



Jonathan Sterne

Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment

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This review honours the memory of Jonathan Sterne, whose passing we learned of just as we began to conceive and develop this special issue on *Crip Media Aesthetics and Infrastructures*. Sterne was an exceptional scholar whose foundational interventions in the study of media, sound, and disability have left a profound and enduring imprint on an entire generation of researchers. Given our shared investment in the epistemologies and cultures of listening, his work assumed a singular importance for us—so much so that this issue would arguably not have existed had Sterne's writing not enabled the very conditions of our own intellectual encounter.

There is an undeniable and cruel irony in a scholar and teacher of sonic media being diagnosed with thyroid cancer and a paralysed vocal cord. Yet, Sterne notably transformed his own impaired body into an epistemological instrument. This is perhaps most vividly exemplified by the Dork-o-phone—the wearable voice amplifier he used in seminars and public lectures—through which a medical necessity became a provocative rethinking of academic infrastructures. "I might also say that disability studies prepared me to become disabled when cancer ate my right recurrent laryngeal nerve and TKIs later attacked my body" (Sterne 2025), he writes in one of his latest writings. Although one might assume that *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology*

of Impairment (2021) emerges from Sterne's experience as an oncological patient, traces of his concern with disability, and with the ways disability shapes media histories and imaginaries, can already be discerned throughout much of his earlier work, including those that did not explicitly engage with disability. Indeed, his bodily practice of amplification both personalizes and exemplifies a longer intellectual project: tracing how listening technologies are bound up with medical regimes and social norms.

In his incisive exploration of the cultural history of sound reproduction, *The Audible Past* (2003), Sterne notes that "deafness was at [its] very beginning" (41). What, for Friedrich Kittler (1999 [1986]), was an erudite excavation in media archaeology and technological determinism becomes, in Sterne's hands, a finely grained critique of the ableist assumptions and protocols underpinning modern audiometry and its entanglement with the invention of sound-reproduction machines. Although devices such as the phonograph, the telephone, and early hearing aids fundamentally transformed modern life and communication, Sterne argues that they emerged directly from anthropometric investigations into, and normalising efforts directed at, disabled and non-compliant bodies—specifically, the physiology of the ear. In this way, he exposes the erasure of disability from mainstream his-

toriographies of media and acoustics, drawing attention to a profound historical amnesia: the work of scientists and inventors such as Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Cros, Francis Galton, and Hermann von Helmholtz did not merely serve deaf people; rather, it drew extensively upon disabled lives and bodies in the development of the very infrastructures—and the profits—of communication capitalism. “Instead of eradicating the cultural status associated with deafness,” they “actually fetishized it” (41). Thus, Sterne exposes the reverse side of a medical listening practice that deployed acoustic technology to establish institutional authority over the passive, objectified body. His early engagement with the medical sciences is particularly evident in his studies of the invention of the stethoscope and mediated auscultation, where he articulated the emergence of an “audile technique:” a mode of listening that separated sound from its source and transformed the patient’s internal physiology into an acoustic text to be decoded and measured. Likewise, in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2012), Sterne traces how this algorithmic format of lossy audio compression was shaped by twentieth-century psychoacoustics and by the collection of data on imperfect hearing—that is, on the limits and intrinsic vulnerability of the human body.

Following this line of thought—strongly informed by a deconstructive impulse—he and Mara Mills (2017) formulate a distinct “dismediation theory,” comprising three proposals and six tactics that reject the techno-optimism underlying the concept of media as prostheses. In what reads like a cutting-edge manifesto, they argue that media and disability have been “mutually constitutive” (365) since their inception, thereby repositioning disability as a foundational and generative dimension of technological history rather than a deficit to be fixed or rehabilitated. With this move, they decisively contribute to legitimizing disability media studies and defining its epistemological premises, a trajectory that finds its completion in *Diminished Faculties*,

which highlights this coextensiveness while laying the groundwork for a new, seminal approach.

Sterne’s work on sonic media paves the way for his inquiry into what ocularcentric modern epistemology has systematically marginalized or treated as a secondary effect: namely, auditory perception. By interrogating sound and listening, he questions the conditions of (im)possibility of experience and knowledge, and challenges conventional notions of sensory impairment: not merely as deficit, but as a complex techno-cultural condition that, in certain situations, can also be framed as “normal impairment” (117). This sets the scene for an “impairment phenomenology” that he formulates as a distinct variant of political phenomenology, deeply informed by the politicized analysis of experience rooted in feminist, queer, and decolonial perspectives. In his account, impairment phenomenology investigates lived experience from the assumption of an unstable sense of self, addressing “how to exist in a changed body and how to negotiate that change” (12). It operates as a conduit from positionality toward “orientation” in “speech, hearing, and embodied apperception” (12–14), transforming awareness of one’s own voice in both physical and metaphorical cultural meanings. Through this lens, Sterne critically dismantles what he terms the “ideology of vocal ability,” the normative, ableist assumption that equates a clean, unimpaired voice with agency, political presence, and full personhood (78–81). By dissociating vocal performance from inner subjectivity, he conceives impairment as a “quality of experience” (32) and, significantly, as “itself also a media concept” emerging from the complex “interaction between ears and media,” “technologies,” and “environments” (126).

Diminished Faculties also abounds in creative, unconventional modes of research presentation. A striking example is the chapter “In Search of New Vocalities,” which is conceived as an imaginary, reverberant exhibition space: a virtual gallery organized into distinct rooms—Mouth, Larynx, Signals, and Volute—where readers/visitors

can “confront objects and works that imagine voices as [they] existed outside the bodies, as physical forces in the world that can be visualized” (80). Moreover, what confirms Sterne as an original and visionary scholar is his capacity to “listen forward” and to coin evocative neologisms that synthesize complex systems of thought. To address normative hearing damage, for example, he introduces the concept of “audile scarification,” which serves “as a framework for thinking about culturally produced auditory impairments” (119). This concept reframes acoustic “discomforts” and “torments” as social problems—collective consequences of the high-volume environments characteristic of industrialized societies. Such media environments normalize and demand a standardized “threshold of pain” that operates as a “cultural and political threshold” (118).

The book concludes with a practical guide to impairment theory. Illustrated by Darsha Hewitt, this final section poses questions at once simple and incisive: What is an impairment? What is a theory? How do we use impairment theory? If an impairment is “a productive distortion of an ability [...] real or imagined” (194)—both physical and culturally constructed—and a theory is a “portable idea” (196)—aimed at reconsidering naturalized objects through new lenses—then impairment theory functions as a flexible political toolkit. It can be deployed beyond and against social prescriptions and institutional protocols, reclaiming positionality and orientation as deeply specific, contextualized sites of both resistance and agency.

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