



**Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound.** Edited by Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, & Tom Everett. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015. 304 pp. ISBN: 9781623566654.

As Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett note in the acknowledgements of this collection of essays, *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound* stems from a conference that was organized by the editors in 2012 at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. Amassed in this book is an authoritative and diverse group of writers from multiple disciplines, offering an innovative read for students, scholars, and audiophiles alike who are interested in the histories and cultures of stereo. Each of the book's essays seeks to challenge the “naturalness” (p. 19) of multichannel sound. In doing so, the book sidesteps a purely technological deterministic approach to multichannel sound and reinvigorates the academic study of music, sound, and media.

*Living Stereo* draws together multiple histories of stereo from both popular and academic discourses. Collectively, the essays engage with an array of resources, from scholarly work to trade magazines, and from advertisements to R. Murray Schafer's notes and diagrams in *Ear Cleaning* (1967). Following Théberge, Devine, and Everett's “Introduction: Living Stereo,” the editors have coherently divided the book into three separate but related sections. The editors have also included a “Stereo Timeline” and, although presented linearly, it offers the reader a general history of stereo's development. Moving beyond the sound system and deeper into its relation between space (virtual and physical), economics, listening techniques, and more, *Living Stereo* successfully makes stereo “strange” (p. 2).

The introduction sets the book's tone and aims to debunk the commonplace assumption that stereo is simply a technology. Rather, Théberge, Devine, and Everett suggest an exciting new way to think of stereo: as a “constantly changing historical and cultural phenomenon” (p. 4). By critically thinking through notions of staging stereo, auditory perspectives, and the commercial realities of the stereo-equals-fidelity discourse, the editors not only reorient the way/s in which we think about sound (studies), but they open up new territory for a “pluralist politics” (p. 28) of which Jonathan Sterne (2003) has called the “audible past.”

Part 1, “(Audio) Positions,” delves into largely uncharted territory by addressing stereo's intersections with the politics of class, gender, soundscape, and militarization. Tony Grajeda starts by exploring the “sweet spot” (p. 37) in aural culture, arguing that this privileged position is not only instantiated by the stereo as spectacle, but contributes to the reproduction of a particular relation of listening subject to the world. This subject position, Grajeda argues, was constituted both historically and socially, and was often “distracted” (p. 60) by the visual elements of the stereo itself. Jonathan Sterne's chapter challenges the notion that soundscape is both a “physical space and its representation” (p. 67). He suggests that the concept, while appealing to academic writers, acoustic ecologists, composers, and so on, though useful, prompts questions

of “space, scale and culture without itself giving us the tools to answer it” (p. 78). The essence of the soundscape, for Sterne, is not physical space and its representation; rather, it “is a stable audioposition, one from which the entire world is available to be heard” (p. 79). Finally, John Shiga’s chapter intersects the political reality of multichannel sound with history and culture by positioning the listening subject into the depths of the ocean to explain how channels of oceanic sound worked and could be exploited by military institutions to project political power.

In part 2, “Listening Cultures,” the aesthetics and meanings of stereo are examined in relation to a range of musical genres. From jazz to rock, and from British folk song to classical avant-garde and demonstration records, part 2 of *Living Stereo* offers four chapters of exemplary work for which future scholarship can be modelled from. Tim Anderson explores how demonstration records were featured in *Billboard* between the late 1960s and late 1970s. Seeking to facilitate a general discussion, Anderson points out that, because many listeners found stereo “odd” (p. 118), demonstration discs functioned as a “commercially incentivized pedagogy, which aimed to train listeners how to hear the many differences provided by quality stereo discs and equipment” (p. 113). Eric Barry’s chapter explores mono’s original, “artificial” connotation in contrast to stereo’s “natural” association before a careful explication of how these socially constructed meanings were reversed. Jonathan Tee’s chapter argues against Pierre Schaffer’s claim that the “loudspeaker could help facilitate an acousmatic listening practice” (p. 148). Tee suggests that stereo and multichannel practices actually revealed “the importance of the visual domain to listening” (p. 148), both at home and in the concert hall as an interpretative frame and attentional anchor. Whereas Tee frames listening as an audiovisual practice, Allan Moore identifies a “continuum of recording positions” (p. 176) that listeners experience, one that moves from documentary to enhanced realisms through “blended realism and studio conceived aesthetics” (p. 176). He traces these dominant strains in British folk song from around the mid-twentieth century through to contemporary folk recordings.

The final section, “Multichannel Sound and Screen Media,” places stereophony in its most contemporary of multimedia environments to disturb the realism/illusion binary. Matthew Mulsky’s essay examines how engineering discourse around multichannel sound in CinemaScope sought a more “convincing illusion” (p. 223), as opposed to creating an accurate description of reality, consequently re-inscribing the pre-existing, stylistic sound conventions in Hollywood film. And whereas Benjamin Wright’s chapter delves into the occupational, technological, and aesthetic ways in which Dolby’s Atmos system limits sound mixers’ creative autonomy, particularly when it comes to mixing for cinematic realism, Ruth Dockwray and Karen Collins’s essay explores the function of surround sound in Formula One racing games. They note the importance of surround sound for the subject’s (gamer’s) negotiation between realism and fantasy. Ultimately, Dockwray and Collins conclude that the illusionary aspect of sound design is crucial for understanding sound’s function in “all” (p. 262) media.

*Living Stereo* draws our attention to the “ubiquity” (p. 1) of a technology that has been largely ignored but that has nonetheless defined music and sound studies since

around the mid-1900s. What remains to be explored, however, are the histories and cultures of multichannel sound beyond the book's transatlantic focus. Stereo's ubiquity and discontinuous history can only be read here within a dominant Eurocentric framework. This should not be read (or heard, I suppose) as a limitation to the book's contribution to the field of sound, music, and media studies; rather, it should sound as an invitation from the editors for further research into the histories and cultures of multichannel sound on a more global scale. If, as the editors proclaim, stereo will not "live forever" (p. 2), then its cross-cultural peculiarities will require further exploration to more fully substantiate that assertion.

### **References**

- Schafer, R. Murray. (1967). *Ear cleaning: Notes for an experimental music course*. Toronto, ON: Clark and Cruickshank.
- Sterne, Jonathan. (2003). *The audible past: Cultural origins of sound reproduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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