

MORE THAN MEETS THE EAR: SOUND & SHORT FICTION

Abstracts

FRIDAY, 20TH SEPTEMBER

Lucie RATAIL (Lyon)

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

"There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss." Among Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "The Pit and the Pendulum" is perhaps the most sonorous. Developing a binary rhythm echoing the swing of the pendulum all along the narration, this story alternates between sound and silence, seeing and hearing, acute sensibility/sensitivity and dimness of perception. What ensues is a blending of the visual into the sonorous, a blurring of the senses enabling the reader to share the extreme feelings experienced by the main character. Poe's other short stories also show examples of such narrative strategies, as do most gothic stories in fact. However, the elaboration of gothic atmospheres is usually firstly based on visual stimuli, before being emphasised by sound effects, especially in lengthy novels. In the case of Poe's short stories, it is their very shortness which strengthens his building up of horror, terror and suspense, precisely because it enables him to give precedence to sounds over visual effects.

This paper will therefore comment upon Edgar Allan Poe's gothic through the analysis of the sound effects and sound rhythms he used in his short stories, highlighting the importance of the brevity of his stories in his creation of an immersive gothic atmosphere. A first part will study in more depth auditory features, establishing an overview of the sound effects found in a selection of Poe's short stories. The second part will use lengthy gothic novels as counterpoints to illustrate Poe's mastery of rhythmic patterns in the evocation of a thrilling gothic atmosphere, setting aside beauty (in the form of visual elements) and privileging the arguably more efficient sublime (sounds and silence).

Elena GLOTOVA (Umeå)

"This House Is Full of Noise": Soundscapes in the Nineteenth-Century Short Stories

The potential of sound to inform the architectural design of a space has long attracted the attention of scholars from many disciplines, where the use of literary texts for the purpose of sound investigation has a potential to bring about new insights into the relationships between sound, space and literature. In this connection, Gothic fiction represents a particular sonic dimension with different possibilities and dynamics for the

exploration of sound, including its relationship with domestic acoustic geographies. The ghostly noises of eerie breathing, chilling creaks, and thumping footsteps mingle with howling wind, terrifying thunder, and the rustling of leaves to contribute to the acoustic composition of castles, monasteries and haunted houses. If in the eighteenth century, Anne Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis privileged ivy-covered monastic ruins and castles, in the nineteenth-century Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Warren and Matthew Phipps Shiel transferred the locus of horror onto a narrower space, in the tradition of urbanization and modernity.

This study brings together three nineteenth-century short stories that feature aural phenomena in the representation space, and the psycho-physiological state of the listener: Samuel Warren's "The Thunder-Struck and the Boxer", Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", and Matthew Phipps Shiel's "The House of Sounds". My discussion of the stories pinpoints common features and themes, and highlights the way the authors relate the characters to their surroundings and create the idea of instability in the domestic setting. As Poe depicts the multi-layered acoustic space in its interaction with the characters' mental disintegration, Warren brings out the sonified heterogeneity of the physician's home office in connection with a speculative attitude to sound and the anxieties of the household, and Shiel translates the anatomy and physiology of listening and hearing into the acoustic topology of decay in the domestic space.

Michael J. COLLINS (London)

"A Buzzing Imitation of Human Speech": H.P. Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931) and Sonic-Racial Anxiety in the Modernist Cultural Field

Using a methodology informed by the New Sound Studies and New Modernist Studies, as well as my prior work on short story theory and performance, this paper considers H.P. Lovecraft's sci-fi/horror short story "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931) as a reflection of white nativist fears over Anglo-Saxon exclusion from the changing cultural and sensory field of the twentieth century, occasioned in Lovecraft's racist mind by the rise of sound recording. As a writer for the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, I argue, Lovecraft's work expressed anxieties over how the short story form and its "white" authors competed for position in a new, complex landscape of modern consumption that included popular sonic recordings for personal and domestic enjoyment, especially those by African-American musicians and cultural practitioners. In particular, "The Whisperer in Darkness" dramatizes the emotional breakdown of a white, North-eastern, elite, literature Professor when forced to confront in domestic space, "horrible cylinders and machines" that contain recordings of "alien" voices he cannot verify as an "actual visual horror", phonograph records, extracted brains and sensory organs preserved in cylinder-like containers, and the alien creatures' seemingly limitless capacity for imitation and infiltration dependent upon their masterful use of "wax" (an important material for pre-tape sound recording). Consequently, as a work that emerged in the era that saw the irresistible rise of popular American jazz and blues recordings, and also latent New Deal

governmental strategies to record and document the oral testimonies of displaced or subalternated "others" for popular and academic study, "The Whisperer in Darkness" serves to illuminate the affective social history of conservative Anglo-Saxon nativism at a time of rapidly-shifting cultural and aesthetic norms in American life.

Paul FAGAN (Salzburg)

Silence, Celibacy, Indeterminacy in the Short Fiction of James Joyce & Flann O'Brien

James Joyce's short story "A Painful Case" (1914) figures its striking closing image of the celibate James Duffy, caught amid the entwined bodies of Dublin's Phoenix Park, through the trope of silence: "He waited for some minutes listening. He could hear nothing; the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone." Flann O'Brien's short story "John Duffy's Brother" (1940), itself a peculiar creative response to Joyce's text, closes with an image of another celibate 'Mr Duffy' lost in silence, as Keats in "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer": "to this day John Duffy's brother starts at the rumble of a train in the Liffey tunnel and stands rooted to the road when he comes suddenly on a level-crossing – silent, so to speak, upon a peak in Darien."

In this talk, I propose to address the conference's theme by considering how the trope of 'silence/silences/silencing' is explored in representations of celibacy as a sexual, literary, and political identity in modernist short fiction. What interests these authors (not unproblematically) in their construction of 'celibacy as silence' is the parallel this theme offers for the formal aesthetic indeterminacy of their poetics. To develop this reading, first I historicize Joyce and O'Brien's narratives of experience on the borders of desire at the nexus of diverse and overlapping contemporary discourses about celibacy: Catholic and conservative, but also theosophical, misogynistic, progressive, socialist, and feminist. Secondly, I theorise the proximity of these representations both to adjacent sexualities, relationalities, and political movements in 'early' and 'late' literary modernist movements and to earlier literary representations of silence. Finally, I make the case that it is precisely celibacy's indeterminacy – its affirmation of Foucault's claim that "there is not one but many silences" – that distinguishes its most significant, though critically overlooked, place in the development of modernist short fiction.

Nurten BIRLIK (Ankara)

Energy injected by the sounds from the extra-symbolic in D.H. Lawrence's "The Last Laugh"

D.H. Lawrence's "The Last Laugh" tells the story of two neurotic characters; Miss James, an hysteric whose position is characterized by a fundamental disgust to sexuality and whose deafness stands for her deafness to the demands of the patriarchal culture; and Marchbanks, an obsessive who is, on the contrary, captivated by jouissance. On a

snowy night they hear strange sounds and see strange visions. Despite their different positions to sexuality, these strange visual and auditory images work on them (but differently): The following morning Miss James starts to hear, which stands for a new position in the symbolic register, and Marchbanks dies. The text is highly rich in implications, thus, multilayered; therefore, a thematic reading of it fails to tease out the wider implications of Miss James's deafness and the significance of the strange sounds and her response to them. Focusing on only Miss James, I argue that the significance of her deafness and these sounds in this polyphonic text open itself out when it is read from a counter-Lacanian perspective. These strange sounds can be taken as resonances coming from the imaginary real in Lacanian terms. They lead her to a new space of signification, thus, "cure" her by injecting her a new kind of psychic energy. In this paper, I aim to come up with a counter-Lacanian reading of the text: borrowing terminology from Lacan but employing his concepts to decipher the de-phallogocentric feminine space of signification at the heart of the symbolic created by Miss James.

Paula BARBA GUERRERO (Salamanca)

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

In the epilogue to her short story collection *Krik? Krak!* (1996), the Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat explores the struggles of women with regards to family, cultural identity and spatial belonging. Danticat gathers nine short stories that revolve around the sorrowful experiences of survival of her female protagonists and their (dis)connection with Haitian tradition. Despite being set in different geographical locations, the stories confer a feeling of continuity and cohesion that is perhaps best synthesized in the collection's epilogue, "Women like Us." In it, the narrator speaks of a diverse array of cultural symbols that Haitian women share, which link them together, but also hold them static; for their identities cannot evolve and leave patriarchal influence behind if their symbolic heritage does not adapt. In this paper, I contend that it is in the configuration of literature in and through soundscapes that the author meets a middle ground between those traditions ingrained in her cultural heritage and her personal need to discover herself as fully agentic (as a writer). As such, sound figures as the essential background that ties the stories together, but also as the gateway – the escape – to new forms of testimony and (agonic) agency. Sound is present in the very title of this collection, and it is through the *kriks* and *kraks* of writing that identity is mediated and sorrow worked through. Just as the narrator states: "Krik? Krak! Pencil, paper. It sounds like someone crying" (220). Through this beautiful metaphor, Danticat describes the mourning process undergone to figure out diasporic identities through testimony. In this epilogue, I argue, the sound of writing comes to represent a bitter process of identity construction that reconciles ancestral tradition and a female individual desire for self-fulfilment, loss and glimpses of hope. Anticipated in the collection's title, the sounds of literature, of pencil

and paper, give us the key to *Krik? Krak!*'s reading, for one can only perceive the havoc of diasporic mourning as a collective cultural process once the agony of writing has been heard and given new signification.

Mónica FERNÁNDEZ JIMÉNEZ (Valladolid)

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

"She had discovered the secret to silence ... You have travelled to the East and learned many secret things, I've told her. You're like a shadow warrior." (Díaz, *Drown* 74).

The previous quote appears in one of the short stories of Junot Díaz's collection *Drown* (1996). The context of the utterance lies in a Dominican-American immigrant family household. I had previously addressed this quote in an article as dealing with the trauma of migration, of not being able to address the past. In this paper I propose to analyse the role of sounds and silences in this collection as contributing to understanding the experience of migration and cultural identity. Another short story collection by Díaz, *This is How you Lose her* (2012), shows a similar confrontation: when does sound become meaningful? When is silence more meaningful than sound? In both collections there are first-generation Hispanic immigrant characters for whom the English words they hear do not mean anything, although they are aware of them being uttered, of the break in the continuity of the sounds' meaning. The characters' lack of understanding translates into silences, as shown in the quote, since their meanings are not relevant or understood in this new land either. The role of the short story in this approach is of relevance as well. The stories that compose the collections never make explicit they are showing the same characters, highlighting that, while the situations depicted are quite universal to the migrant experience, the characters are subject to a deep isolation. The fragmentation and lack of continuity between each story shows that, although the silences present in some of them are the result of the breaks in transmission shown in others, such a connection is not always easy to make.

Michael HEDGES (York)

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

Richard Powers is a critically-acclaimed recipient of some of America's most prestigious literary prizes (National Book Award, 2006; Pulitzer Prize, 2019). Few contemporary authors place such receptive response to sound technology at the heart of their creative practice. As a result, Powers' longer fiction is a common case study for intermediality scholars, particularly those cognisant of recording technology's mediation of the relationship between music and literature. Powers' 2008 short story, "Modulation",

compresses the auditory aspect of his novels into some thirty pages. This paper reads Powers' compressed prose as a formal iteration of the data compression the story narrates. "Modulation" recounts the spread of a malignant sound file that renders the world's mp3 players inoperable. The apotheosis of music's free dissemination through file sharing is silence, an absence of recorded sound engendered by its devalued proliferation. The file's subaudible frequencies confound those for whom music has always been a format removed of superfluous psychoacoustic information. Powers enacts comparable data compression of his own, stripping "Modulation" of the surfeit of narrative detail that characterises *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) or *The Time of Our Singing* (2003). Just as mp3s surrender harmonics and transients to fit a song into a handful of megabytes, Powers sheds his prose of its maximalism: both remain recognisable despite, or even preferable because of the data lost through compression. What is left is the essence of so much of Powers' writing: a sustained, informed and conceptually rich textual engagement with sound's capture, storage and reproduction. This is what attracted the theorists Emily Petermann and Elisabeth Reichel to Powers' novels above, and yet there has been no study of "Modulation" to date. This paper discusses how "Modulation" invites us to reflect on representational fidelity in both prose and sound through evoking a watershed moment in how we consume music.

Ivana M. KRSMANOVIĆ (Čačak)

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

The paper aims at investigating patterns of violence related to eroticism and desire in the context of the voice and sound and their literary absence, in Jennifer Egan's Twitter fiction *Black box*. The paper addresses Lacanian definition of Desire as which belongs to the unsaid reaching beyond of the symbolic, and discusses Dolar's explorations of the silent voice and silence, related to the Egan's flash fiction narrative. The study focuses on abounds of diverse sounds which demystify the "coordinated violence" geared towards a female, including the onomatopoeic speech elements, inaudible sounds, sounds of inanimate objects which add to the discomfort or maltreatment of the main character. How are "bodiless" and "voiceless" correlated after an act of violence is conducted? Is Egan deploying sounds to denote that the victimization of women is occurring as silencing appears to be constructed to prevent resistance? How much of the victimizing the Other is given in the subtext of the said and the unsaid?

Demonstration of "mute" violence which makes the narrator "hear the faint" in a tense series of events, is opposed to the usurping and expected flashes of violence innuended by a cacophony of sounds of different origin, until it eventually provokes the "unleash [of] your Primal Roar." As Egan implements "translated sounds" in rare male-female dialogues throughout the story, the actual lines appear to be mere subtitles for the personal soliloquy of the unasked questions of the 'interior voice.' Finally, if the voice is one of the paramount embodiments of the psychoanalytic object, as Lacan claimed, how

are the silenced and unconscious voices constructed in the time-based and space-limited literary medium such as a Digi story? Is the digital storytelling inserting the 'voicing' hashtag?

SATURDAY, 21ST SEPTEMBER

Halszka LELEŃ (Olsztyn)

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

The task taken up in this article is exploring the relationship between the synesthetic representation (Duffy) of reduced sensory perception and intermedial patterns of storytelling (Rajewski) in a short story by a Scottish writer George Mackay Brown (1921-1996). Departing from the concept of "evocalization" of Garret Stewart developed in *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, and the idea of "embodied subject" used by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, I propose to explore the tensions emerging from the use of sparse though intensely phonetically orchestrated lyrical language that foregrounds the patterns of human consciousness. "An Epiphany Tale" from collection *Andrina and Other Stories* is composed as a "phonotext" (Stewart) that engages the reader in the process of reading. On top of its aural qualities, it projects an intersubjective process of reception (Rembowska-Płuciennik, "Narrative Models of Intersubjectivity"). Brown's focus is on showing the paradoxes of perception: the fictional world representation as a mundane ordinary domestic reality gains outstanding quality through being depicted via the subjective point of view of a character with apparently imperfect but ultimately gifted consciousness. Based roughly on the biblical hypotext telling of the visitation of the Magi, the short story is set in the agricultural-fishing Orkney community, with fairy-tale overtones which stresses its universal aspect. The ambivalence of the protagonist's stance, and the limitations of his position unexpectedly result in the expansion of the ways of cognising the reality, which activates complex networks of communicative relations (Kędra-Kardela 63). The reader is encouraged to "identify and share internal states of other people", and thus to take part in their "various perspectives (spatiotemporal, cognitive, emotional, or sensual)" (Rembowska-Płuciennik, "Narrative Models of Intersubjectivity" 202).

David MALCOLM (Warsaw)

Silence and Sounds in Short Fiction by Sylvia Townsend Warner

Motifs of silence and sound play an important part in several of the texts in the collection of Sylvia Townsend Warner's stories entitled *Scenes of Childhood and Other*

Stories (1984). Surprisingly, they do not do so in the four Elfland stories contained in it, although the worlds of humanity and elves are not without their auditory relationships. However, in those working – more or less – within the conventions of social-psychological fiction, the interplay of silence and articulate or inarticulate sound has a central function in the texts.

For example, in "The Proper Circumstances" (1944), the almost silent Evie exerts a malign influence over the household and house which she joins as an evacuee. In "A Widow's Quilt" (1977), Charlotte – almost wordlessly – sews a widow's quilt in an attempt to dispose of her vexatious husband. In "I Met a Lady" (previously unpublished), Thomas breaks with his mistress wordlessly, and imagines a macabre murder committed by silent Teddy Bears. But powerful silence is often broken by meaning-filled (if ambiguous) sounds. In "A Breaking Wave" (1948), the nearly silent Mrs Butler, driven to distraction by her feckless husband, discharges a shotgun at him, repeatedly and perhaps effectively, but an occurrence solely rendered as sound. In one of the most powerful stories, "The Mother Tongue" (1948), the traumatized Polish DP Magda begins to forget her Polish in England, and, indeed, ceases to use any language, until at the story's end, thrust into mourning by the funeral of a casual acquaintance, she breaks out into inarticulate sound, "her speech," which brings her suffering momentarily close to the English that surround her.

This paper will explore the complex relations between the auditory and the inaudible in Townsend Warner's short fiction.

Philipp REISNER (Düsseldorf)

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

One of the more striking features of contemporary American short stories is the way they make use of sound, or rather the lack of sound, to draw attention to religious phenomena. This reference to silence draws on the Judeo-Christian tradition and the view that one has more direct access to God's presence by listening to His voice rather than by reading about Him or examining His work. Short stories such as Chris Offutt's "The Leaving One" from his collection *Kentucky Straight* (1992) and Rebecca Lee's story "Bobcat" from her eponymous 2013 collection are two examples of how sound is used to display the silence of religious presence. In these short stories, the spiritual is connected to the notion of sound both on the level of content and of style.

In these short stories, the sense in which faith is to be heard and not seen is reflected in how passages point, by means of symbolism and metaphor, to religious realities that are not visible and that cannot be depicted directly—phenomena that lie behind the plot. Objects of daily life are used as silent starting points for religious reflection. The Bible and other religious texts appear in these stories in the form of liturgy, in spoken form, or in combination with other sounds that underscore their physical presence. By examining the

stories by Offutt and Lee, we can see that sound is used not only to convey a religious dimension but also to give voice to the silencing of faith characteristic of modern society.

Wolfgang GÖRTSCHACHER (Salzburg)

David Constantine's Poetics of Sound in His Short Fiction

David Constantine is perhaps best known as a poet and translator, and the long-term editor of *Modern Poetry in Translation*. However, he has also published four collections of short stories: *Back at the Spike* (1994), *Under the Dam* (2005), *The Shieling* (2009), and *Tea at the Midland and Other Stories* (2012), as well as a volume of Selected Short Stories entitled *In Another Country* (2015). He has also received two prestigious awards for his short stories: in 2013 the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award for the volume *Tea at the Midland and Other Stories*; and, most importantly, the 2010 BBC National Short Story Award for "Tea at the Midland".

His poetics of sound is best exemplified by a quotation from his 2011 interview with *The Oxford Times* when he says that "Most of my poems and stories begin in images and in a particular tone of voice. Neither in a poem nor in a story do I know in advance what the development and outcome will be. In both genres I have to listen and attend to what the possibilities are." In another interview, Constantine describes how writing poetry begins: "The actual start is an image, a tone of voice, a particular – even wordless – rhythm." I would argue that what Monika Szuba points out for Constantine's poetry also holds true for his short fiction: "He plays with sound, making it signify: the tight relationship of irregular rhyme and flexible metre cues relationships between sound and meaning: the characteristic vowel sound patterning forges rhythm and creates sense."

An excellent example is the beginning of his short story "Tea at the Midland": "The wind blew steadily hard with frequent surges of greater ferocity that shook the vast plate glass behind which a woman and a man were having tea. The waters of the bay, quite shallow, came in slant at great speed from the south-west. They were breaking white on a turbid ground far out, tide and wind driving them, line after line, nothing opposing or impeding them so they came on and on until they were expended." The sounds in the quotation – the wind, the shaking of the glass, the breaking of the waves – are foregrounded. However, I would argue that the sounds of the text, when read out aloud, reinforce through rhythmic and sound patterning the intrinsic sound qualities, something that is perhaps reminiscent - for some readers of poetry – of Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach".

This paper will explore Constantine's poetics of sound by studying a selection of his short fiction. I will also try to conduct an interview with the author on sound-related issues in his short stories.