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## Electrified Voices. How the Telephone, Phonograph and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868-1945

KERIM YASAR, 2018

New York, Columbia University Press

pp. xvi + 282, illus., \$90 (Hardcover), \$30 (Paperback), \$29.99 (E-book)

With *Electrified Voices*, Kerim Yasar provides a brilliant and stimulating analysis of the role of sound media (telephone, phonograph, radio, and early sound films) in the transition of Japan to modernity. The book is part of the recent development of 'sound studies', within the broader field of 'cultural studies', often neglected in favour of 'visual studies'. *The Audible Past* by Jonathan Sterne (Duke University Press, 2003) is certainly the best-known reference of this current. The introductory chapter, in defence of an archaeology of sound gives the author the opportunity to demonstrate his familiarity with the authors of the 'French Theory' (Derrida, Lacan, Althusser, Attali, but curiously enough not Roland Barthes and his *Empire des signes*) and with the German *Medienwissenschaften* (Friedrich Kittler). Yasar's approach is characterised by an eclectic use of theoretical references and, more importantly, by an obvious deep knowledge of Japanese sound and musical culture and of Japanese scientific literature on media and cultural studies, rarely accessible in English translation.

For the media historian, the interest of addressing the transition to modernity through the development of sound technologies is obvious: such dimension is conversely almost absent in a book such as *Moderne sans être occidentale. Aux origines du Japon d'aujourd'hui*, (Gallimard, 2016) by Pierre-François Souyri, dealing only marginally with the upheavals of the media and with their importance in the Japanese transition to modernity.

Yasar's main thesis is that communication and sound reproduction technologies, which first flourished during the Meiji era (1868-1912), helped to create new forms of discourse and new emphases of perception, but they also allowed the creation of the *kokutai*, the new political body that was to lead in the 1930s to the military state. While describing, often based on anecdotes or writers' stories, the specificity of the insertion of these new technologies into Japanese society, Yasar seeks to grasp their conceptualization in the Japanese language itself, confronted to and explained by various Western conceptualisations. This complex round-trip game is one of the major values of the book. Yasar's documented and lively writing helps us to perceive the idiosyncrasy of the Japanese path to modernity. The book provides enjoyable descriptions and analysis of various typical practices: the *yobidashi denwa* (telephone summons); the *naniwabushi*, a narrative musical entertainment genre deeply related to the booming of the phonographic industry; the art of *benshi*, where actors' creative performances enhance the narration of silent films, alongside radio drama and sporting exercises. Quoting Yoshimi Shun'ya, the leading Japanese researcher in cultural studies, Yasar analyses the ban on the recording and broadcasting of the Emperor's voice, as a kind of void (*kūhaku*). This metaphor converges strongly with the observation by the unquoted Roland Barthes that the map of Tokyo has a 'precious paradox', a 'void centre', being the Imperial Palace, a 'forbidden and indifferent place'. This void is the occasion for Yasar to underline the paradox of a military regime that made radio a tool for domination, but without a central voice such as Hitler's in

the Nazi regime. The fact that this sacral silence will be broken only by the broadcast of the *gyokuon hōsō* (broadcast of the precious sound), the capitulation announcement of August 15, 1945, is undoubtedly the most advanced and specific feature of the Japanese relation to the electrified voice. Quoting various individual accounts of the reception of the *gyokuon hōsō* Yasar analyses the broadcast event as an auditory Rorschach test for the Emperor's stunned subjects.

Yasar's approach to Japan could be complemented by similar investigations and questions about the effects of sound media in other societies, which would further allow exploration of what is specific and what is 'universal'. Thus, the anecdote by which Yasar opens his book, the story of Japanese students discovering in the laboratory of Graham Bell that the telephone also 'speaks Japanese' is not unique: the Emperor of Brazil expressed the same astonishment to the inventor when discovering that the device spoke Portuguese as well.

Yasar dedicates very interesting pages to the traditions of orality in Japanese culture and to the role of the telephone in complementing the role of the telegraph to establish simultaneity and homogenisation of the nation-space, which used to be fragmented by various regional and social accentuations. Yet he gives us no account of a possible acoustic theory in Japan before the arrival of Western sciences. Was there in Japanese knowledge some equivalent of Aristotle's theory of sound, which has, in its dogmatic understanding of the Renaissance, handicapped early research on a sound technology as basic as the speaking trumpet? How and when was implemented in Japanese engineering schools the teaching of Western modern knowledge necessary to the emergence of the leading electronic companies?

If I agree with Sterne and Yasar that the analysis of the sound media tends often to be sidelined in media and cultural studies by a focus on visual media, I nevertheless regret that Yasar does not mention the first research conducted in Japan on television. It is too often forgotten that research on 'seeing at a distance by electricity' began in Europe, Russia and US in the late 1870s as a direct follow-up of Graham Bell's invention of the telephone and of the photophone. The divergence and opposition between sound studies and visual studies leads to the loss of perception of the historical dynamics between the various media. It would not have been inappropriate to point out that the first British researchers to be interested in the subject, William Edward Ayrton and John Perry, had been professors at the Imperial Engineering College in Tokyo and that their research had been stimulated by the mysterious properties of Japanese magic mirrors. Similarly, some historical research on the precise circumstances which led Takaynagi Kenjiro, a highly respected hero of the Japanese electronic industry, to develop the first Japanese television system as early as 1926 is still to be undertaken.

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