

# CONSTRUCTING SONIC HERITAGE: THE ACCUMULATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUND ARCHIVES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that sonic heritage does not exist *per se*, but is socially constructed. Rather it arises from various measures of accumulating knowledge with respect to the collected sounds. A variety of actors, for example, scholars, or foundations, participate in this process by editing parts of the collections, publishing ethnographic or historic studies, and conducting digitisation projects. In this context, sound collections are identified as ‘cultural heritage’ as a consequence and result of archival practices. The processes that are linked to cultural heritage will be outlined and discussed in the present research in line with the model of the social construction of technology (SCOT). More specifically, the social construction of sonic heritage will be illustrated with a case study on the Edison-cylinders collection in the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, UNESCO Memory of the World since 2000.

KEYWORDS: sound archives • sound collections • cultural heritage • STS • SCOT  
• cultural anthropology

Within the realm of cultural politics, the field of ‘cultural heritage’ is often linked to notions such as preserving, protecting, or safeguarding. A common criticism of this phrase is that this terminology often reflects an uncritical or even admiring view of heritage (cf., for example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Hafstein 2007; Kuutma 2007). In contrast, ethnographers criticise this ‘traditional’ view of heritage to be closely linked to the formalisation and ‘objectification’ of cultural practices – in other words, “culture becomes fixed, processes become things” (Noyes 2007: 50). Consequently, the practices of cultural heritage in a late modern world have been described by ethnography and anthropology as being processes of inventing history, tradition, or heritage (cf. Hemme et al. 2007a; Kuutma 2007). The idea for the paper is rooted in the perception that cultural heritage is more about change than about preservation. Heritage has often been described as ‘invented’ – ethnographies highlight this view by identifying decisive actors and describing processes of cultural production (for example, Hemme et al. 2007; Bendix et al. 2009). Vocabulary such as making, constructing, producing, or inventing heavily allude to social constructivist theory. However, despite the sharing of the same vocabulary, ethnographies do not implement models of social or technological inven-

tion, such as Actor Network Theory, or the social construction of technology (SCOT). The present paper tries to integrate theory that derives from the field of science, technology, and society studies (STS). More specific, it undertakes the experimental application of the SCOT model in the realm of cultural heritage in order to reveal some mechanisms of heritage construction and to understand why the concept of heritage is so successful.

The current work is informed by an interdisciplinary research approach on culture and technology. A starting-point to think about the constituting of cultural heritage was the terminological parallel of the invention/construction of technology and the invention/construction of heritage. The social construction of technology is a research program that focuses on the actors, their interests, and the historic context during an invention process. The model can therefore help to better understand why some technological inventions feature a range of particular properties (and others not). More specifically, the “practices of cultural heritage” (Hemme et al. 2007b: 9) that are employed by archivists, scholars, and academic institutions are examined in the theoretical context of SCOT. In conclusion, the present research focuses on the idea that the interests of these actors are influential factors within the field of cultural heritage and play a major role in the so-called heritage boom.

The argumentation begins with a brief sketch of the research context encompassing research fields such as human senses, the technology of sound recording, and cultural heritage. Following this, the theoretical framework of the social construction of technology will be outlined. Applying SCOT, the construction process will be elaborated by giving the example of the Edison cylinders, a UNESCO certified collection<sup>1</sup> of wax sound carriers which is registered Memory of the World. Finally, the construction of sonic heritage will be considered in the context of cultural heritage practices in general.

## THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research project from which this paper arises, explores the constituting of cultural property in the context of the sonic environment.<sup>2</sup> It deals with the different processes of the commodification of, or, more broadly, value-production from, ‘intangible’ sounds and tones of all kinds. The term “value” does not only mean economic value, but also other forms of value, such as, for example, scientific value (which might be held by historically ‘invaluable’ archival sources that might economically be worthless). The project is based on empirical data, such as interviews with sound archivists. Moreover, we will also rely on further interviews with individuals to search for shared sound memories and to understand the biographical dimension of sounds.

According to the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, the senses are “heavily encoded instruments that translate bodily experience into culturally recognizable forms” (Herzfeld 2004: 245). “They thus frame and mediate perceptual experience in accordance with a balance of personal idiosyncrasy and socially prescribed norms” (ibid.). This assumption in the studying of sounds is grounded in the (phenomenological) theory that man perceives and experiences the world through the senses. The “life-world” is “taken for granted and self-evidently ‘real’” (Schütz, Luckmann 1973: 4), which means

that “other men also exist in this my world [...] with a consciousness that is essentially the same as mine” (ibid.). Thus, collectively shared beliefs and experiences play an important role in our perception of the world. Building on the notion that culture is a collectively shared ‘web of significance’ (Clifford Geertz), then culture may provide individuals with a stable set of generally accepted knowledge about the social world to which they belong. Accordingly, culture can be understood as ‘the whole way of life’ (Raymond Williams), and is changing continuously. Culture materialises itself in (creative) everyday practices that are based on existing inventories of knowledge, such as knowing what is tasty and what is not.

However, there has been a long absence of the non-visual senses in (ethnographic) research in general which might have to do with a dominance of ‘visualism’ and the perception of hearing, taste, smell, and touch as connoting the ‘lower’ senses in Western academia (Classen 1997; Bendix 2000; Bendix, Brenneis 2005). Furthermore, the absence of hearing in cultural anthropology is related to methodological problems. For example, the lack of adequate recording technologies in the past made it difficult for researchers to study sounds. It was not possible to record noises prior to the invention of the phonograph in the late 19th century. Therefore, ethnographers were not able to record and to circulate sounds independent from the holders of such knowledge, like the ‘intangible cultural expressions’ that are represented by rituals. Sound recording technology bears the possibility to record and store music. Once this possibility was given, ethnographers in many parts of Europe started to institutionalise collecting sounds (and founded phonogram archives in, for example, Vienna 1899, Berlin and Paris 1900, St. Petersburg 1903, Zurich 1909). Technology is thus the precondition for sounds to be listed in cultural heritage programs like the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

## RECORDING TECHNOLOGY AND SONIC HERITAGE

Sounds and tones are omnipresent elements of our sensory surroundings (cf. Winkler 1995; 2007) and are largely excluded from preservational efforts, the exceptions being songs or music. In combination with the distribution of the mass media, like radio broadcasting, sounds can be listened to by social groups and transport significance. Sounds are of ephemeral character and can unfold their potential for cultural processes only when they are available in a reproducible form – as a part of human memory. As cultural anthropology searches for the historic traces of everyday phenomena, the concept of the *lieux de mémoire*, proposed by French historian Pierre Nora (1990), can provide us with a framework for the question of whether sounds can be the property of social groups. Other questions relate to neighbouring issues such as the existence of a ‘collective memory’ (Maurice Halbwachs), or social order (Corbin 1999).

Since hearing is socially encoded, it is important to understand how sounds have transformed into codes, or icons, of culture and why they are collected and archived. In this context, sound archives play an important role for cultural processes because they store huge collections of sounds of all kinds and are crucial to the transmission of past sound events. Furthermore, archival collections show which sounds have been found worthy to be stored and thus are significant to the social groups who maintain the

archives.<sup>3</sup> During my fieldwork I was privileged to talk to many sound archivists<sup>4</sup> and to participate in several archivists meetings, for example, the annual conferences of the German Association of Media Archives (Verein für Medieninformation und Mediendokumentation, vfm), or the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA Germany/Switzerland). During the conferences,<sup>5</sup> and during the interviews with archivists in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, my interlocutors often used the terms 'audiovisual heritage', or 'sonic heritage' when they talked about their collections. This signals that heritage discourse is a re-known frame of reference among the sound archivists. According to their view (and writing a bit simplistic), documents have to meet special selection criteria in order to be included in the UNESCO Memory of the World<sup>6</sup> Register. One of them is the outstanding value of the documents for humankind, among other qualifications. Following the view in the realm of cultural politics, if a document meets the criteria, it is UNESCO-certified heritage (cf. UNESCO 1972; 2002; 2003).<sup>7</sup> The use of the term 'sonic heritage' in the realm of sound archivists points to the absorption of the heritage discourse within the archive sector. Furthermore, sonic heritage reflects both the value of the preserved sounds as well as the materiality of sound. The theorising of the latter is the topic of the following paragraph.

#### THE SCOT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The program of the social construction of technology (SCOT) derives from the field of science, technology and society studies (STS). What STS can contribute to the study of sounds and music, "is a focus on the materiality of sound, its embeddedness not only in history, society, and culture, but also in science and technology and its machines and ways of knowing and interacting" (Pinch, Bijsterveld 2004: 635). STS suggest a social constructivist approach to invention. More specifically, artefacts as well as scientific theory are regarded as designed within a social context, and not exclusively by individual actors. The rationale behind applying SCOT as a theoretical framework for the interpretation of sonic heritage is threefold: First, as mentioned above, the model helps to identify actors and their interests in the construction process. The second reason is that SCOT as a process model of invention is in line with processes of collecting, researching, and publishing. Third, technology is deeply involved in the construction of sonic heritage by being the *conditio sine qua non* for the fixing of sound and thus for the development of sound collections.

The romanticist view of the engineer who gets groundbreaking ideas in his garage by inspiration has been fundamentally challenged by STS. STS scholars Trevor Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, among others, tell the story of "the social construction of facts and artefacts". They use the example of the invention of the bicycle and ask why some early versions of the bicycle "died" while others "survived" (Pinch, Bijker 1987: passim). By analysing archival and museum objects (for example, prototypes of early bicycles), they develop SCOT, which arranges and describes the selection process. In the early stage of the development of the bicycle a couple of different variants existed. One relevant social group in the construction process was sporting cyclists, who used the bicycle exclusively for sports (and not transport). For this group the air tyre meant "high speed" since bicycles with air tyres achieved good results in bicycle races. For another relevant

social group of “early adopters”, elderly men, the air tyre meant “security” by reducing the vibrations of the cobblestones which often led to accidents. A close look on all ‘actants’ (Bruno Latour) helps to identify the different stakeholder groups (for example, sporting cyclists, elderly persons), interests (security, speed), and artefacts (the Dunlop air tyre, different types of frames). At this early stage of the process, it is this “interpretative flexibility” of the bicycle artefact which helped to “stabilise” the form of the bicycle. Throughout the continuing negotiation process with the further groups involved, the “evolution” of the process came to a “closure” (cf. Pinch, Bijker 1987: passim) and the bicycle finally took the form we know today.

As an intermediary result, the classic story of the genius-inventor has been replaced by negotiations between social groups on the properties of artefacts and their problem solving abilities. The event of invention itself is now modified and described as process of stabilisation and closure. Since SCOT, invention stories have become more complex, because a variety of actors and their interests suddenly appear in the development processes and seem to complicate narratives of technology. However, the model bears a more realistic idea of the development of facts and artefacts in our complex life-world with its highly differentiated group interests, legal frameworks, and moving technological possibilities.

#### THE ACCUMULATION OF KNOWLEDGE: EDISON CYLINDERS AS HERITAGE

The collection of early sound documents of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv is an example for the construction of heritage through the accumulation of knowledge with respect to a collection. Knowledge in this context means ethnographic and historic facts that are published in books and CDs.<sup>8</sup> The Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv was founded by Psychologist Carl Stumpf at the University of Berlin (today: Humboldt University of Berlin), who started with recording sounds with an Edison Phonograph in 1900 (cf. Stumpf 2000 [1908]). The collection of “the oldest sound documents (Edison-cylinders) of traditional music of the world from 1893 to 1952” (Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv 1999) consist of 15,000 Edison-cylinders and other mechanical carriers, for example galvanos. The self-documentation considers the archives to be of immense value for comparative ethnographic research. Official publications of the Phonogramm-Archiv (cf. Reinhard 1962; Simon 2000; Koch et al. 2004) highlight special holdings of the ethnographic collections: Articles reprint original letters from composer Béla Bartók to the archive and mention important ethnographic collections, like the field recordings by Franz Boas. Publications on the history of the Phonogramm-Archiv allude heavily to the scientific importance of the wax cylinder collection. Up to 1962, 94 publications concerning the collections had been published (Reinhard 1962: unpag.). Recent publications are, for example, the series “Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv – Historical Sound Documents”, which edit wax cylinder recordings, or books on *Popular Music on Africa* (Erlmann 1991) and on *Music Archiving in the World* (Berlin, Simon 2000). Thus, the sound collection is regarded to enable ethno-musicologists to research changes and developments of threatened or extinct cultures during the last 100 years.

When Stumpf began to record he was mainly interested in acoustics and music psychology. He deposited the wax cylinders of the first recording (of a Thai music group visiting Berlin) at the University of Berlin in the Psychological Institute. By equipping field expeditions with sound recording technology and incorporating the field recordings the archives grew rapidly during its first 30 years. But other foci of research emerged (cf. Reinhard 1962; Koch et al. 2004). Erich M. von Hornbostel especially shifted from acoustics to musicology and started to maintain many co-operations with other musicologists, among them, Béla Bartók (cf. Koch et al. 2004). He also started to develop “phonographic methods” (Koch et al. 2004: 231). In 1922 the city administration of Berlin took the Phonogramm-Archiv over and attached it “for no logical reason” (Reinhard 1962: unpag.) to the Academy of Music Hanns Eisler Berlin. Further complications with respect to World War II, post war era, and cold war followed: After bringing the collection to mines in Silesia, at the end of the war nearly the entire collection were translocated to Leningrad, later to East Berlin and thus remained out of reach for Western ethnographic research. In the 1950s, a period of stabilisation began when new collection efforts were made. In 1952 more than 10,000 original cylinders from “almost all areas of the world” (Koch et al. 2004: 228) had reached the archives little by little. After the German reunification, in 1991, all cylinders were returned to the Phonogramm-Archiv at Berlin-Dahlem.<sup>9</sup> Today, the archive is still a section of the Ethnological Museum (since 1934), where the collection remain physically located. The archive cooperates with other research “institutions from a multitude of countries” (Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv 1999) and has become the “Central European center of comparative musicology” (ibid.). The archive’s protagonists also underline that the “[i]nternational demand for these sound documents is constantly increasing” (Koch et al. 2004: 230) and that the publishing activities aim to open “the Archive to the public as well as to the scientist” (ibid.; cf. Reinhard 1962; Simon 2000). In 1999 the Edison cylinders, as a part of the collection, were registered as UNESCO Memory of the World. Accordingly, the main reasons that were taken into account for the nomination were research projects, the number of publications, and the historic value of the wax cylinders collection “as the basis for contemporary research” (Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv 1999).<sup>10</sup>

#### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SONIC HERITAGE

In his paper “Claiming Culture”, Valdimar Hafstein reconstructs the processes of the “formation” of intangible cultural heritage, in which “a vast array of actors under a variety of circumstances and [...] places” (Hafstein 2007: 76) are involved. He concludes: “Don’t let all the talk about preservation fool you: all heritage is change” (ibid.: 75). This opinion is shared by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who thwarts UNESCO and Museum officials’ view, which “suggests that heritage exists, as such, prior to – rather than as a consequence of – UNESCO’s definitions, listings, and safeguarding measures” (2004: 56). A closer look on the UNESCO documentary heritage program Memory of the World shows that the registration of archival documents on the list stands at the end of a complex process which can be described as “social construction”. It is obvious that without Stumpf the Edison collection would not exist – but is he really the founder of a collection of sonic heritage? The question of how to operate and develop a sound

collection depends on a variety of social actors who negotiate these purposes and the organisational form of the archives. Different groups, such as the archivists, scientists, or even politicians need to share the imagination that a collection is of important value to our 'knowledge society' and therefore must be safeguarded. The example of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv shows that many actors, organisations, interests, and chances were participating in the history of the archives and its collections. For example, the Edison-cylinder collection has been physically moved several times (1934, 1944, 1950s, 1991). Various directors' (for example, Stumpf, and his successors Otto Abraham, and von Hornbostel) research interests, organisational talents, as well as interests of local and world politics influenced the shape of the collection. Due to this, as well as the changes in the organisational structure of the archives, and other aspects in the archive history (for more details, see Simon 2000: 25–31), the sound collection found themselves in a period of *interpretative flexibility* during the first third of the 20th century. In the 1950s and 1960s funding from the Volkswagen Foundation allowed for new collecting efforts and organisational continuity, which can be interpreted as a period of *stabilisation*. New dynamics appeared, when in the 1990s the political changes in Germany allowed for a re-structuring of the whole museum sector in Berlin. Those responsible for the Phonogramm-Archiv in the Ethnological Museum took the opportunity to apply for the recently-founded heritage program UNESCO Memory of the World. Preparatory events were conferences on the dawn of the 100th anniversary of the collection (for example, Electronic Information, the Visual Arts & Beyond conference, Berlin 1999). The heritage construction process is further grounded on the number of publications based on the archival materials, the age of the sound documents, their use for scientific research, and the international background of the collection. All these points were listed in the application form for the nomination because the accumulation of scientific knowledge adds value to the respective collection (which is one of the pre-conditions for the heritage certification). In summa, the involved actor groups successfully used events and discourses to translate "saving ancient galvanos" into "preserving universal values". The status of the wax cylinders as UNESCO Memory of the World means an intermediary *closure* of the stabilisation process.

The present research tried to bring in to operation a process-oriented theoretical model, SCOT, in the context of practices of cultural heritage. The Edison cylinders at the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv are not the only example for the strategy to transform archival stocks into sonic heritage. Archivists in various contexts entitle their collections documentary/sonic/audiovisual heritage. The growing use of the heritage language in archival practices is a second facet in the accumulation of knowledge. Knowledge in its anthropologic dimension does differ from academic knowledge which appears to be context-free. Knowledge can be defined as "corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world" which is "distributed, communicated, employed, and transmitted within a series of instituted social relations" (Barth 2002: 3). How ethnographic knowledge trickles into the realm of the UNESCO and into everyday life remains a research desideratum.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it can be found that knowledge on heritage increasingly invades the realm of cultural politics practices. For example, the European Commission names cultural heritage as "a vehicle of cultural identity" (European Culture Portal 2006) and supports action by the Member States "in order to conserve and safeguard cultural heritage of European significance" (ibid.). The example shows that

institutions who want to apply for funding have to find strategies to fit into the heritage framework. In conclusion, a stable discourse of heritage language emerges. One more reason for the great success of the heritage concept is its adaptability to different contexts with respect to history. The strong metaphor of heritage as collective memory relates to very heterogeneous phenomena with links to the past, for example collections, monuments, archival goods, old houses, traditional cultural practices, and so on. The circulation of ethnographic knowledge is facilitated by the electronic media. Memory institutions can easily receive via the internet information on the latest developments in cultural politics and are 'enabled' (towards the enabling-potential of technology, cf. Schönberger 2007) to provide their contents in a digital form. The possibility to distribute archival contents in a digital form supports archives to ensure that they are valuable for societies, but also has its ethical boundaries (Seeger 2001). Finally, being certificated and on a heritage register is important for the respective institution that holds the listed documents: The list is an artefact that provides certain values such as creating orientation, leading to public attention, and pressures for action such as the safeguarding of the listed elements (Schuster 2002).

The UNESCO Memory of the World program as well as other heritage certificates promote the value of archival collections for the 'collective memory' and knowledge of societies. This signals the value of a collection for the respective group which owns the heritage. As heritage is currently an important mode of cultural production, memory institutions can justify getting (public) money by asserting that they do important memory and identity work for the group they are sponsored by. It seems that the construction of heritage will continue as long as cultural heritage is regarded to be a powerful concept in many societies.

## NOTES

1 The term collection refers to both, "any kind of private collection that has not been deposited in a specialized institution such as an archive" (cf. Seeger 2001: 32) as well as to collections which are part of an archives.

2 "Sounds and tones as cultural property?" is the title of one sub-project among a wide range of projects in the interdisciplinary Göttingen Research Group on Cultural Property. The scholars deal with different processes of value-production (commodification) of 'tangible' or 'intangible' cultural expressions from different disciplines and point of views, for example, cultural heritage sites in Cambodia, or analysis of cultural politics legislation. A detailed list of the project can be found online: <http://www.cultural-property.uni-goettingen.de> (accessed September 10, 2009).

3 For example, the form of institutionalisation and funding is important for the collection strategy; public funded archives will guard other collections than 'semi-public' archives funded by (private) foundations.

4 Participating archives: German National Broadcasting Archives (Potsdam-Babelsberg, Frankfurt/M.), Regional Broadcasting Stations Archives (hr, rbb), Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, Music of Man Archives Hanover/Hildesheim, Vienna Phonogramm-Archiv, Austrian Mediathek, Swiss National Sound Archives, and Memoriav Switzerland.

5 Vfm conferences: May 18–20, 2009, Frankfurt/M.; May 3–5, 2010, Vienna; IASA Germany/Switzerland branch: November 13–14, 2009, Munich.

6 The Memory of the World list contains a broad range of archival goods, among them sounding documents. Examples are Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (autograph leaves, historic records),

the Radio Broadcast of the Philippine People Power Revolution (sound recordings of 44 audiocassette tapes and 1 mini-disc), or sound carriers of the Vienna Phonogramm-Archiv.

7 The term “heritage” in the Memory of the World Programme is used analogously to the 1972 world heritage convention: “The Memory of the World Programme proceeds on the assumption that some items, collections, holdings or fonds of documentary heritage are part of the inheritance of the world, in the same way as are the sites of outstanding universal value listed in the UNESCO World Heritage List” (UNESCO 1995: 05).

8 For broader concepts of knowledge(s), see Barth 2002; Berger, Luckmann 1967.

9 The Ethnological Museum is at the same time an organisation of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums at Berlin), and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation).

10 I would like to thank Dr. Susanne Ziegler at Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv who provided me with information on the history of collections and recommended literature.

11 First efforts have been made by Bendix, Welz 2002, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995.

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