

The Sound of ACT UP! AIDS Activism as Sound(e)scape and Sound-Escapade

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to provide initial thoughts on the unattended dimension of sound within the visual culture of the early and current HIV/AIDS activism, investigating the queer-affective potential of sound as well as its unintended impediments for past and present protest-mobilization strategies.

Sound constitutes an escapade — a wilful departure from mainstream debates about the western video-art and activism of ACT UP! I would like to relate the transgressive politics of ACT UP! to both the movement's wilful tones, screams and noises (i.e. Sound Escapade), as well as to the queer political nature of its silences (Sound-Escape). Through a selection of activist and artistic works this paper seeks to analyse the possible role the soundscape of ACT UP! might have played during the early AIDS Crisis, and the subsequent for the current imagination and diverging cultures of remembrance.

Keywords

AIDS activism, soundscape, noise, sonic protest, silence, queer atonality

1 Introduction

“Fight Back, Fight AIDS. Fight Back, Fight AIDS”

“Healthcare is a right. Healthcare is a right!”

“Act UP! We'll never be silent again”

These are some of the chants that left a lasting impression as I sat in the quietness of The Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library. Born in the remoteness of the GDR in the same year AIDS became known in the United States [1], I was suddenly confronted by feelings of pain, fear, loss, as well as anger and despair during my first visit to the archive to watch AIDS-activist videos. Since this visit was conducted in the realm of a research project [2] that dealt with queer vernacular media, such as everyday photography, scrapbooks or home videos, I primarily focused on the imagery and the visual cultures of AIDS and what I term ‘AIDS activism from bed.’ My interest led me to the films *Silverlake Life* (Tom Joslin, Peter Friedman, 1993), *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (Gregg Bordowitz, 1993) and to the photography of Jürgen Baldiga and Mark Morrisroe. Simultaneously, the audio captivated my interest, particularly as I watched the last few documentaries, which centered on the question of honouring and remembrance in the context of past and contemporary AIDS Activism. Once again, I became aware of the significance of the auditory for protest mobilisation and community formation. Furthermore, I realised the directors' urgency — mostly attributed to a fear that AIDS and AIDS activism might be forgotten — in using sound as a way to effectively impact contemporary audiences. Sound seems to be reworked for a form of memory activism — an activism in the fight for remembrance. Yet, what are sound characteristics of this particular memory activism? How do such sounds reflect the present moment instead of the past? Are there sounds in the past, or perhaps in the present that counter or even queer those current ones? Where can we locate queer sounds in regard to AIDS activism, and how do these

sounds produce new configurations and definitions of political protest as well as political art in a contemporary context?

I would like to address these questions in four sections: I will begin with a short introduction on the relation of sound and memory in three documentaries, which were each released in the last five years. Thereafter, I will theorize about the relationship between noise and queerness [7] in the construction of the urban soundscape of AIDS activism. Hoping to rethink this relationship, I would like to proceed with initial thoughts on sound-escapade — a concept aligned with my metaphorical approach to willful sounds. With the terminology of willfulness I refer to Sara Ahmed who wrote about the stubborn moments within articulations of the will (Ahmed, 2016). Sound-escapade will serve as a stubborn, willful alternative to previously claimed ‘noisy’ memorials of AIDS activism. The sound of the ballroom and so-called camp sounds are my concrete angles for discussing sound-escapade as a conceptual example for a queer theoretical analysis of sound activism and art. Lastly, in the final section, I will discuss the role of sound-escape — the escape from sound or silence.

2 Sounding memory

“Remembering... the past might be anarchically wounded by forgetting,” writes Ricky Varghese (2016), editor of the current *Drain Magazine* on AIDS and Memory. Forgetting seems to be the anarchic wound of AIDS memory, and thus, of filmic attempts to capture HIV/AIDS. Remembering is therefore supposed to symbolise the practice of healing the wound. Yet, Varghese writes: “Remembering exists in the time it takes to write a history, it exists within the very temporality that informs historicity” (ibid.). What are the temporalities, rhythms, and sounds of cinematically remembering HIV/AIDS? To address this issue, I refer to three documentaries in which the international direct-action advocacy group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (*ACT UP!*) is remembered by noise and the temporality of instancy.

The documentary *We were here* [3] (David Weissman, 2011) deals with the AIDS crisis in San Francisco and displays interviews of five important protagonists during these days. To “evoke an epic history [...] of the personal and community issues raised by the AIDS epidemic” [4] one can hear burbling sounds along with plucked strings, gentle percussion and the harmless harmony of minimalist electronic music. Both the narrative and reflection of the US-American AIDS movement, as well as relevant self-organised structures of support that emerged in San Francisco, represent a radical transition during the moment when *ACT UP!* is introduced to and visualised on the screen. This shift is not simply characterised by the rather iconic representation of “carried images” (Holert, 2008) and graphics — denoted by Douglas Crimp as *Demo Graphics* (1990) and by Gregg Bordowitz as “Imagevirus” (2010) — but it also signifies the sudden and noisy introduction to the emergence of sound from the discreet cascade of piano and strings. In short, the noise of AIDS activism represented by *ACT UP!* operates in an opposing conjunction with the ambient sound system of the documentary.

United in Anger [5] (Jim Hubbard, 2012) is a documentary about the history of *ACT UP!* in general. Based on oral histories of members and archival footage it illuminates the efforts of *ACT UP!* as it challenges governmental neglect, pharmaceutical industry, and social indifference. Without the “disruptive cacophony that ran counter to the official silence of government policy” — to quote Beauchamp (2015) — the soundscape of the documentary predominantly transports the viewer to the setting of an elevator or shopping mall. With their evocation of pureness and even transcendence, the ambient sounds of new-age or meditation music provide the framework for the dramatic outcry of activists calling upon the government to intervene. How might we interpret the meaning of this sound? I posit that the film sound urges us to learn about *ACT UP!* as the only radical form of protest against governmental as well as societal homophobia, racism, and the stigmatisation of drugs during the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s. Simultaneously, the viewer is encouraged to connect noise with protest, and more specifically, with the achievements of a certain form of political agency — particularly,

presence, street interventional protest, and public collectivity. Thus, auditory distortion and noise function as prolongations of the anti-authoritarian statements during the liberation movements of the 60s and 70s.⁷ (Collins, 2015)

In contrast, David France's 2012 Oscar-nominated documentary *How to survive a plague*[6] takes a slightly different, more unusual approach in exploring the relationship between the sound of resistance and noise. Here, the audience listens to a Hollywood-like orchestration, which is typical in the context of the aestheticization of violence, death, and loss (Kutschke, 2012). The overwhelming, sublime mode of expression through the sound of drums and lashing violins makes the suffering almost disappear by simultaneously connoting the AIDS epidemic as an action movie in which predominately white male activists are identified as heroes.

Does the placement of the white male and heroic activist in noisy and/or sublime soundscapes reflect the reality of the past or the fiction of the present? Are we supposed to remember ACT UP! by its rantingly white heroism because we live in both a time of a political impasse and of "activism exhaustion" (Juhasz, 2016)? Yet, by both replaying the noise, chants, clapping, and having our feelings manipulated through drum-driven violin-walls do we not risk losing contact to the silence of mourning and the sonic introspection of the black, female, queer "domesticity in proximity to HIV" (Juhasz, 2016)? Furthermore, do we then forget how to listen to the silent protests and ambient contemporary politics when we are trained to perceive noise and action-movie cascades as the primarily auditory medium of political and aesthetic participation? Might we neglect that the „rhythms of our loss have changed" (Woubshet, 2015)? Could an acknowledgement of such changes represent an attempt to reconnect with the beat of a politics of the personal of AIDS" (Juhasz, 2016) at the time of early AIDS crisis?

In order to discuss the political soundscape of sound-escapade and sound-escape, a contextualization of the interdependency between noise and political categories such as masculinity, Western ideology, whiteness, and Avant-gardism is necessary. My use of the term "soundscape" originates from the perspective of queer ecology critique.

3. Soundscape

R. Murray Schafer, who coined the term soundscape as "a way of describing the relationship between sound and place," contextualized noise as the typical outcome of an urban environment (Kelman, 2012, p.163). In a noisy soundscape, "individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overly dense population of sounds" (Schafer, 2013, p.64). In contrast, the rural environment, the pasture, the village, and the farm represent soundscapes in which "discrete sounds can be clearly perceived because of the low ambient noise level" (ibid.) Additionally, Schafer discusses the idealistic imagination of pureness, as well the transparency and the possibility to have access to a "total appreciation of the acoustic environment" through listening (Schafer, 2012, p.96). Thus, we are instructed to think and to hear in Western terms of immediacy and objectivity, and more specifically, a heteronormativity that is "a performance that erases the trace of [its] performance" (Morton, 2010, p.279). Suggesting to have immediate access to the rural environment by listening can be understood as the attempt to erase cultural and gendered constructions of rural sounds. Subsequently, it seems less surprising that the city in Schafer's opinion delivers the "schizophonic" sounds instead, the obscured, the synthetic, as well as the unnatural soundscape (Schafer, 1977, p.91). In short, the city produces an atonality that Schafer would have termed queer in a derogatory way.

By bringing up noise in the rural soundscape he insightfully refers to war and religion. By describing the "noise of clashing metal" (Schafer, 2012, p.71) during a battle or the sacred noise of the church bell, as well as the "clamorous urge of chanting and rattling" (ibid, p.73) during religious procession, he implicitly discusses noise in two inherently masculine and therefore accepted modes of power. Moreover, by claiming the "aberrational noise of war" (ibid, p.72) and religion as the punctuation of rural quietness, Schafer attributes the

intelligibility of noise to masculinity. Thus, masculinity is discursively implemented as the gateway for what has become a tolerated sort of noise within music as well as politics. In addition to its devalued ambiguousness with regard to its “schizophonic” and queer vagueness, noise thus became intelligible within a martial set of masculinity.⁷

Considering sound’s intersection with gender/sexuality and power, I would now like to return to the sound of ACT UP! produced in the previously mentioned filmic memorials. According to Schafer’s theory, one might interpret the chanting, rattling, clapping as a restaging of activist noises that belong both to the urban environment and to implicitly articulated and devalued forces of queer longing and belonging. The filmic reduction to the affective and mobilising qualities of noise risks reproducing the cultural dominant model of queer urbanity. While AIDS activism is interlaced with metronormativity, a term that “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalising narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities” (Halberstam, 2005, p.36), noise can also be understood in its construction as a masculine intrusion and powerful articulation. Here, ACT UP!’s sounds would produce the same structure against which it was fighting.

However, is it as simple as it seems? Should we, perhaps, try to listen to the queer potential of noise, interrogation or curiosity? What might be of importance in addition to rehabilitating noise? Where do we locate the sounds that do not distance themselves from the urban environment or metropolitan influences, but which still enable a queer tonality that marks another way of political agency within the spectrum of AIDS activism? Simultaneously, my research interest examines the possibility of locating a queer tonality of AIDS activism that is not affiliated to the street or the city, and which still does not produce the deterministic romanticism of the rural soundscape for which Schafer — at least from my point of view — can be criticised (see also Goodman, 2010). This analysis, thus, requires a subsequent analysis of two self-created terms — sound-escapade and sound-escape.

4 Sound-Escapade

Listening with the expectation to gain fully and immediate access to the melody of nature — as Schafer states — ties into the normative imaginations of the will-like sovereignty and autonomy of liberal subjectivity, a subjectivity that autonomously determines of what it listens to. Reference to the notion of escapade instead is not about “asking to replace a notion of cognitive will with a notion of involuntary or unconscious activity” (Berlant, 2011, p.116). Rather, it is about responding to the “episodic intermission from personality, the burden of whose reproduction is part of the drag of practical sovereignty” (ibid). Looking for the “small vacations from the will itself” (ibid) means to inhabit agency differently and to simultaneously respond to sound formulas that are the circumvention of practical sovereignty, which thus enables the queering of the burden of personhood. I would now like to introduce two examples that invest in the queering of sovereignty: the sound of the ballroom and camp sounds.

4.1 Sound of the Ballroom

The sound of the ballroom is affiliated with the aesthetics and culture of vogue — a drag dance culture that is deeply embedded in Black queer communities, whose members are disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In vogue, drag and repetitive dance moves play a central role in unravelling the codifications of gestures that determine gender and sexuality. Through imitating and quoting societal constructions of masculinity and femininity, vogue participants deconstruct gender.[8]

Ultra-red’s collective listening procedure [9], which served as the foundation of their exhibition *Vogue’ology* in 2009/10, serves an intriguing example to highlight the political quality of vogue by focusing on the lateral and ordinary aspects of deconstructing gender. Those aspects were

examined by a procedure of listening as a means of political organizing as well as of establishing an archive of the Ballroom community which has been hit by AIDS greatly. The Ultra-red sound art collective was founded 20 years ago by two AIDS-activists who worked on the margins of society with drug-users, women, undocumented people. In order to confront not only the memory of a past activist moment, but also its absence “the collective reconnects the art world and AIDS activism with memories of when the arts served as a crucial arena for open discussions about the pandemic.” (Vera List Center, 2010) They reinitiated those discussions with an emphasis on the acceptance of art and AIDS activism as spaces in which one both learns and listens, as well as learns to listen. Vogue’s performative explorations of gender and of understanding performance itself served as their model by which to re-evaluate listening without the expectation of orchestration, but rather with responding. The orchestrated setting of listening is transformed into an invocation of “affective responses other than rage as constitutive of collective action” (Vera List Center, 2010). Ultra-red thus shifts ACT UP!’s politico-aesthetic strategy of orchestrated sounds of anger to a tableau of listening and of being affected, instead of being the conductor of political action. Contemplating the sound to be unstable yet durational, repetitive, and looped, Ultra-red embraces the affective, tacitly, and palpable dimensions of listening (Radford, 2014). Those laterally deconstruct political agency that is based on personhood. Through the affective mode of listening experience political collectivity is created differently and reshapes public places. For example, as Berlant’s commentary on Ultra-red illustrates: “[I]t becomes slowly apparent that to cast the political as a feedback loop is another way to understand the ambiance of the classic public sphere” (Berlant, 2011, p.248). Ultimately, the public sphere becomes a place to practice collective listening, and listening becomes political in the sense of collectively making a change while being able to hear your own breath (ibid). Such participatory pedagogies of listening have almost unperceivably informed practices of current activism like Occupy. Here I would especially like to refer to the participatory practices of echoing that became known as human microphone. Hereby I mean the amplification of a one-person-speech by a crowd, which requires a good listening.

By practices of listening as those of tacitly responding instead of acting and outcrying, I think we are enabled to become aware of sounds and rhythms in the past that — in the heyday of street activism — went missing. Hence, I would now like to turn to a source that might have been underestimated in those times, but represents a form of sound activism that counteracts the nostalgia towards the kind of ACT UP! activism that the aforementioned documentaries bring to the foreground. I term this form camp sound.

4.2 Camp Sounds

Central to my analysis is the independent filmmaker John Canalli’s video *Divine is dead*[10]. Canalli, who became known as the producer of a number of video documentaries about Wigstock — a popular annual drag performance party in New York — directed the video in 1988 — around the same time when the American actor, singer, John-Water-muse and drag queen Divine died from complications of obesity and four years before Canalli himself died from complications of AIDS. The video depicts a public funeral, which could be interpreted to be the one of Divine but simultaneously represent one of the many videos that ultimately shaped the political aesthetics of ACT UP! In actuality, however, the video stages the parody of a political funeral. The audience is confronted with a somewhat queer funeral — one without a real body and one resembling a performance or parody. Most striking, however are the campiness and gross exaggeration of the sounds of mourning, the moaning as shrieking, the sobbing as orgasming, the speech as campy voicing. Though the emphasis on the intersections of queerness and artificiality, as well as queer parody and noise of urbanity may be obvious, I would like to take a different analytical approach to camp.

Shifting away from Susan Sontag’s understanding of camp, Juliane Rebutisch (2013) references Jack Smiths aesthetics of the natural (*kuratürlich*) dimensions of the Diva and

subsequently argues for a conceptualization that remains connected to nature. For Rebentisch, camp secures nature as a moment of queer history.

The video portrays this dimension of nature through laments that transform into tribal sounds. The dynamic of laments blending into tribal sounds, as well as the tribal sounds becoming campy voices of mourning, makes the border between nature and culture almost indistinguishable. As a result, the video envisions the materialist site of camp just as the camp site of nature soundscape. The “false dichotomy of Nature and history on which... homophobia depends” is revised by the interrelatedness of cultural and natural notions of camp (Morton, 2010, p.273).

In a broader context, the question of the deployment of political agency is thus reframed. Through the sonic interference of queer noise and ‘natural’ sounds, political agency must be located in the instability and non-essentialism of nature-culture. Such an instability makes nostalgia and the conservative politics of the sound of resistance impossible.

Oftentimes, the idea of nostalgia has been met with criticism for controlling the past and inhibiting future imaginations. Thus, AIDS and AIDS activism became contained in a limited set of images and, as I posit, sounds.

In their poster *Your Nostalgia is Killing Me* (2013), AIDS activists Ian Bradley-Perrin and Vincent Chevalier address the question of remembrance and the cultural ownership of the history of AIDS. Furthermore, considering that AIDS is brought to public consciousness by a small group of affected individuals (predominately white gay males) Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier portray those who fall victim to by nostalgia. In the process of memorializing some (white gays), many lives (i.e., black mothers, drug-users, transgendered sex workers) risk erasure. Furthermore, the visibility of death produces the invisibility of the ill health. Despite changing narratives, as well as altering sounds and the corresponding images that shape how society remembers the history of AIDS and AIDS activism, individuals with AIDS who report undetectable viral loads and a non-infectious virus eventually become neglected (Köppert/Sekuler, 2016). Though from the perspective of the ill health, we learn about the political dimensions of silence and retreat today, which helps to perceive the rhythms of the past differently and to become aware of the silence in AIDS history. Next, I would like to posit how sound-escape may function as an alternative to the normativity of urban activist noise and to the romanticism of rural quietness.

5 Sound-Escape

The opening sequence of Joaquim Pinto’s film *E Agora? Lembra-me / What now? Remind me*[11] (2013) unfolds a soundscape of slowness and the perception of AIDS and chronic Hepatitis C as a long and arduous process. Totalling approximately 170 minutes, the film resembles a journal-like, notebook documentation of a year of clinical trials. Duration symbolised by the slug in the first take of the film sounds like silence. However, does silence here represent the same death propagated by ACT UP’s well-known slogan “SILENCE=DEATH”? Since the viewer learns that Pinto lives with his partner Nuno Leonel in the rural landscape of Portugal, one might feel reminded of Schafer’s analysis of sound in rural landscapes. Schafer discussed the silence and quietness of the rural soundscape as a way of healing and an escape from noise pollution. As a result, Schafer reproduced the bipolarity of nature and culture, village and city, rurality and urbanism, masculinity and queerness.[12]

With a different approach, Pinto’s film undermines the simplistic division and aesthetic moralism. Not only does the audience listen to silence while watching a slug whose gender identity is hybrid and unidentifiable within heteronormative sexual standards, but the viewer also becomes confronted with remarks that blend the drug-induced confusion of Pinto’s mind

with the obfuscation of the proper meaning of his words (since the treatment destroyed his teeth and with it the capability to express himself articulately). Life in the remoteness of a Portuguese village thus does not sound like the pureness and straightforwardness of rural landscape; rather, it sounds like the combination of silence and clouded meaning, as well as of classical music and electro-clash. While watching the X-ray of his set of teeth, the audience hears the song “The Plot” (2009) by WhoMadeWho — a band known for refusing classical popish and rock-ish elements such as the solo instrumental. Later on, one hears the motor of a tractor, the sowing of seed, and the humming of a bee; nature sounds being wrapped into the polyphonic structure of electronically mixed sounds, a “potential soundtrack[...] coming from a mixing table” (Ferreira, 2013).

Moreover, audiences listen to the mundane procedures of life with HIV in a highly capitalised and bureaucratic system of health service. Ambient sounds of the transit zones of the health care system (e.g. waiting room, hospital dispensaries) in the middle of the financial crisis of Spain — from where he purchases the non-approved drugs — enable an understanding of the political dimension of this seemingly melancholic and personal logbook.

Indeed, Pinto’s documentary represents a sort of filmic activism that is neither a shouting message nor “the empty authority and authoritarianism of so much communication, a long linguistic and historical flood of AIDS activist propaganda, ... preaching, and the movement of public intervention.” (Latimer et al. 2016) Rather, Pinto’s film subtly and silently shatters the hopes of living in a post-AIDS time, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of political connectivity beyond personal sovereignty.

Silence, or what I call sound-escape, should not be misinterpreted as the total disavowal of the auditory. Instead, to put it in Stathis Gourgouris’ words, “silence is its in-between. It begs us to listen,” (2016). Like Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk (2016), I survey silence as a necessary aspect of language, one less concerned with modernist compression, the aesthetics of the white page, and artistic withdrawal than as a means by which to propose the political act of listening and a kind of radical reception and responsivity. Within this political act and radical reception, we move away from individual creation and pave the way for collective action (Barrett, 2016).

6 Conclusion

Ultra-red’s *Vogue’ology. Organized Listening* and Joaquim Pinto’s *E Agora? Lembra-me?* quiets down ACT UP!’s famous chant „We’ll never be silent again!“ without staging silence as a withdrawal from the political. Sound-escapade and sound-escape represent auditory approaches that form another understanding of what political activism and art could be in a contemporary context. Moreover, they inspire to rediscover the archival sources of AIDS activism and political art, which were muted by the dominant slogan “SILENCE=DEATH” and by the connotation of silence as a marker of homophobia. Since a video such as John Canalli’s *Divine is dead* is sonically unconventional than the infuriated activism of ACT UP! they likely were overlooked.

In times where, traditional audio-aesthetics of the political no longer impact the political future, and in which politicians yet again occupy the post-public sphere of communicating ‘true’ feelings through seducing elements of noise, we need to create silence in order to listen each other. We need “affective responses other than rage as constitutive of collective action” (Ultra-red, 2017).

Footnotes

[1] Studies that were released in October of this year addressed the prejudice that HIV/AIDS

was brought to the US by Patient Zero in 1981. Apparently, the HI-Virus had already existed in the 1970s (McNeil, 2016).

[2] Research project *Media Amateurs in Queer Cultures*, funded by the German Research Foundation, at the University of Siegen 2010-2013.

[3] Available at: <https://wewereherefilm.com/> (Accessed: 28 October 2017)

[4] Available at: <https://wewereherefilm.com/> (Accessed: 28 October 2017)

[5] Available at: <http://www.unitedinanger.com/> (Accessed: 28 October 2017)

[6] Available at: <http://surviveaplague.com/> (Accessed: 28 October 2017)

[7] Within Queer Theory and Affect Studies noise started to be presented as a productive and transformative force due to its qualitative variability. Thus, the inaudible came into focus as well (Thompson, 2017).

[8] G Douglas Barrett (2016) examines the relation of appropriation art and AIDS activism in more detail. Particularly with reference to Ultra-red, Barrett points to appropriation as a practice of critically engaging with the modern concept of *Werktreue* and all the associations, which primarily include autonomy and authorship.

[9] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZiJPrzCYKg> (Accessed: 28 October 2017)

[10] [Item VDD0709] John Canalli Photographs and Video Recordings, Coll2009-007, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

[11] Available at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt31102356/> (Accessed: 28 October 2017)

[12] Treating the rural as the ecological site of sound is readopted by today's approaches to field recording-based sound artworks with their side effects of projections the male artist's own image on the site (LaBelle, 2006).

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Biography

Katrin Köppert holds an MA in Gender Studies and German Literature from Humboldt-University in Berlin. Her Ph.D deals with queer pain in vernacular photography postwar and pre-stonewall. She was a doctoral scholarship holder from the DFG-research program "Gender as a Category of Knowledge" of the Humboldt-University Berlin. Köppert was research assistant at the Institute for Media and Media Theory at the University of Arts and Industrial Design Linz/Austria. She is currently the research assistant of the department of History and Theory of Visual Culture at the Berlin University of the Arts.