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And so the World Bleeped, Blooped, Buzzed, and Glitched. Now Hear This

Eliška Raiterová

Ross Brown. *Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. 215 pp. ISBN 978-1-3502-3600-4.

► PLAY

The book *Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear* by Professor of Sound Ross Brown (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, UK) was longlisted for the PQ Best Publication Award in Performance Design & Scenography in 2023. And certainly not unjustly. Brown takes the reader on a wondrous complex journey through the modern history of sound and hearing from Edison to the present, showing that sound has been around all the time, an integral part of every perceptible phenomenon, although not always understood as such.

At the time I was reading *Sound Effect*, the film *The Zone of Interest* (2023), directed by Jonathan Glazer, about the life of the family of the German concentration camp commander just outside the camp walls, was premiering. The advertisements often presented this film as groundbreaking, emphasising that despite being about the Holocaust, it contains no scenes of violence. However, this claim is somewhat misleading. Violence permeates the film, albeit not visually – it is ‘hidden’ within the sound. The screams, cries, gunshots, alarms, and constant hum of cars and machinery from the crematorium seem to emanate from afar, behind the so-called ‘fourth wall’, i.e., from the space behind the projection screen. The film made me

wonder how it is possible that while the violence is present in the sound, we perceive it as absent from the film. Are we accustomed to being guided mostly by sight and preferring it to hearing? How are we accustomed to editing what we hear? To these and a few other questions I have not even dared to ask, Brown offers knowledgeable answers.

History of diabolical machine and more

Ross Brown became Britain’s first ‘sound academic’ in 1994 and held this position for several years until the beginning of the new millennium, while he had been developing the BA in theatre sound design at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama of the University of London. Since the 1980s, the era called ‘sonic turn’ (15), sound was finding its place in the professional theatre industry and there was a growing demand for more challenging sound work. The author himself began working with sound at the Fringe Theatre as a recent art school graduate in the mid-1980s, moving then quickly to large international work.

Drawing on his rich and long-standing experiences, Brown has written a comprehensive work on sound and hearing. The

book is divided into three parts. The first part is more theoretical and introduces various concepts from the field of Sound Studies, while the other two focus more on historical aspects – including a reflection on contemporary artwork or pop culture.

In the first part called ‘Theatrical Hearing’ (3–62), Brown shows that each generation learns to hear according to its own cultural circumstances – by listening to different music, watching differently sounded cartoons or moving around in a differently noisy world. Sound effects from popular culture in particular then form a kind of common repository of sonic knowledge, and hearing for the author (referring to Steven Feld’s concept of acoustemology) means knowing. He concludes that hearing, which does not happen in the ear but only in the brain, is an editing process that also involves ‘unhearing’ (36–37) – taking out what we do not want/need/cannot hear. He argues that the sense of hearing is programmed by narrative, dramaturgy, and aesthetics and, referring to Peter Sellars and Jacques Ranciere, suggests that sound design has become part of the process of aesthetic dissensus, that is, the breakdown of the consensus of perceived phenomenon and represented meaning.

The second part, ‘Reconfigurations’ (67–115), begins with a description of a contemporary sound production (Complicité’s 2016 London production of *The Encounter*), in which the audience shared a diegetic world via binaural headphones. Drawing on Holger Schultz, Brown considers perception with headphones as a constant recalibration of the body in relation to what is heard. This introduction is followed by a dive into the history and

remarkable excursion into development of sound technologies: from Edison’s invention of the phonograph to the modern contraptions such as stereo sound and hi-fi cell.

The first use of recorded sound in a theatrical production, designed by Colonel Charles Gouraud, Edison’s head of European office in London, is also discussed. A recording of a baby crying was played at the premiere of the domestic comedy-drama *The Judge* in 1890; the critic Clemens Scott labelled it a ‘diabolical machine’, ‘infinitely worse than nature’ (89). Forty-five years later, Brecht described Piscator’s use of a recording of Lenin’s voice in a performance of *Rasputin* as properly chosen *Verfremdungseffekt*.

In the second part, Brown emphasises that sound exists not only as a momentary effect in the play but as part of the scenography and discusses the notion of ‘picturesque’ as a proto-Romantic praxis providing a new sensibility of the world. Although picturesque is traditionally thought of as a visual experience, he argues that since its inception it has always been a distinctly auditory experience as well (103).

In the third part titled ‘Our Thunder is the Best (Living in the Audio World)’ (119–197), Brown shows how subjectivity was shaped through sound in 19th-century English Gothic melodrama, then discusses the origins of sound in film (using the films of the Armenian-American director Rouben Mamoulian, who was a promoter of sound in film) and the origins of radio (focusing on the Columbia Workshop series and its crucial figure, Norman Corwin). Here, too, sonic qualities are revealed to be a tool that immerses us in the (not just psychological, but also physi-

ological) subjectivity of the characters – for example, in the case of the first movie adaptation of *Jekyll and Hyde* from 1931, in which Mamoulian used a recording of his own beating heart that later became a sonic meme.

To convene hearing

As is apparent from this (greatly reduced!) summary, Brown's breadth of topics is impressive, and he navigates them with ease, displaying deep insight into the subject matter. His language is witty, fresh, and evocative, perhaps reflecting the unconventional dynamic origins of the book, much of which was drafted while walking the author's dog in a park near his home in southeast London. Some passages in the book are truly historical anecdotes such as the one about the first stereo film, which Walt Disney developed while having dinner with conductor Stokowski and then, after the flopped premiere, for some reason sold all the equipment to Stalin, who turned out to be a big Disney fan. Ironically, when the ship was carrying the sound equipment across the Atlantic, it was torpedoed by a U-boat, so the remains of the first surround sound film still lie at the bottom of the ocean.

The typographic structure of the book is also worth mentioning. Brown employs special symbols for play, pause, and rewind to seamlessly transition between topics and time periods. Thus, when the narrative requires it, a symbol of pause allows the author to go back a century and clarify an analogy, while a play symbol signals that the main topic of discussion is 'on' again. A part of this structure are Brown's own memories, imaginary or

hypothetical scenarios, marked in italics, and these passages also make the book an unusual and exciting read. A charming constant is the naval command 'Now hear this', with which the author announces a new theme. Besides being an allusion to Christopher Logue's contemporary telling of Homer's *Iliad*, *War Music*, it characterises the theatrical rhetoric suggesting that sound often performs to convene hearing (xxii).

Sound as socially constructed space

Crucially, for Brown, sound is a socially constructed space. This is why he also introduces the term *audimus*, collective auditory habitus as an opposite to *audio* (from the Latin *I hear*) – to avoid the danger of solipsism and fetishisation of first-person experience that audio marketing promotes, along with evangelical meta-discourses of aurality like McLuhan and Carpenter's study *Acoustic Space*, which, according to the author, resonates some problematic narratives of this 1950s sales patter (196).

Particularly noteworthy in this context is Brown's analysis of advertisements promoting hi-fi cells at the time of their origin in the 1950s, which turn out to be highly sexist in contemporary understanding, targeting men with an image of escape from an annoying wife and noisy children. The sound here, according to Brown, enables ethically desirable selfishness and the illusion of escapism. He points out that sound narratives can also be simplistic and racist – e.g., 'the archetypal sound montages of animal sounds, narcotic detachment and approximated "ethnic" styl-

ings' (129) brought about by colonialism, which persist to this day in the form of relaxing soundtracks as well as in much theatre and movie sound design.

One thing that might be slightly confusing for the reader of the book is its overly general treatment of the term 'theatre'. Ross uses the term in the broadest possible sense, the theatre for him is the whole world, 'a congregation of hearers', as he puts it in Conclusion (197), and while this seemingly goes hand in hand with understanding of sound as a pervasive socially constructed space, sometimes the theatre metaphor seems to be somewhat vague and void, unclear as to what the author means at a given moment.

The definition of sound that the author arrives at in the end seems simple: sound

is audibility, where audibility is not given but constantly negotiated, created by the differences of us as hearers. It is these that define wonderfully rich and layered sonic space.

Overall, Brown's exploration of sound and its societal implications is insightful and thought-provoking. The book offers a rich tapestry of historical anecdotes, theoretical reflections, and contemporary analyses, accessible not only to all academics but also to a wider audience of those interested in sound, such as theatre, film, and music practitioners. *Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear* contributes significantly to the understanding of sound as a dynamic and culturally embedded phenomenon.

■ STOP



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