

PAPERS 4 Elements for a history of listening

Chair – Paul Barker
WED 16.30-18.00 | RR5

Listening differently: how the transformation of audition at the end of the 19th Century changed French theatre

Melissa Van Drie

Understanding the process of how sound was received and processed was an important preoccupation of science in the 19th Century, one that changed the conception of listening, and led ultimately to the development of phonograph, microphone and telephone.

A new listening experience was introduced into mainstream culture. Mediatized listening is constituted of encounters with disembodied voices and purely audible communication. While literary, music and cinema studies have recognised the impact of these sound techniques on artistic creation and perception, they have largely been ignored in theatre studies.

This reflection will not focus on the immediate – and sometimes banal – incorporation of sound machines onstage or in the wings. Rather, it's how the powerful imaginary and technical experiments of these early technologies altered the very concept of and forms of theatre (modes of representation and theatre-going).

Electrical sound and the concept of mediatic resistance in theatre

Jean-Marc Larrue

Although the microphone, phonograph and incandescent light were invented at the same time, it took 60 years before electrical amplification was accepted in the theatre. Yet electrical lighting invaded stages and auditoria all over the world in just a decade. Why did theatre resist sonic technology?

Theatre artists, who were reluctant to use a microphone on stage, would happily do so for radio or phonographic recording. The short but fascinating Théâtrophone story also shows that the presence of microphones on stage was acceptable as long as the mediatized sound was heard only outside the theatre venue.

This paper explores the concept of mediatic resistance to explain why and how electrical and mediatized sound was considered a major threat to the fundamental characteristics of the theatre. And how, 60 years later, amplified and pre-recorded sound gained acceptance.

Sound in space-time: how technology has changed sound practices

Éric Vautrin

In the past sound was merely illustrative or served to reveal off-stage action. But as technology developed, sound became a tool of dramatic construction.

Today's we can control sound to the tiniest parameter. We are witnessing sound production techniques becoming their own sound material.

Now that composition and diffusion have become linked, the gestures of the sound engineer resemble those of an improvising musician. The sound engineer is evolving from technician to performer/composer.

Can these new composition practices induce new ways of listening in performance spaces, opening the possibility for new theatre forms?

What precisely are we listening to when we listen to sound material and not just sound? And what can we make of the declaration of French composers Guionnet and La Casa who, when attempting to define this place of undifferentiation, where sound is opposed to sound matter, said: "Listening to sound matter is a form of deafness"?