

# *More Than Meets the Ear: Sound & Short Fiction*

19-21 September 2019, University of Vienna

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## – CONFERENCE PROGRAMME –

### Keynote - Thursday

#### **Sounding Diasporic Dislocation in Postcolonial Short Stories**

JORGE SACIDO ROMERO (SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA)

### Panel 1 - Friday

#### **Gothic Soundscapes: Rhythm in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories**

LUCIE RATAIL (LYON 3)

#### **'This House Is Full of Noise': Soundscapes in Nineteenth-Century Short Stories**

ELENA GLOTOVA (UMEÅ)

#### **'A Buzzing Imitation of Human Speech': H.P. Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness" and Sonic-Racial Anxiety and Resonance**

MICHAEL COLLINS (LONDON)

### Panel 2 - Friday

#### **Silence, Celibacy, Indeterminacy in the Short Fiction of James Joyce and Flann O'Brien**

PAUL FAGAN (SALZBURG)

#### **Energy Injected by the Sounds from the Extra-symbolic in D.H. Lawrence's "The Last Laugh"**

NURTEN BİRLİK (ANKARA)

### Panel 3 - Friday

#### **Narrative Soundscapes: The Ecology of Diasporic Mourning in Edwidge Danticat's "Women Like Us"**

PAULA BARBA GUERRERO (SALAMANCA)

#### **Sound, Silence, and the Loss of Meaning in Junot Díaz's Short Fiction**

MONICA FERNANDEZ JIMÉNEZ (VALLADOLID)

### Panel 4 - Friday

#### **"Modulation" by Richard Powers: Data Compression, Prose and Digital Sound**

MICHAEL HEDGES (YORK)

#### **'I'm all Ears': Sounds of Violence and Desire in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"**

IVANA M. KRSMANOVIĆ (ČAČAK)

### Panel 1 - Saturday

#### **Evocalization, Embodied Subject and the Ambiguities of Sensory Perception in "An Epiphany Tale" by George Mackay Brown**

HALSZKA LELEŃ (OLSZTYN)

#### **Silence and Sounds in Short Fiction by Sylvia Townsend Warner**

DAVID MALCOLM (WARSAW)

### Panel 2 - Saturday

#### **The Sound of Faith: Religious Silence in Contemporary American Short Stories**

PHILIPP REISNER (DÜSSELDORF)

#### **David Constantine's Poetics of Sound in His Short Fiction**

WOLFGANG GÖRTSCHACHER (SALZBURG)

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## – CONFERENCE REPORT –

The international conference *More Than Meets the Ear: Sound & Short Fiction* welcomed fourteen researchers from nine nations at the English Department of the University of Vienna. The event was organised in affiliation with the European Network for Short Fiction Research. From the opening address to the last of the conference papers, questions of sound *in* literature and sounds *of* literary text were explored from a variety of theoretical approaches. Each speaker captured the relevance of aural phenomena in short fiction from their individual perspective,

resulting in a varied but harmonic polyphony of voices. The conference opened on Thursday evening with a keynote address in the beautiful *Alte Kapelle* (old chapel) with its panoramic views of the two main courtyards of the university campus situated in the former general hospital complex dating from the late seventeenth and nineteenth century. The remainder of the conference was held at the English Department in one of the smaller courtyards of the historic campus.



Conference poster (© Freidl & Burz-Labrande)



English Department at campus & outside view of *Alte Kapelle* situated between courts one and two (© University of Vienna)



Jorge Sacido Romero speaking in the *Alte Kapelle* (© Manon Burz-Labrande)

### Hearing Voices on the Page, Understanding Silences, and the Mobility of Languages

In his evening lecture **Jorge Sacido Romero** managed to set two key notes that resonated through all talks and discussions of the conference: First, by drawing attention to the connection of short narratives and oral literary traditions, in which effectiveness often derives from accomplished vocal performance; and, second, by showcasing the cultural relevance of ‘voice’ – be it in the sematicisation of silence or the tone of a particular voice. In the course of his analyses of short stories by Koye Oyediji and Diriye Osman he also proposed a special suitability of the short story genre to represent liminal or problematic identities. Sacido Romero built his argumentation on Slavoj Žižek’s conceptualisation of the voice as an object whose materiality defies localisation — it is neither the self nor of external origin — and Jacques Lacan’s thoughts on the non-auditory nature of verbal hallucination — rendering the internal voice an *objet petit a* with questionable allegiances. Bringing together the thus theorised liminality of the voice and the liminality of language, culture and individuals in a postcolonial setting, Sacido Romero’s talk foreshadowed what this conference would have in store for its listeners in the coming two days: theory-driven explorations of the cultural relevance of sound. After a stimulating discussion, the conference organisers invited participants to the nearby wine bar Bolena for an informal conclusion of day one.

### **Sounds and Voices out of Nowhere**

The speakers of the first panel on Friday, **Lucie Ratail**, **Elena Glotova**, and **Michael Collins** all explored uncanny sounds in their papers. Ratail's analysis of select stories by E.A. Poe focussed on their staging of conflicts between rational interpretation and sensory perception that produces horror from seemingly insignificant sounds. In a similar vein, Glotova explained how gothic houses acquire an almost supernatural character in narratives by Poe, Samuel Warren and M.P. Shiel, via close descriptions of their soundscapes and by highlighting the transient nature of sound. Collins's talk changed the historical context from nineteenth-century Gothic fiction to early-twentieth-century weird fiction. He drew on similar concepts and arrived at similar conclusions as Sacido Romero the night before, when he showed how racist ideas prevalent during the *fin de siècle* American cultural sensorium are carried over into the new century and resonate in the imagination of bodiless alien voices in Lovecraft's eerie science-fiction story. The ensuing discussion with all panellists revolved around ways in which a deprivation of other senses, whether circumstantial or artificial, often is used to place emphasis on hearing in short stories in order to increase suspense, heighten uncertainty and encourage reader immersion.

### **Sounds of the Unspoken and Unheard**

After a well-deserved coffee break **Paul Fagan** and **Nurten Birlik** presented talks about two forms of absences of sound in modernist short fiction. Fagan offered a refreshing re-reading of James Joyce's well-known "A Painful Case" and Flann O'Brien's literary response to it, "John Duffy's Brother," by interpreting silence not as a passive absence, but as a marked articulation of the aesthetic role of celibacy in Irish culture. Birlik offered a 'counter-Lacanian' reading of deafness and sudden hearing restoration in D.H. Lawrence's "The Last Laugh." She interprets the transformational sounds in this story as 'auditory images' springing from the Lacanian *real* that introduce a new symbolic register for the protagonist. Both speakers explored less obvious connections of sound and sexuality, which led to exciting discussions of further aspects of the role of sound in individual as well as collective repression.



## Travelling Languages and Momentary Glimpses

Having spent the lunch break in Vienna's best late-summer weather, conference participants returned for a panel about short stories in which sound becomes a platform for cultural identity. **Paula Barba Guerrero** examined sound as an agent of change in narratives of migration when the 'sonic object' of memories attempts to find its place in new environments and the soundscapes of writing and of ancestral life travel with migrants. In **Monica Fernandez Jiménez's** talk, these ideas were immediately taken up again and enriched by questions of continuities and discontinuities of languages in migration. Fernandez Jiménez also highlighted the appropriate choice of the short story cycle by Junot Díaz to illustrate such a fragmentary process, not opting for one coherent and exhaustive narrative but a string of 'moments of truth' (Mary Louise Pratt).

## Sounds of the Future and the Future of Sound

Before the conference dinner at the typically Viennese *Heurigen* restaurant s'Pfiff, which opened with an official reception by a Mayor's representative, the last panel of the day again thematised fragmentation — albeit that of short prose texts themselves. **Michael Hedges** engaged with the role of varying focalisation and the influence on literature of music and



Conference dinner venue s'Pfiff (© Michaela Huber)

technology. He illustrated the effect of digital sound distribution on the richness of music by juxtaposing a sample of compressed music with a sample of the remainder of data compression, the upper and lower frequencies that are cut in Mp3-files. The issue of literature and technology was taken up again, though on a very different level, by **Ivana Krsmanović**, who talked about Jennifer Egan's Twitter fiction hit "Black Box." She also discussed problems of focalisation and narrative voice, which she related to Lacanian theory and its links between inner voice, internalised voices, and individuality. This offered an opportunity to foregone speakers also working with psychoanalytical concepts to engage in a fruitful debate.

## Reading Silences and Reading in Silence

**Halszka Lelen**'s talk about a short story by Scottish author George Mackay Brown that deals with synaesthesia and imperfect perception, imagined by the story as almost a divine gift, provided an elucidating exploration of the connection between the 'sounds' a text read in silence produces in our head, as theorised by Garrett Stewart, and questions of intersubjectivity in the reception of literature. **David Malcolm** traced different forms of silences and their interruptions, by words, by noise, by meaningful, and by meaningless sounds, in Sylvia Townsend Warner's short fiction. In his analysis, a sound often is but a trace, visceral though momentary, that an act of consequence has taken place.

## Transcendental Silences and Translating the Sense of Sound

The last coffee break was spent in animated conversation and gave way for the final panel, in which two recurrent topics of this conference were picked up again: meaningful silences, and the sound of texts. **Philipp Reisner** began by noting the way in which the contemporary American short story often addresses religious phenomena through reference to silence, an observation that resonated well with Lelen's talk. In his examples, which are by Chris Offutt and Rebecca Lee, he finds similar 'spiritual silences' and 'silent invitations' in



Breaks powered by *Cositas Veganas*  
(tartlettes © Dominique Franzberger)

conjunction with wild nature and animals. Our last speaker, **Wolfgang Görtschacher**, once again drew attention to the legacy of writing to its elusive predecessor: spoken language. Görtschacher provided a close analysis of a passage from David Constantine's short story "Tea at the Midland" and showed how Constantine's poetics of sounds form the basis of not just his lyrical work but of his narrative texts as well. The complexity of sound-related issues in literature were instructively revealed by a work-in-progress German translation manuscript of the passage from "Tea at the Midland". In a rare insight into the work of translators, problems of the getting the sound of a text right emerged as just as tricky as such of semantical correspondence. In the following panel discussion, the question of how sounds make sense in conjunction with the other senses was discussed with reference to the theories of Roman

Jakobson, an idea tellingly put into a nutshell by one participant: “Sounds makes *sense* by being *sensuous*!”

In her closing remarks, conference host Sylvia Mieszkowski pointed to the many echoes and surprising resonances between papers, panels, and discussions that arose in the past few days. Looking into the future, she invited all speakers to submit their papers for publication in a special issue of the peer-reviewed and interdisciplinary journal *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice*. In the light of the prolific debates at this conference, our guests tended to agree with the conference’s final statement: Our discussions and the forthcoming publication will amplify the important contributions of literary studies to the interdisciplinary field of sound studies.

**Report: Harald Freidl**