

- 73 Philipp Schweighauser, **Toward a History of Literary Acoustics. The Noises of American Literature, 1860–1980.** Dissertation, Basel (Prof. Hartwig Isernhagen). Unpublished typescript, 2003, 290 pp. (Publication forthcoming.)

This thesis brings together two lines of inquiry in Literary and Cultural Studies that are all too often pursued in isolation. The first seeks to

identify the specificity of literary language and, on the basis of these initial considerations, derives a set of questions about the historically contingent social functions of literature. This is an approach that can be traced back to the origins of literary theory and remains an important concern of Literary Studies in Europe, including European American Studies. The second line of inquiry understands literature primarily as a mode of representation which, in however mediated form, gives access to an empirical reality existing outside literature. This approach has been revived more recently by postcolonial, feminist, and post-Marxist critics and theorists meeting the challenge of poststructuralism's influential antirepresentational stance.

A history of literary acoustics combines these two concerns as it traces the changing representations of acoustic phenomena, ranging from the sounds of the African-American oral tradition to urban noise, across literary history and embeds this survey in a series of reflections on the social functions of literary communication. The focus of this study is on noise in a twofold sense. As an object of literary representation, noise denotes unwanted sounds perceived as loud, harsh, or discordant. Throughout literary and cultural history, a great number of acoustic phenomena have been called 'noise'; they range from the din of factories to immigrant accents. As a term relevant to a discussion of the social functions of literature, noise describes a crucial function of literary discourse: its disruption of, and interference with, the communicative networks that are already in place. From a communicational perspective (a perspective that ties in with a long line of thought on the social function of literary discourse), literature is the innovative noise of culture. Literary texts, then are sites of both the representation and the cultural production of noise, and it is this convergence which a history of literary acoustics addresses.

The literary texts discussed range over a period of roughly 120 years, from Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron-Mills" (1861) to Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984). Tracing the changes and continuities in the literary production and representation of noise from realism to postmodernism, this thesis brings about a dialogue between widely divergent authors and literary forms. Frank Norris's naturalist *McTeague* is read alongside Howells's realist masterpiece *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. A reading of Zora Neale Hurston's explorations of African-American oral tradition in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is brought to bear on an analysis of John Dos Passos's highly experimental novels *1919* and *Manhattan Transfer*. The early postmodernisms of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* are played off against the late-postmodernist return to realist strategies of representation in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and DeLillo's novel. The shared concern that pulls together all of these readings is the question of the degree to which the literary representation of noise

injects noise into the literary and cultural channels of communication. This question is ultimately a question about the politics of representing noises that elude our conventional means of representation: the unspeakable noise of war, African-American vocalization, the cacophony of urban sounds, the languages in which radically alternative visions of the world struggle to make themselves heard.

Firmly grounded in a literary-historical perspective, this thesis unites under the umbrella of acoustics cultural critique and ecological interests, literary theory and close reading, and Literary and Cultural Studies. Its theoretical framework builds on literary theory (Russian formalists, Adorno, Barthes, William R. Paulson), information theory (Shannon), systems theory (order-from-noise principle), acoustic ecology (soundscape studies), sociology (Bourdieu), and the work of the French historian of science and philosopher Michel Serres. In its double focus on the literary production and representation of noise, the thesis contributes to the study of American literature from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century a history of literary acoustics that is embedded in the ongoing historiographic project of writing the history of modernity/postmodernity.

Parts of this thesis have already appeared in other places. The introduction draws on the present author's discussion of Henry Adams and Michel Serres in "The Desire for Unity and Its Failure: Re-Reading Henry Adams Through Michel Serres" (*Mapping Michel Serres*, edited by Niran Abbas and Steven Connor, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming in 2004). A large part of what is now Chapter 2 has been published in two companion essays: "The Soundscapes of American Realist Fiction" (*Philologie im Netz* 19 (2002), 55–78. <<http://www.fu-berlin.de/phin/phin19/p19t3.htm>>) and "'You must make less noise in here, Mister Schouler': Acoustic Profiling in American Realism" (*Studies in American Fiction* 30:1 (2002), 85–102).