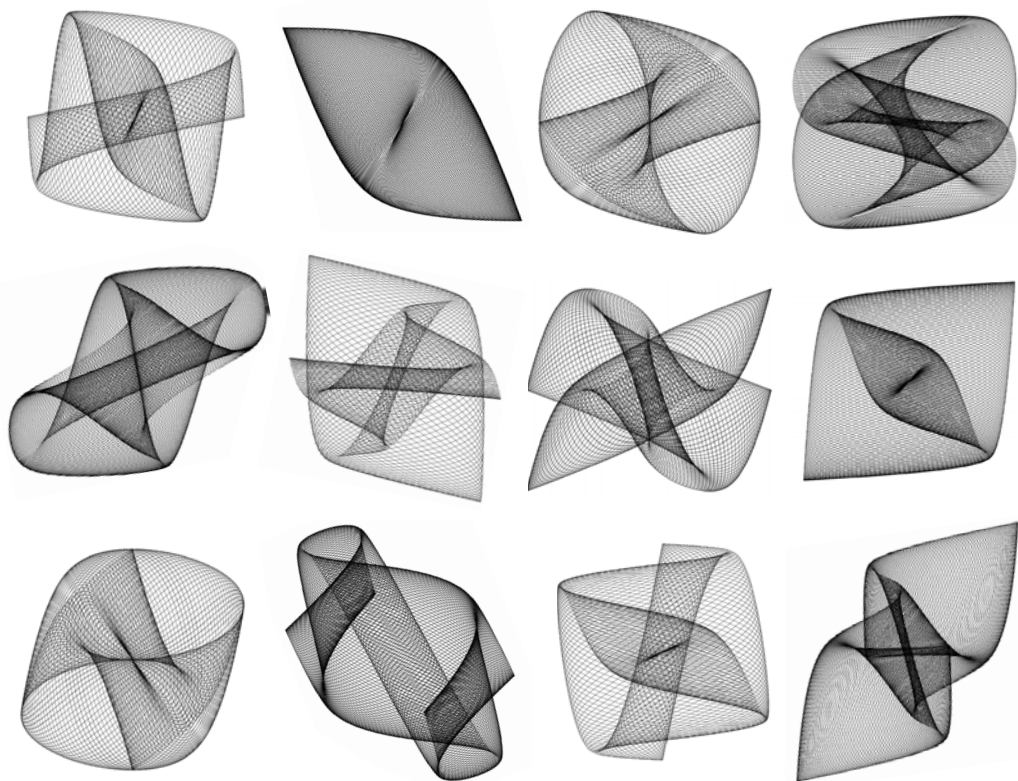
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# keywords in sound

DAVID NOVAK + MATT SAKAKEENY [EDITORS]



keywords

# in sound

david novak and matt sakakeeny, editors

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David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny

# introduction

Sound is vibration that is perceived and becomes known through its materiality. Metaphors for sound construct perceptual conditions of hearing and shape the territories and boundaries of sound in social life. Sound resides in this feedback loop of materiality and metaphor, infusing words with a diverse spectrum of meanings and interpretations. To engage sound as the interrelation of materiality and metaphor is to show how deeply the apparently separate fields of perception and discourse are entwined in everyday experiences and understandings of sound, and how far they extend across physical, philosophical, and cultural contexts.

The OED defines sound strictly as matter, “that which is or may be heard; the external object of audition, or the property of bodies by which this is produced.” The physical forms of sound—as impulses that move particles of air and travel through bodies and objects—provide the fundamental ground for hearing, listening, and feeling, which in turn enable common structures of communication and social development, as well as elemental survival skills. The raw “stuff” of sound is the tangible basis of music, speech, embodiment, and spatial orientation, and a substantive object of scientific experimentation and technological mediation. We analyze language with phonemes, we locate ourselves in spaces through reverberation, we distribute sound and capture it as sound waves on vinyl or magnetic tape, or as binary codes in digital compression formats, and we feel it in our bodies and vibrate sympathetically.

But the conceptual fields used to define sound—for example, silence, hearing, or voice—circulate not as passive descriptions of sonic phenomena but as ideas that inform experience. Metaphors “have the power to define reality,” as Lakoff and Johnson influentially argued, “through a coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others” (1980: 157). To “hear” a person is to recognize their subjectivity, just as to “have a voice” suggests more than the ability to speak or

sing, but also a manifestation of internal character, even essential human consciousness. Sound, then, is a substance of the world as well as a basic part of how people frame their knowledge about the world.

This book is a conceptual lexicon of specific keywords that cut across the material and metaphorical lives of sound. A lexicon is not just a catalog of language but a vocabulary that is actualized in use. The keywords here have been chosen for their prevalence and significance in both scholarship and in everyday perceptions of sound. Contributors approach their keywords differently, but each begins by addressing the etymology or semantic range of his or her keyword and then goes on to reveal how these terms develop conceptual grammars and organize social, cultural, and political discourses of sound. To reexamine these words is, first, to invoke them as artifacts of rich and diverse histories of thought, and second, to attend to the existential and even mundane presence of sound in everyday life.

In this, and in many other ways, we take inspiration from Raymond Williams, whose *Keywords* (1985) remains the central reference for students of culture, literature, materialism, and more. Williams's taxonomy does not end with description and classification; he integrates the historical meanings that cluster around a particular term into a relational field of interpretation. We can see the utility of this approach in his famous reading of the term "culture," which he distinguishes as one of the most complicated words in the English language. "Culture" is a noun of process for tending of natural growth, even as this process is linked to the material product of animal and plant husbandry; "culture" becomes an independent noun that, in turn, indicates a separate kind of matter yet to be "cultivated." These practical and material meanings extend into metaphors of social cultivation that reinforce a progressive linear history of "civilization." This universal model of human culture was pluralized and rematerialized in the Romantic separation between multiple national and traditional cultures (such as "folk-culture") and "high cultural" productions of music, theater, art, and education (symbolic forms that could now be capitalized as "Culture"). Williams shows how these simultaneous meanings of "culture"—as a human developmental process, as a way of life for a particular people, and as a set of artistic works and practices—cannot be usefully clarified in distinction from one another. Despite producing discrete and sometimes radically incommensurable interpretations, "it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant" (Williams 1985: 91).<sup>1</sup>



Williams was interested in the many possibilities not only for defining culture but also for studying culture, and his work was foundational to the field of cultural studies, which did not exist as such when Williams published his seminal *Culture and Society* in 1958. *Keywords* provided a point of intersection and a unifying discourse for scholars applying various research methods to diverse topics under the banner of cultural studies. While *Keywords in Sound* is a different book, from a different time, for an interdisciplinary field that is already relatively established, Williams offers us a model for taking up a topic so vast and familiar (“sound”) and situating it within and against a field that is necessarily narrower and more fragmented (“sound studies”). As with “culture,” the links between terms of sonic discourse and their conceptual genealogies require critical interrogation. We have adopted the keyword format in an attempt to directly lay out the foundational terms of debate and map the shared ground of sound studies.<sup>2</sup>

The intellectual histories within each keyword are entwined in ways that destabilize and denaturalize sound as a distinct object of research. For example, after articulating together the terms silence, deafness, noise, and echo, it becomes apparent that attempts to define them as the negation of sound or mere artifacts of sound “itself” are narrowly limited. In both silence and deafness, the presumed absence of sound is shown to be the impetus for a host of sound-oriented developments, including new forms of composition (e.g. John Cage’s 4’33”), communication (e.g. lip-reading, braille, sign language), technology (e.g. Bell’s telephone, the audiometer, the hearing aid), and metaphysical theories of acoustic multinaturalism. Noise was repeatedly reconceptualized through the Industrial Revolution and the growth of urban centers, and noise continues to mean very different things for audio engineers, city and country residents, and avant-garde composers; for animals, birds, and insects; and for recording machines and networks of transmission. In their attempts to reanimate the past, historians have devised methodologies for excavating echoes that are never fully retrievable, piecing together traces from decontextualized sound recordings or, more commonly, working in silent archives of textual description. Far from being constructed against noises, echoes, and silences, the domain of sound is constituted by them.

The entries in this book draw on an enormous variety of approaches to the study of sound, each of which carries its own conceptual genealogy. But their referential fields are not self-contained, and each keyword links

to the others in ways that disrupt linear histories of inquiry. Identifying a keyword such as noise does not mean that there is something discrete out there in the world that is containable within the term itself, or that it could be conceived as a category without reference to its opposites (i.e., silence, music, order, meaning). In illuminating specific keywords, then, our intention is not to produce a centralized frame of reference or a canonical list of conceptual terms. Instead, we elucidate the philosophical debates and core problems in the historical development of studies of sound, both during and prior to their reconfiguration under the banner of sound studies.

Words for sound can also interanimate one another. In positioning two keywords with such radically different legacies as transduction and acoustemology into a relationship of complementarity, the conceptual whole becomes greater than the sum of its referential parts. Proceeding through a social critique of science and technology, Stefan Helmreich wonders if the utility of transduction as the material transformation of energy reaches a limit in the sonic ecologies of the rainforest, where Steven Feld developed his theory of acoustemology, a phenomenological approach to sound as a way of knowing. And yet virtually every aspect of Feld's research required processes of transduction—from the listening practices adopted by the Kaluli to navigate the soundscape of birds and waterfalls to the microphones used to capture those sounds for the recording *Voices of the Rainforest*, to the headphones and loudspeakers that allow a distant listener to access and interpret representations of this world of sound. In juxtaposing two very different keywords, our hope is that the reader will not only recognize them each as constituent elements of sound studies but also reconsider how the integration of such discrepancies and overlaps might allow for the emergence of new concepts of sound.

Following from this logic, we do not include a separate entry for "sound." Instead, this über-keyword emerges as a semiotic web, woven by the complementarities and tensions of its entanglements in different intellectual histories. Sound has been conceptualized as a material unit of scientific measurement subject to experimentation and manipulation as acoustic data. Sound can also be conceived through its resonance in space as a nonsemantic, nonexpressive environmental context. On the other hand sound is analyzed as a purely semantic object of language that distinguishes humans from other animals, and then again as the perceptual

ground for subjectivities formed through feeling, embodiment, and the reception of listening. The central reference point of sound binds together these disparate approaches, even as they break its meanings down and partition its effects into different subareas. But sound studies cannot become an interdisciplinary field by insisting on a holistic object that can hold together across these historical gaps and ruptures. Instead, scholars can expand sound studies by knowing and saying more about what we mean when we reference sound, and becoming more reflexive about how its meanings are positioned within a range of interpretations.

As editors, our own perspective derives in part from our affiliations with music and anthropology. The differences between these approaches are instructive for considering their interventions in sound studies: the former represents a legacy of historical systems of sonic production and analysis, and the latter an emergent program of social constructivism that reframes sound as an object of culture and human agency. There are, of course, points of overlap and intersection between these and many other disciplines, yet each has developed unique lines of inquiry in the development of sound studies.

Historically, music has stood as the most distinct object in studies of sound, partly because it elicits a heightened attention to sound and a widespread recognition of its characteristics, and partly because it represents a robust and established literature about sound, touching on its creative organization and social valuation. Along with speech, the study of music subsumed the study of sound until the Scientific Revolution, resulting in the first attempts to scientize sound in relation to the “harmony of the spheres,” to entextualize sound as graphical notation, and to philosophize sound as an aesthetic art form. Having congealed over centuries, the thematic frames of music studies—style and repertoire, aesthetic appreciation and biography, along with the proprietary tools used to formally analyze musical texts—have been productively questioned in sound studies. For example, recent work by David Suisman and Susan Strasser (2009), Mark Katz (2010), Jonathan Sterne (2012), and others has foregrounded the technological production and social consumption of music, revealing how these processes of mediation have conditioned reception, aurality, and the creative agency of listening. Collections edited by Georgina Born (2013), Michael Bull (2013), and Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (2014) demonstrate how music in spatial environments is subject to interpretations that extend far beyond music as it has been socially constructed as

an autonomous art form. As another indicator, the Special Interest Group for Sound Studies formed within the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2009 to represent an increasing interest in sound and aurality.

But if sound studies has presented specific challenges to the field of music studies and offered productive paths forward, the repositioning of “music” within the domain of “sound” has sometimes minimized or obscured the vastly different histories of these terminological concepts. Music studies predates sound studies by two millennia yet maintains an amorphous presence in the new order. The more we follow the trail of sound studies, the more often we bump into things that had always been called music, walking like a ghost through the gleaming hallways of the house that sound built. “Sound” often denotes acoustic phenomena and aspects of production and reception that register outside the realm of “music” or displace its objects and cultural histories into an apparently broader rubric. But does the term “sound” always accurately frame the particularities of soundscapes, media circulations, techniques of listening and epistemologies of aurality, even when the practices in question are widely recognized as musical and the sounds consistently heard and described as music? The generalizability of sound, in its most imprecise uses, can sidestep the effects of institutional histories and the structuring influence of entrenched debates. While we are not endorsing doctrinaire approaches, the risk of ignoring the historical particularity of sonic categories is the misrecognition of sound’s specific cultural formations.

In anthropology, the deeply coconstitutive relationship of sound and culture has long been apprehended—from Franz Boas’s pioneering linguistic study of “sound-blindness” (1889) to the homology of myth and music that runs throughout Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Raw and the Cooked* (1973)—but not recognized as a distinct subject of study until the end of the twentieth century. Feld first described his work as an “anthropology of sound” in the 1980s through his fieldwork in the Bosavi rainforest, which launched and helped organize the field around methodologies that bring the phenomenological and environmental emplacements of sounding and listening into ethnographic research (Feld 1996, 2012 [1982]). Studies of language and voice, space and place, the body and the senses, music and expressive culture, and other topics now consistently put sound at the center of analysis. This turn is further reflected in recent institutional projects, including a critical overview in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Samuels et al. 2010), a pair of issues dedicated to sound in *Anthropology News* (vol. 51, issues

9 and 10), and the establishment of a Music and Sound Interest Group in the American Anthropological Association in 2009.

Anthropology's signal contribution is the application of ethnographic methodologies and theories in everyday experiences of sound and listening. Ethnography offers sound studies an ear into the expressive, embodied, and participatory relationships with sound as it unfolds into powerful articulations of particular selves, publics, and transcultural identities (Erlmann 2004). Fieldwork in multitrack recording studios, for example, has shown how technologies of sound production can reveal conflicting language ideologies among musicians and engineers (Porcello 2004), stage a sonic "Nativeness" in powwow recordings (Scales 2012), or represent "the sound of Africa" as a transformative mix of different "tracks" of cultural mediation (Meintjes 2003). Ethnographies have also begun to develop sound studies' potential to address comparative global perspectives of cultural difference. Contributors to this book bring an anthropological concern with social constructions of power and agency to bear on playback singers in Indian popular cinema, Islamic listening publics, Aboriginal radio broadcasters, and day laborers making noise in an Osakan tent city.

But despite the interdisciplinary breadth of sound studies, the field as a whole has remained deeply committed to Western intellectual lineages and histories. As one example, of the dozens of books about sound published by MIT Press—a leader in science and technology studies, philosophies of aesthetics, and cognition—none is principally invested in non-Western perspectives or subjects. Sound studies has often reinforced Western ideals of a normative subject, placed within a common context of hearing and listening. Presumptions of universality have also led scholars to treat sounds as stable objects that have predictable, often technologically determined, effects on a generalized perceptual consciousness, which might even be reduced to an entire "human condition." This bias is detectable in the work of sound studies' de facto founder, R. Murray Schafer (1977), who did not explicitly recognize the constitutive differences that participate in the "soundscape" as a multivalent field of sounds with divergent social identities, individual creativities and affordances, biodiversities and differing abilities.

However, increasing attention to sound in cultural studies, communication, literary criticism, and media studies has deepened understandings of the role sound plays in formations of social difference. A recent

edition of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* collected multiple perspectives on the poetics of sonic identity, as mediated through literature, film, and audio technologies, with the intention of questioning “(sonic) objectivity itself” (Chow and Steintrager 2011: 2). Also in 2011, *American Quarterly* divided the issue “Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies” (Keeling and Kun 2011) into three subsections relating to various forms of difference (“Sound Technologies and Subjectivities,” “Sounding Race, Ethnicity, and Gender,” and “Sound, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere”). The *Social Text* issue “The Politics of Recorded Sound” (Stadler 2010) gathered essays on topics ranging from ethnographic recordings of Nuyorican communities to audio reenactments of lynchings. Several contributors to these texts also participate in this book, where they and others address power relations that have subtended the possibilities of hearing and voicing, stigmatized disability, and subjugated different auralities.

While many keyword entries productively reference sonic identities linked to socially constructed categories of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, citizenship, and personhood, our project does not explicitly foreground these modalities of social difference. Rather, in curating a conceptual lexicon for a particular field, we have kept sound at the center of analysis, arriving at other points from the terminologies of sound, and not the reverse. While we hope *Keywords in Sound* will become a critical reference for sound studies, it is not an encyclopedia that represents every sector of sound studies or includes every approach to the study of sound. Important and growing areas of sound research—such as archaeoacoustics, ecomusicology, and the rise of multinaturalism through interspecies studies of sound—are only gestured to at points. And while the physical sciences feature prominently in many of the keyword entries as points of cultural and historical inquiry, the fields of cognition, psychology, and brain science receive scant mention. No doubt this is partly due to the difficulty of bridging gaps between the physical and social sciences, but it is also a result of our admitted skepticism toward studies that assume a universal human subject without a full accounting of social, cultural, and historical context.

It goes without saying that many possible keywords are absent for more pragmatic reasons. Some, such as media, are folded into other terms (e.g. phonography) or addressed from multiple perspectives by individual contributors across different keyword entries. Others, such as senses, would have ideally been included and were not only because of practical limita-

tions. We were not able to suitably address sound art, a field that has exploded in creative activity of every kind, from an efflorescence of theoretical and historical writing to the establishment of pedagogy in art schools such as the Department of Sound at the Art Institute of Chicago and to the sound installations that have become a norm at underground galleries and major museums, including MoMA and the Whitney.<sup>3</sup> Other possibilities will undoubtedly arise in “retuning the world” of sound studies; we hope that this project will play a generative role in the ongoing recognition of its conceptual categories.

Broadly speaking, our criteria for inclusion gave less weight to the specific words themselves than to their intellectual connections with the contributors who wrote about them. We invited each of the authors to take up a key concept that could serve as a nexus for multiple reference points in critical discourse. Going beyond summaries of existing thought, we encouraged them to push further in creative elaborations of their keywords from within their own work—often a focused analytical example, drawn from ethnographic, historical, or philosophical research that has the potential to challenge existing discourses and suggest possibilities for further inquiry.

Any intellectual engagement with sound will necessarily reshape its material significances and extend its metaphorical lives in particular ways. Just as Williams’s writings about culture informed the critiques of “writing culture” that followed his publication, we submit these keywords as reflexive considerations of past writings about sound, as elaborations on the broad conceptualizations of sound in everyday life, and as entry points for future debate.

## Notes

We thank all twenty authors for their patience in the back-and-forth (and sometimes round-and-round) loops of feedback in the editorial process. We also thank Ken Wisoker and the team at Duke University Press, as well as the anonymous reviewers who gave suggestions on the progress of the book. Finally, thanks to Peter Bloom, Steven Feld, and Jonathan Sterne for their helpful advice on earlier versions of this introduction.

1. Williams also laid the groundwork for more recent reference works that similarly inspired us, including *Words in Motion*, edited by Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing (2009), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (2010), and *Key Terms in Language and Culture*, edited by Alessandro Duranti (2001), along with Jean-Francois

Augoyarde's and Henry Torge's *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (2006), which describes the experiential conditions and phenomenological effects of sound.

2. The chapters of this book are referred to throughout as "entries," and are cross-referenced throughout the book by title.

3. Recent studies of sound art include Cox and Warner (2004), Demers (2010), Kahn (1999, 2013), Kelley (2011), Kim-Cohen (2009), LaBelle (2006), Licht (2007), Lucier (2012), Rodgers (2010), and Voeglin (2010).

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