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Sonic Ambiances – ‘Bruitage’-Recordings of the Swiss International Radio in the Context of Media Practices and Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. *The article follows a discovery in the Swiss sound archives: the ‘bruitages’. Bruitages are field recordings; real world sounds from places and events in Switzerland used in radio production. They represent a documentary media practice which is based on sonic ambiances. In the context of radio, sonic ambiances are then positioned threefold: as a documentary and handcrafted practice, as a bodily performance in local space, and as a perceptive phenomenon. This leads to an understanding of ambiances as mediatized interactions between humans and their environment, resulting in specific media practices. The article concludes by considering whether a deeper understanding of ambiances could influence the media-critical debate about the realisation of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage convention.*

Keywords: *documentary radio, media production, empirical study, sound studies, performance, intangible cultural heritage*

At the beginning of the 20th century shortwave technology made it possible to spread voices, music and other sounds worldwide. In the following, I take a look back into documentary media practices in international radio production of Switzerland in the 1960s and 70s through the example of ‘bruitage’ recordings.

This paper is based on parts of my dissertation project about the Swiss Shortwave Service of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). Using archival sounds such as programmes and raw material, I examined how facets of Swiss culture, especially of Alpine Switzerland, were broadcast to listeners worldwide. SBC had programmes in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Arabic and Esperanto. Focusing on a handful of programmes, my micro-examination focusses on sonic particularities of international radio broadcasting during a period of the Cold War. Besides finished programmes, so-called ‘bruitages’ were an exceptional find in the archive.

This article follows the production, usage and reception of these tape recordings during the 1950s and 60s. I will begin by contextualising ‘ambiance’ in radio production as part of the handicraft of recording and later montage. Secondly, ambiances are discussed in the context of sonic performances wherein humans interact with their surrounding space through the use of a medium. Thirdly, the created sonic ambiances can produce emotional reactions in the listener, rendering the listener as resonance space.

In the last section, (sonic) ambiance will be discussed briefly in the context of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage debate. *Bruitages* will be shown to refer to a specific form of (popular media) culture, a set of media practices which may, in future, be considered as forms of cultural heritage, but which are currently not only excluded by the UNESCO convention but moreover seen as a threat to 'cultural heritage'.

Bruitages as elements of sonic handcraft

The term '*bruitages*' comes from the French '*bruit*' which means sound or noise. The surviving *bruitages* range from commentary-free atmospheres of railway stations, alpine tramways or fighting cows to events accompanied by commentary such as a recording of an aircraft landing on a glacier or of a religious custom. *Bruitages* lacking reporter comments are a precursor to today's sound libraries or sound effects¹. The recording of *bruitages* without commentary stopped in the 1970s as sound libraries became commercially available in the form of records.

Bruitages represent a documentary media practice that is based on recorded sounds outside the studio and on the spot. They can be understood as field recordings or, following radio historian David Hendy, as 'real world sounds', which can be differentiated from studio recordings by their real world reference (Hendy 2013). Real world sounds also differ from studio recordings in their sonic 'dirtyness' and 'rawness'. They are unstaged and therefore include unintentional surrounding noises and sometimes even acoustic interferences. This highlights how self-recorded ambiances are integral components of radio as a hand-crafted medium (Hendy 2013, 42). The recordings from distinctive places and selected events in Switzerland were juxtaposed with studio voices and music to create programmes. In this arrangement they were one means of translating Switzerland sonically alongside other types of radio broadcasts such as music programmes. *Bruitages* are a form of recorded ambiance which were used by SBC for representing and mediating a 'Swiss reality' to listeners abroad (Huber 2014). In the following section, empirical examples will be discussed.

Bruitages: performing sonic ambiances

Archival findings show that *bruitages* were used in documentary programmes such as touristic feature series. One example was already mentioned above: the glacier landing *bruitage*, which was used for a broadcast series of 14 episodes called 'Let's Discover Switzerland' (1968). It was used to promote the broadcast in the programme magazine of SBC. Text and picture explain in detail how and where reporter Nick Lombard landed in 'one of those famous Swiss-made Pilatus Turbo-Porter aircraft'. The text promises to give insights into Switzerland 'off the beaten track' – a glacier landing being the most exclusive experience. This programme shows how outdoor experiences were a flagship in the entertainment programmes of SBC as a competitive international broadcaster.

In a similar but preserved programme from 1975 called 'Don't Just Stay Here – Do Something', reporter Keith Cooper tried out different less-known winter sports. One of the episodes lasted 24 minutes. The *bruitages* of his sport trials – from sledding to

1. *Sound libraries or sound effects are collections of prerecorded or preproduced sounds and noises which are used in radio or film sound design to produce atmospheres.*

delta flying and bob sled racing — comprise a quarter of the programme and were in some cases presented uncut. The personal expressions by Keith Cooper are marked by his spontaneity and in this way they differ strongly from scripted moderations. As well as his voice, one hears noises of him moving and breathing, or one hears the rattling, sliding or whizzing noises of sports equipment on ice, snow or in the air. Through the surrounding sounds or sonic ambiance of the places — one hears a Swiss folk band playing or a bell at the starting point of the bobsled run — *bruitages* were a key ingredient in presenting Switzerland as lively and unstaged. The touristic feature programmes drew their vividness from the bodily performance of the reporter and its liveness on tape. Ultimately, the sonic immediacy enabled by the field recordings became a way to mediate Switzerland in a distinctive and illustrative way.

Thus, *bruitages* in the context of SBC, can be described as real world sounds of Switzerland, which were part of a programme strategy to mediate Switzerland to listeners abroad in an unstaged manner. *Bruitages* are an expression not only of the interest of radio producers in the sonic environment of Switzerland, but also of the bodily involvement with this environment through a sonic performance. Ambiances in the specific context of radio can therefore be understood as both documentary and performative. The following section takes a reception-based approach to ambiances.

Bruitages as resonance space in the listener

As Hendy and others state, sounds are essentially ambiguous and ephemeral (Hendy 2014; Bonz 2015). Radio sounds are less precise in meaning than words or the fixed images of cinema, leaving room for the listeners' imaginations. The imaginative power of sounds is a common theme in theory, practice and scholarship of radio (for example Chignell 2009; Kleinsteuber 2012).

One challenge in my research was — and is — how to access and verbalise listeners' sensory imaginations. There is a collection of listener letters to SBC, but these often do not refer to impressions of a specific programme. Listeners from the time often wrote generally about their impressions of the SBC's programme and their ties to Switzerland. I therefore tried to gain insight into the sensory impressions and moods through a survey. 21 students and colleagues heard the broadcast 'Don't just stay here — do something' in its entirety and answered my questionnaire. Interestingly all persons that took part in the study seemed easily able to have a sensory-bodily impression of the sports by only hearing somebody else performing them. They all seemed able to physically imagine the sports and in this way were able to decide without doubt if they would like to try it themselves or not. People referred repeatedly to the high risk of most of the presented sports and the somehow naive and comical aspects of the reporter trying these himself. The spontaneously performing reporter, his changing voice and surroundings were seemingly able to mediate a complex of verbal, paraverbal and environmental information that triggered the power of imagination in the listeners. One person commented: 'Funny how one heard the sounds/noises of the way downhill. I know all these places and now look forward to the winter season.' Some people complained about the bad quality of the recordings, as they consist of disturbing noises. There were also critiques of the manner of presentation being too much fun and too enthusiastic, making it hard for listeners to maintain a critical distance. These observations can be

understood as effects of the performative setting, the spontaneity, immediacy and closeness of the presented winter sports experience.

Broadcasts that include real world recordings such as *bruitages* can be more illustrative and more emotional than for example a sober newscast style. Radio historian Hendy cites a famous British radio producer of the 1920s who claimed that reality radio had an extraordinary power to affect the listeners through a 'sudden mental contact' (Hendy 2013, 42). The immediacy and real world reference of field recordings allow a different type of communication-based relationship. Hendy writes that producers and listeners are enabled to 'understand each other not only intellectually, but emotionally' (Hendy 2013, 40). Embracing Hendy's approach lets us view radio not simply as a medium of ideas or information but far more as a medium of feeling.

In section 1, the definition of *ambiance* was derived from a specific documentary media practice in which a reporter interacts sonically with the local environment. In this sense, *ambiances* were defined in the context of sonic performativity, which is based on unique spatial references. In short, *ambiances* are sonic performances of surrounding space. In this section, *ambiance* as term was reflected in the context of listener reactions to a radio programme that built upon the inclusion of *bruitages*. Section 2 aimed to show how *bruitages* as real world sounds triggered unexpectedly strong reactions in the listeners. A survey revealed how radio functioned as a medium of feeling by enabling a sudden mental contact between listener and producer. This contact, one might say, is bodily and mentally performed – on one side we have the reporter moving through a local space with a recording device – on the other side we have the listener imagining or re-performing the situation mentally. The listener functions as a resonance space for the reporter's sonic performance. In this way, *ambiances* that are seen as an acoustic phenomenon find a resonance space in an audience or a subject. *Ambiance* as defined by its environmental relations became, in the empirical context of a documentary media practice, part of a complex network of spatial, bodily and mental performances of a loose group of producers and audiences. *Ambiance* remains a fuzzy term as it connects the real world with imaginary and emotional resonance spaces. *Ambiances* in the context of sound media can be understood as outer and inner resonance spaces which build a common ground for human relations. *Bruitages* as an example of sonic *ambiances* are based on technical knowledge as they deal with recording and montage issues. As Hendy illustrates, radio is a handcrafted medium (Hendy 2013, 42). Applying his approach to sonic *ambiances* allows them to be seen as a handicraft practiced by a group of people aiming to reach a specific audience. This perspective provides a point of departure for discussing sonic *ambiances* in the context of cultural heritage.

Sound hunters: Sonic ambiance as intangible cultural heritage?

Moving forward to the material presence of recorded *ambiances* as *bruitage* tapes I finally would like to link sonic *ambiances* with questions of cultural heritage. In 2003 the UNESCO convention for intangible cultural heritage stated:

'They [forms of intangible cultural heritage] are forms of culture that can be recorded but cannot be touched or stored in physical form, like in a museum, but only experienced through a vehicle giving expression to it.'²

According to this definition intangible cultural heritage is based on non-material expressions of culture, which always needs a vehicle or as one might say a medium of expression. Recent discussions about digital media and cultural heritage refer mainly to questions of how digital media can help to preserve heritage before it is definitively lost and to questions about the negative side-effect of 'freezing' UNESCO listed cultures in video, text or photography, rather than supporting their somehow natural tendency to change (Kalay 2008, Pietrobruno 2014). In general there is a strong line drawn between media and culture in these discussions. Media are mostly discussed in their representational and documentary roles for culture rather than as integral aspects of today's grown culture as such. This presents difficulties when discussing sonic ambiances, which are mainly a mediated practice. It is therefore worth considering whether and how documentary media practices, such as the recording and broadcasting of ambient sounds, could be valorised as a form of culture with its own tradition and social anchorage as a form of intangible cultural heritage.

At first sight *bruitages* strongly connote post war media techniques, and seem to be only a professional and not a popular practice. But *bruitages* still exist in the form of sound libraries, which today are used for audio design in radio and film. It is also important to consider the motivation behind *bruitages*, such as human beings interacting with their environment through a recording device. Starting with the first affordable recorders, the sound hunting community started to grow. Sound hunters were organised in national groups and met through international gatherings and competitions. Sound hunter organisations still exist today but are much less popular than in the 1950s and 1960s. With the availability of commercially available audiovisual recordings, sound hunting changed into chasing special audiovisual moments. So the connection can be drawn even more clearly: *bruitages* as a spontaneous recording practice are a predecessor of home videos and today's YouTube videos. And recording practices have their traditions which underlie technical and social change. Following this line of thought, one might even go so far as to say that YouTube is full of sonic and audiovisual *bruitages*. As such it is a witness to a very vivid form of culture, one which produced different traditional lines and differentiations. A form of culture which not only represents something that is more real, but also, as a form of cultural interaction with the environment, creates reality. Auslander states that (documentary) media cultural practices, in all their differentiation, should be considered a form of culture, because its production includes a performative act, similar to dancing or music making (Auslander, 2006). This view could well be applied to *bruitages* and ambiances, as the preceding discussion illustrates.

To sum up: following the traces starting in the Swiss sound archives, reconstructing the creation and reception of *bruitages*, and localising their complex functioning and meaning as ambiances, it finally became obvious that there are complex cultural processes underlying these seemingly simple sonic artifacts. It was shown that the UNESCO convention for intangible cultural heritage excludes media practices. These practices seem to be considered part of the threatening influence of globalisation

2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intangible_cultural_heritage

causing social transformation, which leads to extinction of potential cultural heritage. UNESCO sees technical media mainly as representational and documentary, as something different from the 'real' intangible culture and not as form of culture itself. Drawing parallels between the bruitages and sound hunting suggests that documentary media practices such as sound hunting, home video production or YouTubing be considered as cultural forms. For such media cultural forms to qualify as cultural property they must fulfil UNESCO's criteria regarding the processes of knowledge transfer, of the grouping and gathering of people who act as carriers of a specific form of culture etc. In today's globalised, networked and mediated societies people are less likely to gather together in locally or socially fixed structures than to commune through recorded and mediated sonic and visual materials.

Finally, looking closely at specific media practices such as hunting for sounds or bruitages clarifies the urgency of discussing such practices in the context of heritage. It has become clear that such practices of recording, storing and publishing content are not only documentary practices, but also practices of humans interacting with their (acoustic) surroundings, practices of imagination and of cultural identification with a certain place. Ambiances could therefore be an avenue for understanding and validating contemporary and future cultural practices as heritage; practices which use technological media as their form of handicraft, for human interaction and personal expression.

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