

Soundscape:

From origins to possible directions in literature

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Sound studies is a highly interdisciplinary and engaging academic field, incorporating the natural sciences, humanities, arts, and design, among others. Contributions to literary studies embrace new ways to approach the acoustic dimensions of text, exploring narrative representation of sound and the psycho-somatic peculiarities of perception.

Fictional representation of the relationship between characters and their acoustic environments has necessitated the search for appropriate vocabulary to describe the contextualization of sounds in fictional settings. Accordingly, the concept of *soundscape* has entered literary scholarship to analyze the audible world in fiction. Situated in the field of literary sound studies, the present article addresses *soundscape* as a concept that proves useful in description of acoustic environments and listening in fiction. I will elaborate on *soundscape* in its major constituents – the sound, the space, and the listener inhabiting the space – and situate the concept in relation to selected nineteenth-century Gothic short stories.

The sonic features of the genre make it fruitful to employ the concept of *soundscape* to explore the spatial and acoustic parameters of Gothic narratives, and ways of engaging with sound. The essay will conclude by discussing possible elaboration of the concept, as well as implications and future directions for scholarly work.

SOUNDSCAPE: THE ORIGINS

The principle source text for this concept is *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* by composer and acoustic ecologist Murray Schafer. He

coined *soundscape* as the sonic equivalent of landscape in an individual's experience of place: "[a] soundscape consists of events *heard* not objects *seen*", and laid the foundation for soundscape theory (1977:8). Ever since its publication, the work has informed almost every study on the phenomena of sound, and has even gained popularity beyond the academy (Kelman 2010:214). Schafer took a holistic approach to acoustic phenomena thus challenging the ocular-centric perspectives of the Western tradition and paving the way for new fields of discovery (Krause 2008:73). The soundscape represents a network of relationships between the comprising *sound(s)*, the *space*, and the *listening subject*.

In his discussion of *sound*, Murray Schafer avoids its explicit definition, but brings in the ontological status of sound as *sound object* versus *sound event*. Pierre Schaeffer's¹ concept of "sound object" refers to an unintentional representation of the audible: it is an object for perception (epitomized as a recorded sound) with a complicated relationship to its cause. Murray Schafer describes the *sound object* as "defined by the human ear as a smallest self-contained particle of a [soundscape], ... analyzable by the characteristics of its envelope" (1977: 274). As an object, sound is isolated, artificial, and analyzable through such qualitative properties as its dynamics and timbre. Prior to the possibility of recording a sound object, sound was indispensably an *event* (Steintrager 2016:xii). The event-like construal of sound considers its unfolding through time. In his dichotomy of *sound object* and *sound event*, Schafer observes that the latter represents "a symbolic, semantic, or structural object for study" (1977:274). Stretching out in time, the *sound event* affords spatial features of the environment and related con-

textual features of sound production. Citing the composer Agostino Di Scipio, sound is "an event *in* the environment and *of* the environment" (Solomos 2018:97).

Within the *soundscape*, *sound* is interpreted in relation to the *space* and the *listening ear*. As Solomos suggests, "[s]ound defines itself as a *network of relationships*: to other sounds, to the ambient space and to the subject who listens" (2018:95). Schafer writes about the effects of space on sound in prairies and forests, ancient caves and modern public spaces through "reflection, absorption, refraction and diffraction", also affecting the features of sound production (1977:217–219). Finally, the perceiving subject weaves sound and space through the act of listening. Audition informs the listener about events and objects in space, the disposition of the milieu, and the whereabouts of sound-producing sources. Schafer introduces an *earwitness* (as compared to an eyewitness) and considers the trustworthiness of his or her accounts. If the "terrible squash" of Niagara Falls in the descriptions of Jonathan Swift who has never been there raises a suspicious eyebrow, the exploding shells of Erich Maria Remarque compel with the truthfulness of the author's experience. It is the "authenticity of the earwitness" that, for Schafer, ensures the success of the reconstructed soundscape (1977:9).

Schafer created a variety of descriptive criteria that pertain to the features of *soundscape*. These in turn represent other concepts that anchor the *soundscape* and exemplify Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the interconnection of concepts: "[e]very concept has components that may, in turn, be grasped as concepts" (1994:19). The descriptive network for *soundscape* branches off to *keynote sounds*, *signals* and *soundmarks*, where each, as no-

tes Michel Chion, highlights a fundamental difference between "figure and ground" (2016:9). *Keynote sounds* do not require conscious listening as they form background sounds against all the other sounds of the acoustic environment. At the same time, keynote sounds affect human behavior and mood as their absence makes the environment shapeless. In a landscape, keynote sounds are those created by its climate and geography, such as the sounds of wind, forests, water, insects and animals. *Sound signals* represent foreground sounds that are listened to consciously. Although Schafer admits that any sound can be listened to consciously, he confines the term to those signals that make up complex code messages. Sound signals, according to Schafer, "must be listened to because they constitute acoustic warning devices: bells, whistles, horns and sirens" (1977:10). The term *soundmark* refers to a sound that is particularly noticeable by those living in a community. For Schafer, "[o]nce a soundmark has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of the community unique" (1977:10). For instance, the bells of a parish church were the soundmarks that defined some communities in the past: "A parish was also acoustic, and it was defined by the range of the church bells. When you could no longer hear the church bells, you had left the parish" (Schafer 1977:215).

With its emphasis on background sound, Schafer's concept of soundscape responds to the changing acoustic environment challenged by noise pollution. According to soundscape theory, humans both have an immediate effect on the sonic environment and are directly influenced by it. The progression from a natural harmonic world to one mechanically, dra-

matically and indiscriminately affecting the environment has accelerated over the past decades, bringing in confusion, anxiety and the "overpopulation of sounds" (Schafer 1977:71). As a result, research in various areas of sound studies is commonly engaged to address the perilous derivatives of modernity and the relationship between humans and the sound environment (Schafer 1977:3–4). According to Schafer, the concept of *soundscape* applies to the arts, science, and society as an overarching category for various areas of sound studies: from acoustics, psychoacoustics and communication technologies to the structural analysis of language and music.

Such broad application of the concept has provoked skepticism about the after-effects of its wide circulation and use. In "Rethinking the Soundscape. A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies", Ari Y. Kelman traces the intellectual history of the concept and its utility for scholarship. He acknowledges the widespread popularity of *soundscape*, but expresses concern about its ubiquitous use and misapprehension in sound studies. For Kelman, Schafer's original definition designates something much more specific than its recent omnipresent reference to "almost any experience of sound in almost any context" (2010:214). Instead, the author's discussion of *soundscape* suggests his preference for certain sounds over others. In its primary focus, the concept is infused with ecological and ideological implications about sound and the social production of meaning, and in particular the perils of background noise as a critical acoustic phenomenon. As a result, Kelman deplores the fact that *soundscape* is employed "willy-nilly, without accounting for its original definition" (2010:228). Yet, even despite the indeterminacy in applica-

tion, Kelman admits that Schafer's notion "resonates ... beyond the bounds of the book" and continues to call attention both to the background of sound and the critical aspects of social and cultural context (2010:228). It is important to acknowledge that Schafer himself refutes possible limitations to the application of his concept by suggesting "[t]he home territory of soundscape studies" as "the middle ground between science, society and the arts" (1977:4). As the concept of *soundscape* not only welcomes, but appeals to interdisciplinarity with its manifold and overlapping strands, it fills the necessary niche in the broad field of Sound Studies. *Soundscape* thus addresses a range of theoretical, methodological and cultural challenges. With due attention to its "original definition", *soundscape*, however, has established itself as a "work in progress", a policy for inclusion rather than exclusion, that responds to the emerging needs for accessing and understanding auditory culture.

SOUNDSCAPE IN LITERATURE

The significance of sound in literature goes beyond the established poetic devices, such as assonance, alliteration and rhyme. Literature, as Sam Halliday observes, is notable for its capacity to reveal the social connotation of sounds, the interaction of sound with other senses, and "the qualitative dimension" that accounts for the interest of people in certain sounds – what and why they actively pursue or evade in the audible world (2013:12). In this connection, according to Justin St. Clair, Schafer's *The Soundscape* is a "singularly important antecedent" for the studies of sound in literature that welcomes literary studies "as evidentiary material"

(St. Clair 2018:356; Keskinen 2008:13).

Schafer's concept and its subsequent wide network for sound studies have achieved their presence in literary sound studies² and served as a model for a number of literary and interdisciplinary publications (St. Clair 2018; Cuddy-Keane 2005; Mieszkowski 2014; Smith 1999). Borrowed into literary criticism, the wide network of concepts illustrates the Deleuzian-Guattarian mechanism of becoming, when "... every concept refers back to other concepts, not only in its history but in its becoming or its present conditions" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:19). The capacity of literature to contextualize the relationship between people and their acoustic environment has necessitated a new language for its exploration. In "Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear", Melba Cuddy-Keane suggests that literary analysis of narrative acoustics "can be enhanced by employing the sonic vocabulary" suggested by M. Schafer: "soundmark instead of landmark, soundscape instead of landscape, sound signal and keynote sound in place of figure and ground" (2000:385).

Inspired by Schafer, literary scholars have employed the concept of *soundscape* to account for the meaning of sound in literature and culture. For instance, Brigitte Gazelles' *Soundscape in Early French Literature* (2005) engages with sound in a range of pre-modern French literary texts that were mainly transmitted orally to the listening community. Early French soundscapes reveal the use of sounds to establish military authority, glorify chivalric romances and epic songs, or subvert the established order. One of the most influential studies of soundscapes in Victorian culture and literature is John Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* (2007), which blends

sound studies, science and literature in the exploration of innovative sound technologies and their impact on the consumer. Victorian soundscapes pertain to speech transmission and reception in Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, the interplay of sound and gender in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and the problematic engagement of authors and intellectuals with street noise. Melba Cuddy-Keane's modernist soundscapes embrace the process of "new aural sensitivity" that appeared in conjunction with the gramophone, the wireless, and other sound technologies of the time (2000:71). A significant area of sound studies in literature belongs to Gothic soundscapes that draw attention to the audible world in its connection with the fearful, the terrifying and the unsettling. The following section examines this area in more detail and highlights interaction between the sound, the space and the listener in the audible world of Gothic fiction.

GOTHIC SOUNDSCAPES

The connection between Gothic fiction and the audible necessitates a brief introduction to the former. A strict definition of Gothic literature is recognizably problematic due to its "polyvalency and slippage of meaning" (Mulvey-Roberts 1998:xvi). Rather, Gothic fiction is described within some general parameters, such as the confines of a (seemingly) antiquated space, e.g., an abbey or a decaying mansion. Therein secrets from the past are physically and or psychologically haunting the characters. Oscillating between the rational and the supernatural, these "hauntings" take the features of specters and monsters (Hogle 2002:20). Transgression and excess, ambi-

valence, instability and liminality are inherent traits of Gothic literature, traits which construct, examine and contest differences between barbarism and civilization, natural and supernatural, self and other (Botting 1996:20).

Sonic intensity furnishes the Gothic as writers employ sound and music to evoke the terrifying and the uncanny (Elferen 2012:19). The sonic Gothic receives comprehensive coverage in Isabella van Elferen's *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny* (2012). Van Elferen's concept of "Gothic music" operates through numerous Gothic authors – from Ann Radcliffe and Edgar Allan Poe to more contemporary writers, such as Shirley Jackson. Soundscapes in eighteenth-century Gothic novels are explored by Angela M. Archambault (2016) who focuses on the function of sound to promote and augment the elements essential to the Gothic genre. Among eighteenth-century authors, Ann Radcliffe is pre-eminent for her aesthetics of the auditory. Studies of Gothic sound in nineteenth-century literature mainly draw from the science and technology of sound. Delving into the scientific and occult practices of the time, Kristie Schlauraff (2017) analyses bodies as soundscapes in American and British Gothic fiction, and illuminates how fiction overlaps with scientific practices to tap into the fundamental questions of humanity. In their provocation of fear and terror, Gothic soundscapes highlight the interconnection between the sound, the space and the listener.

Sounds in Gothic fiction are notable for their complexity and multiplicity. A short story by Samuel Warren "The Thunder-Struck and the Boxer" (1832) reveals an aural composition that contains multiple layers of sounds. The protagonist's house

becomes an acoustic space that unites the outer noises with the sounds in the household. During the unprecedented thunderstorm, the house turns into a site of anxiety and class dominance, where the shrieks of the master's wife and children seem louder against the silent terror of the servants. In the world of the Gothic, sounds interact with silence which, as Elferen observes, "functions as a signifier of the un-homely" (2012:19). In Edgar Allan Poe's famous story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) the "soundlessness" in the surroundings of Roderick Usher's mysterious mansion is pervaded with the subtlety of sound that reconfigures silence as a construct and a scaffold for the narrator's fears and oppressive ruminations.

Gothic listeners are anxious, scared and troubled by what sound obscures and reveals. At times the auditory disturbance is enhanced with the idiosyncrasy of perception, when afflictions or supernatural capacities allow for the overacuteness of hearing. Roderick Usher is hereditarily predisposed to a hearing disorder of increased sensitivity to sound, which is manifested in the "morbid condition of the auditory nerve" (Poe 1960/1839:121). Specific *soundmarks* of the place – such as the grating sound of a door – are able to accelerate his sensitive nervousness. Similar to Poe's Roderick Usher, Haco Harfager in M.P. Shiel's short story "The House of Sounds" (1911) suffers from a preternatural sensitivity to sound and is the last descendant of an aristocratic family with a rich and confusing history of internal feud. The variety of terms that Shiel employs in "The House of Sounds" to construct the representation of Haco's disorder (tinnitus, oxyecia, Paracusis) foreshadow the structural instability of his dwelling in its symbolic connection with his afflicted

hearing. In its complex and ruinous acoustic topology, the house parallels the morbid physicality of its host. In addition, the soundscape is infused with the detrimental and constant sound of the ocean – the *key-note* sound that establishes and reinforces the narrator's sense of delusion.

Gothic spaces are reconstructed, transformed and illuminated by sound. In the sonic realm of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) the dark ephemeral reality of the room is reconstructed through sound and acquires mobility and rhythm, where the heard, the semi-audible and the unheard, such as the sounds of hell and heaven or the wind in the chimney represent the co-formative parts of the place. In a short story "From the Dead" (1893) by Victorian Gothic writer Edith Nesbit, the change in sonic composition reconfigures the bedroom into a murder room. Sound signifies liminality, and obscures not only the designation of the place but the boundaries between the visible and the ephemeral, the rational and the phantasmagoric, the male and the female.

Thus, Gothic soundscapes echo with the terrifying, the unsettling and the unidentifiable in bringing together the instability of the place, the listener's affliction and the mysterious and frightening qualities of the audible. Sound in Gothic writings can be seen as a means to address the objects of fear and anxiety on the contested ground in-between the supernatural and empirical worlds.

TO CONCLUDE: BACK TO ORIGINS OR MOVING FORWARD?

With his invention of the *soundscape* concept, Schafer transmitted the conceptual schemas of landscape into the sonic world.

The vocabulary of soundscape studies has been eagerly borrowed by many fields of the arts, the social sciences and the humanities, finding its appreciation and application in literary criticism. With its aural intensity, the mysterious, uncanny and ethereal Gothic fictional world is attractive for the application of Schafer's *soundscape* concept. *Soundscape* can express the idea of an interconnection between ambiguous sounds, liminal spaces and unstable identities of the listeners.

Contemporary developments in textual orality offer some resources for thinking about possible elaborations of the concept, as well as implications and future directions for scholarly work. Schafer's *soundscape* is a "work in progress" that points at tensions between sound, noise and modern technologies. In this connection, the relationship between literature and recorded sound opens up a conversation about a deeper engagement with the concept either in favor of Schafer's original meaning, or towards further abstraction away from the negativity of modernity. Previous studies have already indicated the ambivalent nature of this relationship: soundscapes in nineteenth-century fiction reflect the way recording technologies both distracted and positively affected the performance of literary figures who imbued the acts of hearing, sounding and science with broad significance (Picker 2007:4–5). Moreover, phonographic technology and acoustics enforced the capacity of the nineteenth-century writers to "sustain soundscapes in print" (Chao 2007:89). Yet, how does the resonant potential of Schafer's *soundscape* meet recorded literature such as audiobooks, that have been increasing in numbers since the early 1930s? Is it possible to reconcile the concept with the aesthetics of narrative pos-

sibilities, or should we formally dismiss recorded literature as part of background noise?

NOTES

- 1 Pierre Schaeffer (1910–1995) is the founder of *musique concrète* (music made of sounds of natural origins, such as thunderstorms, steam engines and waterfalls) – a French composer, acoustician and electronic engineer.
- 2 An interdisciplinary branch of studies that Sylvia Mieszkowski defines as the analysis of "sounds and processes of hearing, which have been mediated by (written) words" (2014:24).

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SUMMARY

Soundscape: from origins to possible directions in literature

(Ljudlandskap: från ursprung till möjliga riktningar inom litteraturen)

Recent studies demonstrate a significant level of interest to literature as a source of insight on sound and hearing. Attention has focused on the new ways to approach the acoustic dimensions of text, featuring narrative representation of sound in its physical characteristics and the psycho-somatic peculiarities of perception. Accordingly, the concept of soundscape, has entered critical scholarship to analyze the audible world in fiction. This essay addresses soundscape as a concept by scrutinizing the terms in which it was defined and situating soundscape in relation to nineteenth-century Gothic literature. My point of departure is the foundational work of R. Murray Schafer *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977), which introduces the concept and outlines the territory of soundscape studies as the intersection of science, the arts and society, and delineates terms central to the idea of the soundscape. I will elaborate on soundscape in its threefold dimensions: the panoply of sounds, the specific location, and the subjective experience of an individual inhabiting the space. The essay then considers the concept in light of the recent studies of sound in Gothic fiction and narrows down the topic to selected short stories by British and American nineteenth-century writers: E.A. Poe, E. Nesbit, S. Warren, and M.P. Shiel, among others. The shared features of the audible world in Gothic short stories and more distinctive elements of Gothic soundscapes offer some resources for thinking about a more complex elaboration of the concept, as well as implications and future directions for scholarly work.

Keywords: soundscape, sound, gothic literature, the uncanny, auscultator.

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