

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Greg Goodale.** *Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age.* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 189 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03604-0; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07795-1.

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## Learning to Listen

Given the subject matter of this work, it seems only appropriate to begin with a musical metaphor. *Sonic Persuasions* is like one of those rock ‘n’ roll albums from the early 1960s, released before the Beatles popularized the notion that songs should be thematically related. Albums released during this time period were simply a collection of an artist’s latest songs, and the only unifying thread was the fact that they were all from the same performer. Similarly, Greg Goodale’s book is a collection of brief case studies that examine examples of media in which sound was used to produce a particular effect. And, like listeners to those albums from yore, individual readers will have varying responses to the different selections, though one wishes there was a more cohesive framework to hold the disparate elements together, beyond the mere fact that all the examples deal with sound in one way or another.

Goodale, an assistant professor of communication studies at Northeastern University, begins this book by pointing out that Western scholarship has long favored sight over sound as a means of knowing the world. This preference can be traced back to Plato, and in the modern era, Goodale argues that this dynamic has encouraged media scholars to focus on the visual element of film and television. Radio, the electronic form of mass media that preceded and helped to establish television, has been less studied, (though the field of radio studies is not nearly as desolate as Goodale suggests). There are also the obvious

material conditions that have contributed to the scholarly emphasis on the visual over the sonic; until recent decades, recording and playing back sounds were cumbersome affairs. The dominant format for scholarship, the book, also lends itself to literary, textual analyses, and translating sound into a printed form is always a difficult task. Goodale additionally mentions copyright as an obstacle for the academic study of sound, and one strongly suspects that is the reason the book does not come with an accompanying collection of audio examples.

In contrast to this persistent visual paradigm, however, some scholars such as Marshall McLuhan have called attention to the power of sound and the ways it evokes emotion. Goodale also cites the scholarship of more recent academics whose work might be lumped together under the rubric of sound studies, including Michele Hilmes, Susan Douglas, Mark M. Smith, Jonathan Sterne, and R. Murray Schafer. After acknowledging this growing field, Goodale laments the lack of agreed-upon methodology or overarching theoretical assumptions that might lend some consistency to this area of study. A logical inference from such an observation would be that the author intends to provide just this and bring some coherence to the cacophony. Given the ephemeral nature of sound and the variety of ways in which it has been studied, such an attempt may very well be impossible, though it would make for an intriguing study nonetheless. Rather than this more ambitious

task, however, Goodale states that his more modest goal is simply to indicate that “sound can be read ... in a variety of ways,” and he invokes a wide variety of examples to prove his point (p. 13). The argument, then, is not that sound works in any kind of predictable or consistent manner, but merely that it does produce effects.

In the opinion of this reviewer, (who is aware of, though not intimately familiar with, the earlier sound studies scholarship), one would have thought that the importance of sound for the field of media studies was already well established.

The next four chapters are arranged in loose, chronological order as Goodale works his way through approximately one hundred years of history, beginning in the late nineteenth century. Along the way, he discusses a great many topics, including an obscene joke recorded in the 1890s, the changing style of political speeches in the early twentieth century, clocks, locomotives, Hitler’s vocal style, the intersection of race and musical styles during the 1930s and 40s, radio programs, air-raid sirens, bombs, and (again) the ticking of a clock. The discussions are based upon close analysis of specific sounds, though Goodale also relies upon a good deal of visual and written evidence as well. When discussing the linguistic conventions of political speeches from the early twentieth century, for example, Goodale references a number of political cartoons from the era, and when considering the notoriously complex issue of race and popular music, he integrates photographs into the discussion. The analysis of the sounds of a clock, and how these came to represent the disruption caused by modernity, relies heavily upon Richard Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son*.

Goodale draws his theoretical insights from an equally wide variety of sources, including such stalwarts as Theodor Adorno, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. The work of Lawrence Levine is also cited numerous times; Goodale acknowledges that this work’s impetus was a single-word response that Levine wrote on one of his graduate school papers: “listen.” A final chapter provides a broad summary of some of the previous scholarly work that has been done on sound, and this material would have been equally appropriate for the introduction. The observations feel oddly out of place following such an eclectic group of examples.

One of Goodale’s central tenets is that an effort “to read sound should produce remarkable discoveries that illuminate histories and cultures” (p. 140). The operative word in that sentence is “should,” though too often the observations in this book simply offer evidence to support what has already been understood. In discussing political speeches from the early twentieth century, for example, Goodale cites the perceived feminization crisis of the time. Since schoolteachers were overwhelmingly female, and women were also responsible for child-rearing in the home, critics were concerned that America’s young men were not learning to be suitably masculine. This cultural concern dovetailed with growing urbanization and the loss of the romanticized rural life of the past, and a number of cultural historians have written of this phenomenon. Goodale reveals how this concern over masculinity played out in the changing oratory style of politicians, though the underlying insight itself is not new. In his chapter on race and popular music, Goodale scolds scholars for devoting too much attention to Jackie Robinson as a groundbreaking pioneer of integration and for giving undue credit to Elvis Presley for his appropriation of black music (p. 77). The fact that integration had a long, complex, and uneven history before the late 1940s, however, is hardly a new insight, nor is the observation that blacks and whites had been borrowing musical styles from each other before Elvis.

Despite the shortcomings, the book may nonetheless achieve its modest goal. While reading the book, for example, this reviewer found himself thinking more critically about sound than he perhaps would have otherwise. During a screening of *The Artist*, a new film that is being marketed as ostensibly silent, the reviewer was keenly aware of the synchronized music, sound effects, and long bouts of silence; indeed, the sounds of the film are just as integral and meaningful as anything that plays out visually on screen. The ringing alarm from the reviewer’s smart phone also triggered a cascade of thoughts. Of all the possible sounds that this device might produce, why is it that an old-fashioned, traditional ringing, meant to replicate an older form of technology, has such a remarkable effect upon the listener? If Goodale’s attempt is simply to encourage media scholars to listen more closely to sound, then the book will have served its purpose, though one cannot help but wish that a stronger argument had been crafted to yoke all the varied examples together.

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