



**Kerim Yasar.** *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868–1945.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xv + 277 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-18713-8.

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Rocks tumbling from the peak of Mount Fuji, the chug of steam engines on the Oikawa railway line in Shizuoka, jet engines at Chitose (Sapporo) or Haneda (Yokohama) airports, the passing of a high-speed bullet train across the Fuji River, and drag racing at the Fuji Speedway—these sounds, and the best time of year to capture them, were among those listed on a map of Japan printed in a 1977 guidebook to the hobby of sound recording. [1] The article made it clear that by the 1970s the sounds of Japan could be captured and reproduced by anyone with the inclination to pack a portable tape recorder, some spare clothes, and a map. The portability and affordability of sound-recording technology was just one element in an individual and technological mobility that transformed everyday social, political, and economic life after 1945, yet sound was clearly already part of a Japanese national imaginary and deeply imbricated in economic, social, and technological change.

Kerim Yasar's *Electrified Voices* starts from the premise that sound is central to the social and ritual life of a community and explains how this connection between sound and the nation space came about over the previous century, when the new, “modern” technologies of telephone, phonograph, and radio began a process of incorporating

sound into a national imaginary that print capitalism had already initiated. The reproduction of sound that became possible in the latter part of the nineteenth century radically altered the human relationship to it. Sound gradually came to be understood as one aspect of a national culture, and Yasar argues that the new technologies the book examines made more thorough the state-driven, ideological processes of homogenization that the Meiji Restoration of 1868 had accelerated. The book explains how the telephone, phonograph, and radio radically changed the way Japanese related to and understood sound, particularly the sound of the voice.

The roles and uses of sound and our relationship to the sonic environment are historically and culturally conditioned—often particular to a given culture. Nonetheless, until relatively recently, historians have largely ignored sound and concentrated on the visual aspects of the modern experience. This privileging of sight over sound meant that the ability to read became indispensable to social and cultural life and embedded a bias toward writing and seeing in understanding the world. It also helped to shore up and literally engrave upon society class distinctions and a tendency to consider elite visual culture as superior to “less civilized” preliterate cultures. The role of

the written media in shaping national identities and fueling nationalism is well documented and Yasar notes the important part Benedict Anderson's work has played in this. But by explaining the central importance and value placed on the voice in Japanese culture throughout history, Yasar gives us an alternate take on the role of technology in shaping the national space. The technology to record, transmit, and replay sound shaped the creation of "modern Japan" just as much as the printing press and the ability to partake in an imagined community through script.

In the first chapter, dealing with the arrival of the telephone, Yasar makes a strong argument for the role of the voice in Japan, and clearly shows how important to Japanese culture the primacy of the voice and orality was and still is. Scholars from the 1600s on distinguished Japan as a culture rich in speech and placed it in opposition to China—the country "rich in script." This "residual orality" is evident in a range of Japanese arts such as Naniwabushi (narrative ballads), the Benshi (storytellers accompanying silent films), Kabuki, and Rakugo, and Yasar notes that the pulse of oral narrative remained vital throughout the prewar period (p. 28). The telephone then, with its ability to transmit the voice across wider distances than previously imagined, quickly became popular after the introduction of the Yobidashi Denwa in 1900. This system allowed callers without a phone line to visit the telephone exchange and connect to the telephone office nearest to the person they wished to speak with. A telephone summons ticket would be sent, valid for seven days and often including an appointed time for the call to take place. According to the figures, over six thousand were issued in the first year of operation, rising to more than half a million just ten years later and more than two million by the mid-1930s. The technological magic and pleasure derived from the voice meant that even at its most disruptive—it could sometimes take hours to place a call when

the exchanges were busy—the telephone became crucial to modern life in Japan.

Given the historical context of the arrival of the telephone, phonograph, and radio in Japan, it is not surprising that the devices immediately came to symbolize Western modernity, and the connection with "civilization" was impossible to escape. Yet everywhere ambiguity was central to the experience of the modern. As Seth Jacobowitz has recently shown, in Japan the telegraph came to symbolize a modernity that could be both frightening and desirable but certainly appeared unstoppable.[2] In Victorian England, Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Babbage, and George Elliot wrote about and became interested in the ambiguous nature of the sonic transformations wrought by modern technology. While Carlyle was driven mad by the noise of London, including the sound of the air vents installed in the loft he created to escape the din, in Japan Yasar gives us Natsume Soseki—constantly on the move in search of peace and quiet. Soseki nevertheless made abundant use of the telephone to keep in touch, all the while rigging his own phone to ensure it did not ring when he had visitors, or simply leaving it off the hook when he was working. The telephone created its own noise and "participated in the temporal tyranny of modernity" constantly threatening to distract him from his work, take his time, and disrupt his concentration (p. 47). The writer Nagai Kafu was also driven to seek an escape from the maddening noise of technology as it became "impossible to read or write in this heat with the sound of the radio next door" (p. 148).

Chapters 4 and 5 give a fascinating insight into the creation of a national radio network that popularized Kafu's creative nemesis. Yasar gives superb account of the development of sports commentary on the radio and how the experience of listening and the idea that Olympic competitions were being broadcast to an audience "back home" made commentator, listener, and athlete feel part

of something much larger. Radio drama, covered in chapter 5, brought mediated sound to the masses as people tuned in at the same times to listen to the same programs, but also because the technology gave listeners the opportunity to generate their own content, even if this was still policed by the gatekeepers of the publishing and broadcasting industries.

The chapter on the phonograph is preceded by a discussion of the impact of Western music and Western listening styles on Japanese music. From the first public display of a phonograph in 1879, the fascination of reproduction brought a disjunction between the visual and the auditory, adding to a sense that—in the early years—auditory media were organic, living entities. As sound recordings became valuable commodities, the issue of copyright and ownership came to occupy a central place in debates surrounding the new technology. Importantly, Yasar shows that these debates were little different from those taking place around the same issues elsewhere in the world, but that the nature of Japanese music and art forms nevertheless informed these discussions. With the rise of popular musical recordings in the Taisho era, the potential for sound technology to shape and create cultural memories spanning the past and the present created an imagined community of listeners. The final chapter examines the already well-covered debates over sound and film in the prewar period.

Overall, the book is a stimulating and well-written outline of the connection between sound technology and the creation of “modern Japan.” A great addition to a slowly growing field of research and teaching, it is also a useful addition to any class on modern history, not just East Asian or Japanese. But, if this is a book concerned with the nation-space, it tells us little about the spaces within the nation. The increasing volume of modern life made evident new communal, political, and social cleavages. In London, Babbage and Carlyle (even Charles Dickens) were concerned with

the noise made by the lower classes, and the ever-present immigrants on the streets. Their irritation with noise had as much to do with who made it, where, and why. In the second and third chapters, we see some hint of the ambiguity created by the new technology. Yet, aside from the chapter on the telephone, where exchange operators were mainly young and female, there is little mention of class distinctions, race, or gender in relation to the new technology. This book does not really get to grips with Japan’s imperial expansion, either, although Yasar does note in the conclusion that there is much work to be done on the sonic dimensions of the colonial project. What the book does well is make clear the important work that remains to be done on sound culture and the development of sound technologies beyond the West. It offers an excellent model for the transdisciplinary nature of that task. Kerim Yasar’s *Electrified Voices* is an excellent, ground-breaking work that will spark debate, research, and hopefully teaching in an emerging field.

#### Notes

[1]. *Namaroku no Hon* (Tokyo: Kosaido Books, 1977).

[2]. Seth Jacobowitz, *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2015).

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