

Critical Media in the Arts: Time, Materiality, Ecology

19th June 2018, 10.30am, Arts Lecture Room 3, University of Birmingham

Abstracts

Douglas Kahn (University of New South Wales)

Survivable Communication: Trees

The history of telecommunications includes media systems acting as sensors and sensing arrays on natural systems, and features of the earth being incorporated into and excluded from the technological circuit. For example, the ionosphere was discovered through the same means that would place it in-circuit for long distance communication, and was excluded decades later by satellites acting in effect as stable little patches of ionospheric reflectivity. More exotic forms incorporating islands, the polar auroras, meteorites, and the moon, as well as heating up the ionosphere, were among Cold War military tactics of survivable communications that also produced the Internet. This paper will contrast the early military use of trees as antennas by Major General George O. Squier, better known as the inventor of Muzak, with the use of trees in the performative telecommunications of the American artist Leif Brush beginning in the 1960s, as a way to ask about energies, communications and survivability in the Warm War, and discuss Brush in terms of a new concept of energy field performance.

Patrick Valiquet (University of Edinburgh)

An Ear for Liberalism: Experimental Music Research and Mass Media Education, 1973-1990

Received wisdom conflates the liberalisation of the academic music disciplines with the limited embrace of poststructuralism by certain American musicologists in the mid-1980s. In this presentation, however, I will excavate a set of confrontations with structuralism and poststructuralism that, in addition to pre-dating the New Musicology by at least a decade, collapse the walls it tried to raise between humanistic and scientific approaches to music research. Resisting the more recent caricature of poststructuralism as a kind of detached apolitical nihilism, I want to highlight its direct articulation of issues arising from debates about public education, electronic media, science, and human identity during the early stages of computerisation in Western Europe and North America. The same issues also played a central role in the reception of experimentalism in music education research, and were closely tracked in the development of pedagogical practices designed to integrate the emerging electronic media, in early encounters between music research and the cognitive sciences, and in discussions about music's position in school and science policy. In parallel with critical interventions such as those arising from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, and the early theorisation of postmodernity by French scholars like Jean François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, music researchers in the 1970s sought to develop ways of teaching and understanding musical comportment that could prepare listeners for the media saturation, cultural plurality, and individualism of contemporary life. As I will demonstrate, their goal was not so much to produce new kinds of music as to engender a specifically postmodern, liberal aurality.

My examples follow the dissemination of 'acousmatic' listening research in France, Quebec, and England, but my perspective requires a turn from the productive practices of composition and performance to reproductive and, drawing upon Baudrillard's political economy of signs, 'seductive' practices such as teaching, care, consumption, policy making, and empirical enquiry. It is no coincidence that these were the practices most vehemently

attacked by the New Right at the beginning of the 1980s. And so on one hand my presentation tells the story of an erasure. Efforts to foster musical pluralism through the use of electronic media in the classroom gave way to a quantified regime of myopic, nationalistic, production-oriented competition, established most forcefully in Britain with the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, which were designed explicitly to retract and prevent the kinds of political, social and epistemological progress that had accompanied the expansion of public education in previous decades. On the other hand, however, I also want to emphasise some of the underlying continuities between experimentalism and the New Musicology, in a way that I hope will undermine the trope of musicology's 'lateness' to new intellectual currents, and moreover bring the discipline to a more reflexive understanding of the self-imposed barriers it still faces in contending with later rearticulations of poststructuralism such as Actor-Network Theory and recent German media theory. While certainly complex, these resistances also broadly correspond with the ways that music scholarship continues to privilege production over reproduction.

Eleni Ikoniadou and Alastair Cameron (Kingston University)
Ecstatic Material

"Our discos are preparing our youth for a retaliatory strike," Kittler wrote in 1986, hinting at the capacities of sound to summon emergent forms of youth culture. But, as Steve Goodman (2009) has noted, in the following three decades, the vibrational and conceptual weapons that would be prototyped in the rapidly mutating domains of the disco, warehouse and rave, would not fit easily with Kittler's notion of positive feedback, which remained within the sphere of white, Western, male agency (Pink Floyd et al). Instead, influential tools such as sonic afrofuturism, audio virology, and more widely a concern for the complexities of rhythm, might offer new means / weapons for decolonising, disorienting, and decentering mainstream Western history, theory and practice, proposing alternative realities.

This paper will explore the ways in which sound is deployed to analyse, disturb, and ultimately reconfigure the architectures, rhythms, temporalities, and bodies of everyday life, and its technics and discourses of subject(iva)tion and universalism, through the work of four contemporary practitioners (Cevdet Erek, Black Quantum Futurism, James Hoff and Elysia Crampton). These artists draw, in diverse ways, on the electronic rhythms of post-86 discos within sonic and artistic practices aimed at redistributing a supposedly prescribed reality (that Kittler also assumed in his media-determinism), from a marginal and non-Western viewpoint, "[using] the strength of trans-individuation and the minor subject to break through the fallacy of prescribed subjectivity" (Amobi).

Matthew Hayler (University of Birmingham)
Wandering Bodies - Ambient Literature, Cognition, and Technology

In this talk I introduce the idea of "ambient literature," a term drawn from a two-year AHRC-funded research project of the same name which has seen the production of three new digital literary works and a range of academic responses aimed at asking "what is ambient literature?" I take the term to describe experimental literary works which respond to the particular kinds of information which encircles and locates us and with a particular intensification in a digital age. I will explore some of the theoretical questions texts like this can pose: what role do artefacts play in reading? How does this kind of reading experience reveal how we already cognise? And what sources of meaning-making can digital literature draw upon? What meanings might inhere in the bodies of the technologies themselves?

If you'd like to try one of the works of Ambient Literature before the session then please head here on your smartphone: katepullinger.com/breathe or Google "Kate Pullinger Breathe". For more on the Ambient Literature project see ambientlit.com

Thor Magnusson (University of Sussex)

Ergodynamics: Towards a terminology beyond "guitarplay"

Musical instruments are peculiar objects. Like a carpenter's hammer, we manipulate them, often for hours a day, but they are more than simple instruments of arranging our sonic world: they are also organs that express our inner life. A good instrument is full of mystery and hidden paths, but playing it is also a discovery of finding things in ourselves. In order to prevent a dualistic account separating objects and subjects, a new terminology is needed for expressing the instrument's character. Computer game studies has a good term, "gameplay," which covers the visual, interface, interaction, and narrative design aspects of the game. There is a lack of such a word in organology. This talk proposes a terminology for engaging with the way new musical instruments derive their design from previous music technologies. What new instruments translate from earlier technologies are not simply the simulation of an interface, but a whole constellation of embodied contexts, where trained movements, musical actions, human-instrument relationships and other processes are translated to a technology of a different material substratum (from the organic to the digital material). A family of concepts is introduced and subsequently contextualised in relation to the semiotics of mapping, from the background of the Peircian analysis of the sign.

Annie Goh (Goldsmiths College)

Sonic Cyberfeminisms

In recent years, the relationship between sound, gender and technology has gained increasing attention. There have been a number of artist networks, archives and educational initiatives established in the hope of tackling the gendered exclusions from and disparities within the technocentric fields of electronic music, audio production and sound arts. Many of these projects can be understood to share some of the concerns and ideals of cyberfeminism. Emerging in the early 1990s, cyberfeminism sought to explore the potentials and possibilities of technology, computing and Cyberspace for feminist praxis. However, to talk of cyberfeminism or indeed a cyberfeminist ethos in the singular is something of a misnomer: we consider it more appropriate to speak of plural cyberfeminisms, with various agendas, methods, perspectives and priorities.

Whilst many of these recent initiatives have been aimed at increasing the visibility of women in sound technology and computing-related fields, for many, the debates around improving representation of gender reveals disparities around what feminist agendas are being pursued. Is the lack of women and girls in audio technology a problem only to be fixed by increasing participation? Or is there a danger of "leaning in" to a regime of white supremacist, imperialist, capitalist hetero-patriarchy (to use bell hooks' augmented phrase)? Revisiting Faith Wilding's question of the political strategy of cyberfeminism, it is timely to ask – where is the feminism in sonic cyberfeminisms?

Valentina Vuksic (University of Birmingham)

Thermal tripping through runtime

In a performative talk, I look at one of the marginally researched energetic exhausts of computation, the temperature. While at the same time listening to another one that has

been investigated broadly by the cybersecurity community, the electromagnetic spectrum. The unintended thermal emissions are harnessed in (more or less realistic) scientific experiments to establish a communication between air-gapped computers or to localise secret servers like a Tor-node for instance. The witty uses of technological assemblies are juxtaposed with selected media theoretic concepts that address the procedural in computation such as 'sonicity' and 'algorhythms'.