



Everyone's a Different Kind of Alien: An Anthropology of Sound

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To cite this article: Holger Schulze (2016) Everyone's a Different Kind of Alien: An Anthropology of Sound, *The Senses and Society*, 11:1, 3-6, DOI: [10.1080/17458927.2016.1162942](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2016.1162942)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2016.1162942>



Published online: 01 Jun 2016.



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EDITORIAL

Everyone's a Different Kind of Alien: *An Anthropology of Sound*

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ABSTRACT This editorial presents an introduction into the field of an anthropology of sound, with a special focus on the research strand of *Historische Anthropologie* or Historical Anthropology as developed at the Interdisciplinary Center for Historical Anthropology in Berlin since the 1980s. The differences of this approach to a *philosophical* or *biological anthropology* are highlighted via its main focus on the plasticity and transformation of cultural concepts of the human. This transformation is triggered by media, by history, by imagination, and by sensory experiences. This sensory plasticity of humanoid aliens like you or me is thus the starting point for an anthropology of sound.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, sound, percept, political theory, dispositive



Everyone's a different kind of alien. In these small words, found on some recent evening in an online conversation with some good overseas friend, the main issues of this small anthology are unexpectedly yet concisely addressed: the cultural and historical, even extraterrestrial and futuristic relativity of anthropological claims; the transdisciplinary and highly reflexive character of contemporary anthropological research; and the strong focus on the performativity of the senses and the body, of sensing and experiencing in anthropology (Wulf 2013, 1997).

Probably the first tentative efforts to review and to rework the age-old and often hopelessly essentialist, eurocentric and androcentric, decidedly bourgeois, ableist and western research tradition of anthropology, started out in Berlin, in the early 1980s at the Freie Universität. Until then most of the approaches to anthropology branded as *philosophical* or *biological* were apparently mainly interested in preserving an existing social, habitual, a biological and philosophical state of how to think about *The Human Being*. A being who would resemble, unsurprisingly, ever so-often mainly the lifestyle and the habit of its white, male, professorial or aristocratic authors. From such more normative approaches came the notion of anthropology being a deeply affirmative, a rather elitist and a largely non-critical field of research and of reflection. In the 1970s whoever would have dared speaking about *The Anthropological* would have been immediately under strong suspicion of promoting an only loosely camouflaged *Western Suprematism*. Contrarily, the Berlin researchers of those years, such as Dietmar Kamper, Hans-Dieter Bahr, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf would be interested in the more quirky, the weirder and exotic, the idiosyncratic and more troublesome questions concerning anthropology. Therefore the international, peer reviewed journal they founded, *Paragrana* – celebrating its twenty fifth anniversary in 2016 – dealt with topics such as: *Selbstfremdheit* (vol.6: Self-Strangeness), *Muße* (vol. 16: Idleness), *Töten* (vol. 20: Killing), *Fuß* (vol. 21: The Foot) or *Unsicherheit* (vol. 24: Insecurity).

The second volume ever to appear in *Paragrana* was on the issue of *Das Ohr als Erkenntnisorgan: The Ear as an Organ of Knowledge* (Kamper et al. 1993). Exactly this focus on the auditory and the sonic, on listening and sensing represents the constantly provoking interest of this research strand for corporeality and sensory experience. Starting as early as 1984, when Christoph Wulf and Dietmar Kamper published the volume: *Das Schwinden der Sinne – . The Vanishing of the Senses* (Kamper and Wulf 1984). An anthropology of the senses, they stated in this book, is never to be static and unchangeable. Sensory experiences as well as confrontations with media and with reflexivity concerning mediated artifacts transformed and educated its recipients and producers so drastically, that it would be almost ridiculous if not dangerous to assume sensory experientiality in general would still be the same as

in the notoriously referred Neanderthals. Anthropology, they claimed, could never more be essentialized and affirmed in an idealized, cherished state. It needed, they stated, to be reflected, it needed to be subject of a cultural critique and subject to historicization: *Historische Anthropologie*. No more: *in general*. Together with colleagues not only from Western Europe or North America, but also from South America, from the Middle East, from East Asia, China, Oceania and Africa, they tried to explore the manifold transcultural and historically dynamic aspects of highly transformative concepts of humanoid creatures. This *condition humaine* these researchers claimed has not been completely rendered a useless and boring concept. After an assumed *End of Man* (Western, White, Middle-Class, Academic Males I feel urged to add) and in an advent of an intensely globalized, mediatized, commodified and heavily networked period of late twentieth century a fundamental reflection seemed fascinating again: What varieties, what forms of excess, transgression and invention, what potential is there, in this creature one might be tempted to call now rather a *humanoid alien*?

This daring approach let the *Interdisciplinary Center of Historical Anthropology* in Berlin become a constant point of attraction for international thinkers, researchers and scholars such as Michel Serres, Jean Baudrillard or Friedrich Kittler. Various of their works, later published and translated, started out in more tentative presentations, in discussion papers and provocative proposals in workshops and conferences of this center. It were those studies that inspired me and other German researchers to explore more ambitiously the then still utopian, imaginary and rather non-existent fields of Sensory Studies and of Sound Studies. Consequentially, the first conference on *Klanganthropologie, Anthropology of Sound* took place in 2006 at exactly this interdisciplinary center (Schulze and Wulf 2007). For me, personally, the *Historische Anthropologie* is still one of the most inspiring, daring, epistemologically experimental and most open research environments to present a new research approach in its *statu nascendi*. To think about sensory relationality in *everyday life*, about minor, often neglected practices, affects, and artifacts opens up endless possibilities of explorations: to explore the relations between humanoid aliens and sensory occurrences, the obsessions these aliens find in imaginations they like to indulge in, the materialist aspects of various cultural practices, and the desires to promote a social situation supportive for such idiosyncratic needs, an urge to political action. An *Anthropology of Sound* in this definition, as presented here via contributions by Christoph Wulf, Carla Maier, Veit Erlmann, Ulrike Sowodniok, Jacqueline Waldock, and my humble self, such an anthropology would indeed not superimpose an imaginary norm of humanoid behavior – but open up an endless series of variations of evermore strange and alien extravaganza of how *humanoid aliens* might perform, perceive and

protrude. Because every one of the authors (and readers) meeting in this anthology actually *is* a very different kind of an alien for sure.

Holger Schulze,
Copenhagen, May 2016

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