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PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER

The Noises of Modernist Form: John Dos Passos's Manhattan Transfer, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and the Soundscapes of Modernity

This essay seeks to make a contribution to an emerging acoustic turn in literary and cultural theory and criticism.¹ The late 1960s saw the first stirrings of such a turn when R. Murray Schafer initiated the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University. Schafer's monograph The Tuning of the World (1977) and his student Barry Truax's Acoustic Communication (1984) became two of the founding texts of what is now known as soundscape studies. Fueled, in many cases, by intense concerns over acoustic pollution, soundscape studies draw together students from a variety of disciplines to trace continuities and changes within sonic environments of the past and present.²

More recent scholarship has challenged Schafer's and Truax's focus on acoustic ecology and embedded the study of sounds and sound technologies more firmly in their social and cultural contexts. Recent calls to attune our ears to the acoustic world come from a variety of fields and include literary scholar Bruce R. Smith's The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor (1999), historian of science Emily Thompson's The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933 (2002), and communications theorist Jonathan Sterne's The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction (2003). These and other scholars invite us to challenge what Sterne has called "the visualist definition of modernity" (3), and in doing so, they also ask us consider the limitations of both the linguistic turn and the more recent iconic or

pictorial turn, which both assume the primacy of the visual sense. These scholars invite us not only to look at modernity but also to listen to it.³

It is in this spirit that I explore the forms and functions of modernist literary practice within the context of acoustic modernity. Literary modernism, my argument goes, can at least partly be seen as a response to two parallel developments in the early-twentieth-century soundscape. The first concerns the proliferation of physical, audible noise that accompanies processes of modernization. The second concerns the invention of sound-reproducing media that enabled new ways of recording, reproducing, and communicating acoustic phenomena.

Our sonic environment has altered dramatically since the invention of the steam engine in the first industrial revolution of the mid-eighteenth century and the spread of electrical technology in the second industrial revolution of the mid-nineteenth century. In early-twentieth-century America, the acoustic legacy of the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, and the Fords continues to reverberate through the city streets. Automobiles, elevated trains, steamboats, and airplanes all injected new noises into the U.S. soundscape, and so did the spread of electric street lighting and of electrical appliances in middle- and upper-class households from the late nineteenth century onward.⁴ These and other new technologies significantly contributed to the emergence of an acoustic modernity that deeply impacted American citizens' quality of life. In The Soundscape of Modernity, Emily Thompson notes that early-twentieth-century American urbanites considered their age unprecedentedly noisy (Thompson 6). Writing in 1925, a journalist for the Saturday Review of Literature records the acoustic pandemonium he hears in all its intensity:

The air belongs to the steady burr of the motor, to the regular clank clank of the elevated, and to the chitter of the steel drill. Underneath is the rhythmic roll over clattering ties of the subway; above, the drone of the airplane. The recurrent explosions of the internal combustion engine, and the rhythmic jar of bodies in rapid motion determine the tempo of the sound world in which we have to live. (qtd. in Thompson 117)

In his seminal The Tuning of the World, R. Murray Schafer describes the historical transition from agrarian to industrial production as a shift from hi-fi to lo-fi soundscapes.⁵ Schafer agrees with the journalist quoted above that the noises introduced by the two industrial revolutions abuse our aural sense. While many an antebellum observer was still fascinated by "the hum of industry" (M. M. Smith 119-46), complaints about noise pollution became increasingly common by the turn of the century. Ambrose Bierce's definition of noise in The Devil's Dictionary (1911) captures the new attitude most succinctly: "Noise, n. A stench in the ear.

Undomesticated music. The chief product and authenticating sign of civilization" (169). Around 1900, it seems, noise calls for domestication

Sound engineers and acousticians have been responding to the noise problem in systematic fashion at least since the 1920s, and by 1926, the acoustician Edward Elway Free was using the newly developed audiometer to measure the noises that assailed New Yorkers' ears.⁶ Such technological responses to the soundscape of modernity belong to a second development in the acoustic field that paralleled the proliferation of noise. In Free's case, a new technology was used to quantify and thus bring under some form of epistemological control the unruly acoustics of modernity. Since the late nineteenth century, other sound media began to emerge that held out the promise of the rational, precise, and scientific management of sound. The phonograph, the telephone, the radio, microphony, amplification and sound film were all introduced in a sixty-year time span ranging from 1870 to 1930 (Kahn 10). In the same time period, the interactive medium of the phonograph was gradually replaced by the one-way medium of the gramophone (Picker 112, 42-45). While none of these new media emerged in direct response to the increasingly audible noise problem of modernity, their relation to sound reflects what Thompson has identified as the quintessentially modern "desire for clear, controlled, signal-like sound" (3). These media were part of an effort to bring the acoustic world under technological control. As tools that allow their users to objectify, fix, and rationalize sound, they promised acoustic mastery in a time of auditory chaos.⁷ Jonathan Sterne adds that these and other sound-reproducing media were both made possible by and fostered what he calls *audile techniques*, i.e., "a set of practices of listening that were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentality and that encouraged the coding and rationalization of what was heard" (23).⁸

Powerfully, these new media evoked dreams of acoustic control and communicative transparency that were under continual threat in the noise-infested streets of the modern city. Such dreams manifested themselves in a variety of fields. In the case of the phonograph, they inform Edison's claim in July 1877 that the new medium "shall be able to store & reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly" (qtd. in Millard 25). They can, moreover, be traced in the practice of solitary listening made possible by the phonograph, which enabled listeners to withdraw from and shut out the noise of the city streets (Katz 17-18). Finally, such dreams of acoustic mastery also resonate in anthropologists' later attempts to capture Native American voices on record (Katz 2; Sterne 311-25).

Modernist literature of the first half of the twentieth century emerges from and inserts itself into this radically changed mediascape, which itself responds and contributes to the equally radically altered soundscape

of modernity. How do literary texts negotiate acoustic modernity, and how do those negotiations relate to those of the new sound-reproducing media?

With the invention of the phonograph and film, Friedrich Kittler has argued, the social status of writing changed dramatically. The precision with which these new media can record acoustic and optical data is simply unavaible to the old technology of writing. As a result, writing loses its monopoly on data storage and becomes visible as only one medium among others. In the age of the phonograph and film, Kittler reasons, writers are left with but two alternatives: they could either redirect their focus on the medium of writing itself and start--as the modernists would--"a cult by and for letter fetishists" or they could write song lyrics and thus abandon "the imaginary voices" of literature for "the real" voices of sound recordings (135-36).

Kittler's sweeping assertions need to be qualified, not least because they ignore the mediatedness of the sounds reproduced by the new media and thus rather uncritically reiterate the dream of communicative transparency evoked by them and propagated their inventors. Yet Kittler's media archeology does invite us to ask a crucially important question concerning the literary representation of acoustic phenomena in general and noise in particular: how can writing represent noise at all if it must, by force, reduce the unruly noise that lies outside of language to the order of the alphabet? As Katherine N. Hayles points out, "as soon as noise moves into the realm of language, it is always already not noise but language" (29). Noise is that against which language defines itself; it is the other that must be muted for language to emerge. Strictly speaking, it is therefore impossible to speak or write noise. Any inquiry into the literary representation of noise is, then, faced with the complex question of the representability of the unrepresentable. Such an inquiry is, moreover, faced with the related question of the degree to which all attempts to represent noise are always already an act of taming or containment.

Modernist writers respond to these questions by a conscious refusal to deliver on the promise of communicative transparency so powerfully evoked by the new sound media. Instead, their representations of the modern soundscape let its noise seep into the very formal organization of their texts in an attempt to preserve something of the alterity of the nontextual phenoma they aim to represent. In their formal innovations and dislocations, in their negativity and sheer difficulty, modernist texts delay, inhibit and disturb processes of communication--between texts and readers, but also between texts and the broader cultural environment in which they are produced, circulated and exchanged--to such an extent that it seems fair to say that these texts assume noise as one of the

constitutive factors of their formal organization. Both the sensory turmoil of modernity and the radically changed media landscape force upon writers a heightened awareness of the mediality of literature and the contingency of literary form. In systems-theoretic terms, modernism is perhaps best understood as a form of cultural perturbation, as an injection of noise into the sea of redundancy constantly relayed through the new media. In William R. Paulson's phrase, literature becomes "the noise of culture."⁹ Modernist literary texts, then, are sites of both the representation and the production of noise.

In the remainder of this essay, I take a brief look at two very different modernist texts--John Dos Passos's Manhattan Transfer and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God--to illustrate the interplay of the noise these texts represent and the noise they generate. Few modernist texts evoke the din of urban modernity with as great intensity as Manhattan Transfer. Dos Passos's fictional soundscape is colonized by the elevated trains' "annihilating clatter" (21) and "jagged oblongs of harsh sound" (148), by the "grinding rattle of wheels and scrape of hoofs" (53), by departing ships' "thud and rattle of anchorchains" (69), by the "uneven roar of traffic, voices, racket of building" that "soa[r] from the downtown streets" (93), by steamrollers "clattering back and forth over the freshly tarred metaling of the road" (108), and by the "constant hissing scuttle" (152) of automobiles. In Dos Passos's New York, the streets are "noisy as a brassband" (273) and "Fifth Avenue throbs with loudening pain" (159). In the modern metropolis, Dos Passos seems to suggest, noise has become a form of sonic violence.

Yet Dos Passos does not record the noise of New York the way Edward Elway Free would record it with the help of the audiometer one year after the publication of Manhattan Transfer. Dos Passos does not seek to contain the noise by way of representation. Instead, he meets the challenge of representing that which ultimately remains unrepresentable by accepting noise as a structural principle of his own literary practice. In analogy to Werner Wolf's notion of "the musicalization of fiction," one could speak here of "the noisification of fiction"--a term that stresses more than Wolf's does the modernist disruption of harmony.¹⁰ Dos Passos's sudden shifts in and multiplication of points of view, his formal ruptures, and disintegrations of linear narrative reject the codes of what we might call instrumental communication. Dos Passos refuses to dream the dream of communicative transparency, makes noise a principle of literary form, and thus manages to retain something of the alterity and ineffability of the noise he represents. A text like Manhattan Transfer perturbs and impedes processes of communication between texts and readers and thus injects noise into the channels of cultural communication. In the presence of the physical noise of modernity, then,

Dos Passos does not compete with the new sound-reproducing media for acoustic mastery. Instead, he develops an aesthetics of noise that reconfigures the mediality of literature, i.e., the physical arrangement of words on the page, in such radical fashion that literature's communicative function is jeopardized.

Moving from the urban world of Manhattan Transfer to the countryside of Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville in Their Eyes Were Watching God, we cannot fail to perceive the stark differences between these texts. The relatively simple plot structure, realistic surface, and rural setting of Hurston's novel seem to share little with the narrative discontinuity, impressionist techniques, and pronounced urbanity of Dos Passos's text. To sketch this list of differences, brief and incomplete as it is, is to ask whether we are not faced with two completely different traditions of writing. And indeed, literary historians tend to discuss the Harlem Renaissance in general and Hurston's work in particular largely independent of Anglo-American modernism.

But once we realize that both Dos Passos's dissolution of narrative continuity and Hurston's injection of African-American orality into literature belong to a literary tradition that aims at the disruption of prevailing forms of communication, correspondences between their projects become evident that overlay more readily apparent differences in narrative structure and social setting.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. considers Their Eyes Were Watching God the first speakerly text in U.S. literary history, i.e., the first text that manages to reproduce the patterns and sounds of speech in the written medium. Gates's discussion of Hurston's innovation firmly locates it within African-American culture. What we may add to Gates's account is that Hurston's infusion of orality into writing is a challenge to established forms of literary communication that has its analogues in Anglo-American modernism. Hurston's literary reworking of the sound and the noise of African-American orality turns her text itself into an impure, noisy form of communication. Writing in the presence of noise, both Anglo-American and African-American modernists refuse to emulate contemporary sound engineers' and acousticians' attempts to regulate, codify, and tame the acoustic world. Instead, they let its noise infiltrate the very forms of their texts.

Hurston's aesthetics, different as it is at first sight, thus ties up with central representational strategies of Anglo-American modernism: its defamiliarizations, its negativity, and its will 'to make it new.' In my reading, Hurston's antiphonal play of letters and sounds is the source of a semiotic perturbation that functions analogous to Dos Passos's strategic interruptions of the narrative flow.¹¹ Paradoxically, then, it is in the culturally specific interplay of orality and literacy that Hurston's project

converges most clearly with her White contemporaries' aesthetics of noise and communicative resistance.

Yet while Dos Passos and Hurston share a modernist aesthetics of noise, their texts respond to and insert themselves into a rather different sonic environment. If the formal dislocations and fragmentations of Manhattan Transfer can at least partly be read, as I have suggested, as a response to the urbanized and industrialized soundscape, we need to be aware that technological modernity and its attendant acoustics have largely bypassed Hurston's rural Southern town. The sounds we hear in Hurston's Florida are not those of elevated trains, airplanes or internal combustion engines, but the braying of Matt's mule, the hissing of the hurricane, and, most prominently, the sounds of the Black oral tradition: the storytelling and signifyin(g) in Eatonville; the music, the singing, the noise- and merrymaking in the Everglades.

Hurston's novel reminds us that the notion of modernity theorists of Anglo-American modernism rely on may not be adequate to discuss African-American modernism--even though it provides an at least partly adequate framework for discussing works of the Harlem Renaissance other than Hurston's, say, the Northern, urban sections of Jean Toomer's Cane or Sterling A. Brown's poem "Strong Men"--which locates the exploitation of slave labor at the heart of Western modernity.¹² If we need, as Houston A. Baker Jr. and Paul Gilroy have asserted, a notion of African-American or of Black modernity, we may also need a notion of African-American acoustic modernity. That acoustic modernity contains sounds and noises of the African-American oral tradition that are alien to and perturb the established communicative networks of Anglo-American modernity. These sounds and noises signal an alterity whose origins lie in Africa and in slavery; they mark an otherness that is inscribed by a history of colonial exploitation. Listening to those sounds may help us understand the specificity of African-American modernity, and it should preserve us from conflating two connected yet distinctive aesthetics of noise within U.S. literary modernism.

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- ¹ From a media-theoretic perspective, this essay reconsiders questions concerning literary representations of acoustic phenomena and the social functions of literature that are dealt with in greater detail in my The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics (2006). I would like to thank Miriam Locher, Lukas Rosenberger, Matt Kimmich, Nicole Nyffenegger, Kellie Goncalves, and Anne-Françoise Baer for useful feedback on an earlier version of the present essay.
- ² Recent developments in soundscape studies as originally conceptualized by Schafer can be traced in Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology.
- ³ Apart from Bruce R. Smith's, Emily Thompson's, and Jonathan Sterne's work, other important recent contributions to the acoustic turn include Alain Corbin's Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside (1994), Douglas Kahn's Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Voice, Sound, and Aurality in the Arts (1999), Steven Connor's Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism(2000), Mark M. Smith's Listening to Nineteenth Century America (2001), John M. Picker's Victorian Soundscapes (2003), and the essays collected in Michael Bull and Les Back's Auditory Culture Reader (2003). Many of these studies, including my own, are indebted to the theoretical foundations laid out in Jacques Attali's pioneering Noise: The Political Economy of Music (1997).
- ⁴ See Joel A. Tarr's essay "The City and Technology" for a concise overview of the impact of technological developments on the American city.
- ⁵ Schafer notes that the lo-fi soundscape has an adverse signal-to-noise ratio and characterizes it as follows: "In a lo-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds. The pellucid sound--a footstep in the snow, a church bell across the valley or an animal scurrying in the bush--is masked by broad-band noise. Perspective is lost. On a downtown street corner of the modern city there is no distance; there is only presence. There is cross-talk on all the channels, and in order for the most ordinary sounds to be heard they have to be increasingly amplified" (43).
- ⁶ Free identified automobiles, horse-drawn traffic, chain-driven trucks, and elevated trains as the major sources of noise in New York City (Thompson 148-49).

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- ⁷ But see Sterne, who argues that the objectification and abstraction of sound was “a prior condition for the construction of sound-reproduction technologies” (23) rather than vice versa.
- ⁸ Read, for instance, Sterne’s intriguing account of the development of one specific audile technique in the field of telegraphy, where operators gradually shifted from reading the telegraph’s printouts to listening to and interpreting its sounds (138-45).
- ⁹ Paulson’s fascinating study The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information, is an important reference point for this essay. I do, however, believe we need to historicize Paulson’s central claim that “Literature is not and will not ever again be at the center of culture, if indeed it ever was. There is no use in either proclaiming or debunking its central position. Literature is the noise of culture, the rich and indeterminate margin into which messages are sent off, never to return the same, in which signals are received not quite like anything emitted” (180).
- ¹⁰ Borrowing the term “the musicalization of fiction” from Aldous Huxley’s 1928 novel Point Counter Point, Wolf traces the transformation of musical aesthetic into literary form from DeQuincey to Josipovici. See Carol R. Motta’s review of Wolf’s study for a critical discussion of his attempt “to wrench a modern and postmodern aesthetic out of essentially harmony-driven structures” (88).
- ¹¹ The notion of “antiphonal play” is borrowed from Eric J. Sundquist’s excellent To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature. In chapter 5, Sundquist uses the term to discuss the interplay of belletristic epigraphs, scholarly arguments, and musical notations of spirituals in W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk.
- ¹² Brown’s poem illustrates Jennifer M. Wilks’s assertion that, for many an African-American, “modernity” is “that which happens to, rather than that which is effected by, indigenous American populations and the enslaved and indentured transplants who succeeded them” (803).