



Steve J. Wurtzler. *Electric Sounds: Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 416 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13676-1; \$26.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13677-8.



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Electric Reverberations: A New Perspective on Sound Technology

In *Pieces of Sound* Steve J. Wurtzler has written an innovative (no pun intended) study of the contested introduction of electric sound technology in America from the mid-1920s to the 1930s. Wurtzler's examination of sound technology as "a transmedia phenomenon" (p. 9) demonstrates ably how we can, and indeed must, rethink connections between the phonograph, radio, and synchronous-sound film. Taking his cue from the observation that all three media use the same apparatus to transmit sound for different applications, Wurtzler investigates both the economic base of these technologies and struggles over their social meaning. His well-argued and thought-provoking study will provide historians of journalism with an understanding not only of the development of media corporate culture but also of parallels to our present issues of digitalization and assimilation of new technology.

Wurtzler links the phonograph, radio, and synchronous-sound film through their use of electrical acoustics, defined as the implementation of electrical energy in disseminating sound. Yet Wurtzler's story is

not of a teleological triumphal march of electric sound. Rather, he also considers failed technologies such as sponsored films in 1930s Hollywood. With Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker's model of SCOT (the Social Construction of Technology) as his guide, Wurtzler seeks to trace the "closure mechanisms" (p. 12) of meaning for electric sound. He does so using contemporary trade and popular periodicals such as *Wireless Age*, *Life*, and *Phonograph Monthly Review*, along with published industry sources.

"Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms": this slogan (quoted, p. 118) from the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition guidebook perfectly conveys the media corporations' attitudes from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s that Wurtzler investigates in the main body of his work. Wurtzler discusses the economics of "industry applies," demonstrating how large media corporations such as AT&T, General Electric, and the RCA emerged by the early 1930s through intelligent purchasing of patent rights, licensing, and capital investment in research and development. These companies built on their strong economic base through attempts to dictate both the narrative

of how “science finds” by omitting failures and how man should conform to acoustic media. As Wurtzler argues convincingly, media corporations presented their interpretations of sound media as an instrument to promote national unification and “consumer democracy” (p. 224). In so doing, they used models from preexisting practices. The radio’s place in the home, as described in chapter 3, for example, was modeled on the phonograph’s successful redirection from an instrument for business and public performance to an apparatus for domestic entertainment.

One of Wurtzler’s most helpful conceptual models is his discussion of sound representation in film. Chapter 5 presents two epistemological paradigms: “transcription” (sound technology as an instrument to document real-world acoustics) versus “signification” (electric sound as a means of expression and experimentation with sound). Finally, a consensus of “signifying fidelity” emerged, i.e., to “use the creative potential of electrical sound technology to signify the mimetic relationship to an (often nonexistent) original sound event” (p. 18).

A few minor issues, however, mar *Electric Sounds*. Possibly due to decisions by Columbia University Press, there is an index, but no bibliography, and the end notes contain much valuable commentary and explanation, which meant much flipping back and forth during reading. Furthermore, Wurtzler also never explains why he excludes the telephone from his study, as this may have strengthened his arguments about radio and phonograph design as attempting to emphasize the sounds produced rather than the apparatus itself. Finally, what

about sources other than periodicals? While Wurtzler mines these to great effect to illustrate the meanings large companies and journalists offered to the using public, I would have liked him to investigate the impact of these presentations on consumers. Sales figures, cinema attendance, or letters to editors may have proven fruitful in this regard.

Ironically, despite investigating “closure mechanisms,” Wurtzler’s conclusion “stubbornly resists imposing closure” (p. 280). Of course, electric sound was never reduced to one meaning; pirate radio in the 1950s and 1960s is one example of its constant contestation. Yet I would still have liked a conclusion with fewer anecdotes about 16mm film collections at a New England liberal arts college and more explanation of how the radio, phonograph, and sound film strengthened connections between consumerism and American patriotism. The virtues of Wurtzler’s work, however, lie in its new approach and its presentation of how large media corporations sought to influence the public’s interaction with sound, rather than that public’s reactions. He provides a model for understanding how the social meaning of technology, in his case electrical sound, “emerged as the product of the overdetermined interactions between product design, human performance and the rhetorical framing of media forms, including efforts to discipline these consumers of new media” (p. 167). Overall, Wurtzler’s book is a very profitable read and will be most helpful for those who seek parallels to our media present in the past and want to understand the “mutually reinforcing” (p. 227) relationship between new media and extant matrices of economics, politics, and culture.

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