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25 Literary Acoustics

Abstract: Bringing together sound studies and intermediality theory, this essay revisits the notion of 'literary acoustics' to inquire into the usefulness of intermediality studies for analyzing the relations between literature and sound. The second part of the essay is dedicated to an illustrative analysis of Ben Marcus's highly experimental, noisy book *The Age of Wire and String*.

Key Terms: Intermediality studies, sound studies, information theory, literary acoustics, noise

1 Literary Acoustics and Sound Studies: Theoretical Approaches and Concepts

Focusing on the concept of 'literary acoustics' that I introduced in *The Noises of American Literature, 1890–1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics* (2006), this essay combines sound studies and intermediality theory to probe the usefulness and limitations of intermediality studies for thinking about the relations between literary texts and the acoustic world.[1] From its beginnings in the World Soundscape Project (WSP), sound studies has been an interdisciplinary field. Initiated by Canadian composer and music educator R. Murray Schafer in the late 1960s, the WSP brought together musicians and scholars from a variety of disciplines to research soundscapes past and present. Driven by serious concerns about acoustic pollution, early soundscape studies described, critiqued, and suggested remedies for an acoustic world that has undergone fundamental changes since the industrial revolutions. Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* (1977) and Barry Truax's *Acoustic Communication* (1984) are the major monographs that have come out of this first wave of sound studies. More recent scholarship since the early 1990s has moved away from Schafer's focus on acoustic ecology to combine an even wider array of disciplines and approaches, ranging from architecture and cultural geography to philosophy and media studies. In its analyses of artistic and non-artistic, human and non-human sonic practices, research done under the heading of ‘sound studies’ today is finely attuned to the social, cultural, and technological contexts of sound production and reproduction. Most of the research is fueled by a desire to provide a corrective to the visualist bias of much scholarship on modern and postmodern culture, and for over a decade, there has been talk of an ‘acoustic turn’ as a much-needed supplement to the iconic/pictorial turn (Meyer 2008). By now, there are three major anthologies and a handbook that give splendid overviews of the wide variety of approaches in sound studies, among them Michael Bull’s four-volume *Sound Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (2013), Jonathan Sterne’s *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012), Bull and Les Back’s *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2006), and Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld’s *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (2012).

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In my own contribution to sound studies, *The Noises of American Literature*, I study the acoustic imagination of American literary texts from Stephen Crane’s novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) to Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985). My focus is on the changing literary representations of noise – an acoustic phenomenon that, for the time being, we can gloss with the definition we find in the *New Oxford American Dictionary*: “a sound, especially one that is loud or unpleasant or that causes disturbance.” In analyzing how writers from different literary periods resorted to various representational strategies in their efforts to capture something of the acoustic worlds of their time, it became obvious that inquiries into the relationships between literature and the soundscape should not be restricted to issues of representation. This was most evident in the modernist texts under consideration – texts such as Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936). Not only these texts but also earlier, naturalist texts such as Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), and later, postmodernist texts, such as Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), go beyond an attempt to represent the soundscapes of their time and place. In their rhythmic structures; their jarring juxtapositions of different media, genres, and styles; and their textual dislocations and fragmentations, these texts themselves become sounding objects.

This discordant quality of some literary texts can be captured with a second notion of ‘noise’ that was introduced in the mathematician and engineer Claude E. Shannon’s influential 1948 paper “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.” This notion of noise was further developed in German sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory and made useful for the study of literature, music, and culture by French philosopher Michel Serres, French music theorist Jacques Attali, and U.S. literary scholar William R. Paulson among others. In their more technical understanding of the term, ‘noise’ is defined as both a communicative disturbance and the signal that exhibits the highest amount of information because it is the most unpredictable, most entropic signal and thus diverges most radically from what we already know. In this model, noise is the direct opposite of redundancy: While redundancy is perfectly intelligible but contains no information whatsoever, noise is unintelligible but maximally informative (cf. also Schweighauser 2010).

Shannon and his co-author Warren Weaver still sought to exorcise noise from information theory by stating that it is maximum but useless information:

> Uncertainty which arises by virtue of freedom of choice on the part of the sender is desirable uncertainty. Uncertainty which arises because of errors or because of the influence of noise is undesirable uncertainty. It is thus clear where the joker is in saying that the received signal has more information. Some of this information is spurious and undesirable and has been introduced via the noise. To get the useful information in the received signal we must subtract out this spurious portion. (Weaver 1963, 19)

Later thinkers, however, stressed the potentially beneficial effects and innovative force of noise. In Luhmann's understanding, noise and error are indispensable for the evolution of social systems. For Serres, noise is a welcome disruption of death-dealing forces of unity and order. Most pertinent to the concerns of literary scholars, Paulson, in his splendid book *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information*, conceptualizes literature as the productive noise of culture in the sense that in its willful departures from established ways of communication, in its poetic alterity, literature functions as a force of cultural perturbation that may trigger new ways of speaking and thinking in an information age that values decidedly non-literary, machine-readable, and immediately intelligible language uses above all others. In modernity and postmodernity, the noise of literature productively disrupts the sea of redundancy in which we are immersed:

> 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. (Paulson 1988, 180)

It is this kind of information-theoretic and systems-theoretic valorization of noise that prompts me to claim that literary texts do not merely represent noise; they also generate noise. And it is this kind of conviction that underlines the understanding of literary acoustics that I develop in *The Noises of American Literature*. There, I argue that literary texts are "sites of both the cultural production and the representation of noise, and it is this convergence which a history of literary acoustics addresses" (Schweighauser 2006, 19). Later on, I add that "[t]o claim that literature can, in the work of certain writers, become the noise of culture suggests that literary texts at times do make noise. From the double perspective of a history of literary acoustics, noise both designates the communicational and systemic force of literature and one of its objects of representation" (Schweighauser 2006, 194).

Admittedly, I am working with two different understandings of noise here: as an object of literary representation, noise for the greatest part denotes discordant, unwanted sound; as a systemic force, it must be understood in an information- and systems-theoretic sense. But in my understanding of literary acoustics, these two senses of noise come together due to the fact that noise in the ordinary, everyday sense of the word is, strictly speaking, unrepresentable. For as soon as we put noise into text, it is no longer noise but something more ordered and codified. Thus, any literary attempt to represent noise must grapple with its unrepresentability. As students of literature know, one way of representing the unrepresentable – be it noise, death, or genocide – is to invent special language uses. Think of Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate* (1923–1932), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl" (1989). And such inventions of a specifically literary language that differs radically from established ways of communicating are precisely the precondition for literature to assume its systemic force as the noise of culture.

To my mind, this combined focus on the representation and production of noise is crucial because it allows us to think about the cultural effects of literary representations of sound; in other words, it makes us think about the forms of literature and their functions. On a more pragmatic level, taking the systemic force of literary representations of sound into account prevents literary scholarship from slipping into too narrowly descriptive modes. At the same time, while I continue to believe that my two-pronged notion of literary acoustics has heuristic value, my characterization of it has never left me quite satisfied for two reasons: first, there is no sustained distinction between different *types* of literary representations of sound; second, whether the relationships between literature and sound should be captured in representational terms is at least doubtful.

2 Intermediality Studies and Literary Acoustics

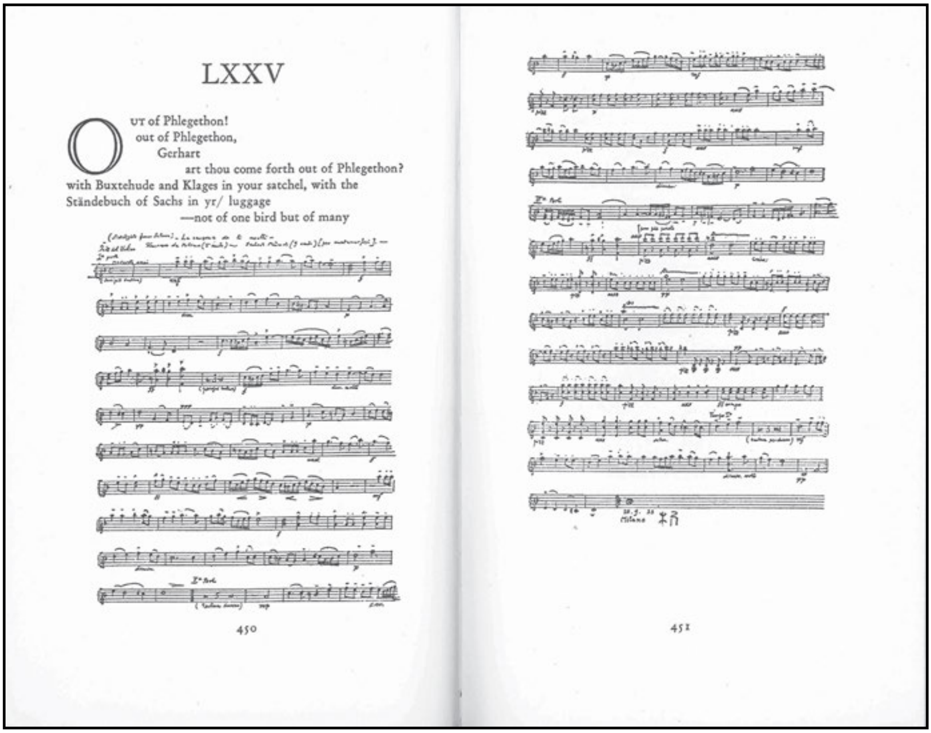
How, then, to approach the question concerning different types of literary representations of sound? For my own thinking about this issue, intermediality studies has been of great value. Intermediality studies as practiced by scholars such as Werner Wolf, Irina O. Rajewsky, and Gabriele Rippl emerged in German-speaking academia in the 1980s (↗0 Introduction). These scholars are concerned with textual as well as non-textual artifacts in which a crossing of the boundaries between different media can be observed. In his entry on 'intermediality' in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Wolf writes, "Intermediality [...] applies in its broadest sense to any transgression of boundaries between media and thus is concerned with 'heteromedial' relations between different semiotic complexes or between different parts of a semiotic complex" (2008, 252). This is a very broad definition that invites both synchronic studies of multiple types of relations between media and diachronic studies of processes captured by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's notion of 'remediation,' i.e. "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (1999, 273;

↗13 Adaptation – Remediation – Transmediality). Rajewsky opts for a similarly broad definition of 'intermediality'; for her, the term is "[a] hyperonym for the totality of all phenomena that transgress media boundaries, [...] i.e., all those phenomena that are, as the prefix 'inter' suggests, in some way situated *between* media" and involve "at least two media conventionally perceived as distinct" (2010, 12–13; my translation). Both definitions encompass an exceptionally wide range of phenomena: from cinematic adaptations of novels and transmedial storytelling to ekphrases and musicalizations of literature (↗1 Ekphrasis: Theory; ↗6 Ekphrasis in the Age of Digital Reproduction; ↗24 Literature and Music: Theory; ↗26 The Musicalization of Poetry). Most pertinent to literary scholars' concerns are instances of the latter two types, which occur *within* specific works; Wolf calls these 'intracompositional intermediality.'

2.1 Plurimediality and Literary Acoustics

Wolf speaks of 'plurimediality' (or 'multimediality') when a given work overtly (or 'directly,' i.e., on the level of the signifiers) includes more than one medium (Wolf 2008, 254–255; Wolf 1999, 39–41). This phenomenon, which manifests itself in a broad spectrum of artifacts and performances ranging from comic strips and computer games (↗31 Performing Games; ↗22 Comics and Graphic Novels) to radio plays and ballet performances, goes well beyond Marshall McLuhan's often quoted phrase that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (McLuhan 1994, 8). Take the cases of illustrated novels or of poems that contain musical scores, where one medium is *literally* present within another (↗20 The Nineteenth-century Illustrated Novel). Ezra Pound's Canto LXXV (1975 [1948]) is a good example (see fig. 1).

Canto LXXV is a poem that consists of seven lines of verse that is, as Carroll Franklin Terrell has pointed out, followed by the musical score of Pound's German friend Gerhart Münch's setting for violin of sixteenth-century Italian composer Francesco da Milano's transcription for lute of a somewhat earlier popular *chanson* by the Frenchman Clément Janequin named *Le chant des oiseaux* (cf. Terrell 1993, 388–389). And indeed, it was the song of birds that Pound heard which inspired him to write this poem as he languished in the American Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa, where he was interned for treason during World War II. Perhaps, the endurance of variations on this musical piece across centuries, nations, and languages – the fact that it comes "not of one bird but of many" – gave Pound some solace, some way of imagining others and probably also himself coming out of Phlegethon, this river of fire in Hades. In any case, depending on our knowledge of Pound, and our ability to read musical scores, we may hear birdsong, a *chanson*, or a melody in our inner ear as we engage with Canto LXXV.



LXXV

Out of Phlegethon!
out of Phlegethon,
Gerhart
art thou come forth out of Phlegethon?
with Buxtehude and Klages in your satchel, with the
Ständebuch of Sachs in yr/ luggage
—not of one bird but of many

Fig. 1: Ezra Pound, Canto LXXV. Copyright 1948 by Ezra Pound.
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Pound 1975 [1948], 450–451.

2.2 Intermedial Reference and Literary Acoustics

Other forms of intermediality – Wolf and Rajewsky call them ‘intermedial references’ – are covert (or ‘indirect’). Here, we have no encounter between different media; everything happens within one medium and only one type of signifier is used: From within one medium, another medium is referenced, evoked or alluded to. Wolf identifies several categories and subcategories of intermedial references and the most basic distinction he draws in the *Routledge Encyclopedia* is between explicit and implicit intermedial references. In explicit intermedial reference (or ‘intermedial thematization’), another medium, a work in another medium, or a maker of other media such as a musician or a sculptor is thematized in the mode of ‘telling’ (Wolf 1999, 44–46, 55–57; Wolf 2008, 254–255). Thus, in Pound’s Canto LXXV, the names “Gerhart,” “Buxtehude” (Dietrich Buxtehude, a seventeenth-century Northern German organist and composer), “Klages” (Ludwig Klages, a twentieth-century German anthropologist whose work Münch had introduced to Pound), and “Sachs” (Hans Sachs, the sixteenth-century German *Meistersinger*, best known for his *Ständebuch*, a beautifully illustrated collection of poems on the various trades) are such explicit intermedial references, however oblique they may appear to individual readers. Pound's Canto LXXV, then, would have an intermedial dimension to it even if it did not include a musical score.

In the second type of intermedial reference, implicit intermedial reference (or 'intermedial imitation'), no medium, work, or artist is mentioned explicitly (Wolf 1999, 44–46, 57–67; Wolf 2008, 255). Instead, a given medium evokes, partially reproduces, or formally imitates another medium in the mode of 'showing.' Wolf distinguishes between three subtypes of implicit intermedial reference. The first is evocation (or 'imaginary content analogy'). In evocation, the cognitive or emotional effects of a medium are evoked (Wolf 1999, 63–64; Wolf 2008, 255). The classic visual example here is ekphrasis, the literary description of a visual work of art, which may be purely descriptive or designed to evoke in the readers' minds the effects that the work of art has on its spectators. In the realm of sound, one possible equivalent would be a description – or evocation – of the effects a musical performance has on a character. At the beginning of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), we get an evocation by proxy as Newland Archer watches a young girl being affected by an opera singer's voice:

> As Madame Nilsson's "M'ama!" thrilled out above the silent house (the boxes always stopped talking during the Daisy Song) a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee, and Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly. He drew a breath of satisfied vanity and his eyes returned to the stage. (Wharton 1920, 3)

What we get here is less a description of a musical piece than an evocation of its effects on one fictional audience member – and of the effects of those effects on another, somewhat voyeuristic audience member.

The second type of implicit intermedial reference is partial reproduction. Here, parts of one medial artifact are reproduced in another without involving more than one kind of signifier. One example that springs to mind are quotes of parts of song texts in literary texts that may trigger both the melody of the song and the remaining words in the reader's inner ear. Take this passage from John Dos Passos's novel *The Big Money* (1936), the third part of his *U.S.A.* trilogy, as an example:

> I find your column interesting and need advice. I have saved four thousand dollars which I want to invest for a better income. Do you think I might buy stocks?
>
> POLICE KILLER FLICKS CIGARETTE AS HE GOES
> TREMBLING TO DOOM

> PLAY AGENCIES IN RING OF SLAVE GIRL MARTS
>
> MAKER OF LOVE DISBARRED AS LAWYER
>
> *Oh the right wing clothesmakers*
> *And the Socialist fakers*
> *They make by the workers. . .*
> *Double cross*
>
> *They preach Social-ism*
> *But practice Fasc-ism*
> *To keep capitalism*
> *By the boss*
>
> MOSCOW CONGRESS OUSTS OPPOSITION
> (Dos Passos 1969 [1936], 520, typography in the original)

By quoting parts of a radical labor song – here rendered in italics – Dos Passos strives to implant both its melody and the rest of its words in his readers' minds. Even if we do not know the song, Dos Passos's rendition of it may evoke in us an audiovisual representation of protestors marching down a street singing some kind of protest song. Thus, as we read the text, the optic and the acoustic imagination are both set to work in our minds simultaneously.

Yet Dos Passos does something additional here. As he does throughout all of his newsreel sections in his *U.S.A.* trilogy, he lets a variety of text types and media collide to create a montage that reproduces in textual form the weekly news features that he and his contemporaries were watching at the movie houses. And in doing that, he engages in a third and – for the purposes of this essay – final type of implicit intermedial reference: formal intermedial imitation. In this subtype of implicit intermedial reference, the formal features of a medium are partially or fully imitated by another medium so that the object medium (literature in this case) is iconically related to the reference medium (newsreels) (Wolf 1999, 44–46, 57–63; Wolf 2008, 255). In the literary passage at hand, what is reproduced in the text are not only the public events commented on in 1920s newsreels but also some of the newsreels' formal features: their rapid succession of topics, their montage of different voices, their disjointed nature (cf. also Spindler 1981; Seed 2009).

Let us take our cue from both Wolf's and Rajewsky's talk about 'reference' rather than 'representation' and stay with the passage from *The Big Money* to ask: How adequate is the language of representation that I employ in my original definition of 'literary acoustics' to describe what happens here? Consider Dos Passos's use of newsreels. To be sure, we can make the argument that what is represented here are both the themes and the forms of 1920s newsreels. At the same time, Dos Passos creates something entirely new that has no precedent in empirical reality. He creates a verbal work of art whose sheer visual presence on the page produces a sense of fragmentation that cannot easily be mapped back onto the situation of someone watching a newsreel in a movie house. What Dos Passos does here is at least as much a response to earlier, more realist forms of writing as an attempt to represent the cinematic real. Even the noisy quality of this passage does not owe everything to its incorporation of a protest song. It owes at least as much to the collisions that Dos Passos stages between different genres, text types, font types, and styles. This creates a set of interferences that we can rightly call noise. And the result of that internal noise is the text's radical dissociation from ways of speaking that we are accustomed to in our everyday lives. In other words, it is its internal noise that allows a text such as Dos Passos's *The Big Money* to assume its systemic, communicational, and external function as the noise of culture.

2.3 Internal and External Productions of Sound and Noise

Importantly, we can give such an account of *The Big Money* without resorting to the language of representation. Instead, we can speak of the literary presentation, staging, production, or performance of sound and noise in literature. And we can add that this performance of sound and noise has both an internal and an external dimension to it. It is internal in the sense that it creates interferences within the text; and it is external in the sense that the text as a whole opts out of and disrupts the conventionalized forms of communication that circulate in our culture. Perhaps, then, the doubleness of literary acoustics that I insist on above is less a doubleness of literary representation than of production. Perhaps 'literary acoustics' is a bivalent notion primarily because it subsumes two forms of production: an internal, literary production of sound and noise and an external, cultural production of sound and noise. Thus, we can arrive at a revised definition of 'literary acoustics,' now reconceptualized as an approach within sound studies: *Literary acoustics is the systematic study of the literary production of sound and noise in two distinct but related senses of 'production': It studies both the staging of acoustic worlds within the confines of literary texts and the communicational, cultural functions that literary texts assume as a result of that staging*.

To my mind, the fact that the word 'representation' no longer occurs in this definition is felicitous for two reasons. The first reason is that, the longer we think about literary negotiations of sound and noise, the less sure we can be that they are most adequately captured via the notion of 'representation.' I have already outlined some of the reasons for my unease with a mimetic account of literature above, but my unease relates to larger questions concerning the being of literary texts. After all, forever scarred by Plato, many critics eschew the idea that literature is a mimetic form of art. Instead, they argue that literature is performative in the sense that it brings hitherto non-existent textual artifacts and fictional worlds into being rather than re-presenting already existing subjects, objects, and events.

In German, there are two ways of translating the English word ‘representation’: the first comes as no surprise: *Repräsentation*. For the purposes of the present essay, the second translation is the more interesting: *Darstellung*. Literally translated, *Darstellung* means ‘placing there’ or, given that the roots of the prefix ‘dar-’ are in acts of public transfer, we could also translate *Darstellung* as ‘placing before the public.’ *Darstellung*, then, does not suggest that literary texts re-present already existing entities. Instead, it suggests that something new is brought to the fore. This is why the German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser suggests that what literature engages in is precisely *Darstellung*, not representation:

> The English term *representation* causes problems because it is so loaded. It entails or at least suggests as given that the act of representation duplicates in one way or another. Representation and mimesis have therefore become interchangeable notions in literary criticism, thus concealing the performative qualities through which the act of representation brings about something that hitherto did not exist as a given object. For this reason I am tempted to replace the English term *representation* with the German *Darstellung*, which is more neutral and does not necessarily drag all the mimetic connotations in its wake. (Iser 1989, 236)

These reflections put in a nutshell my first reason for opting for a new, non-mimetic definition of ‘literary acoustics.’ My second reason relates more specifically to the argument I develop in *The Noises of American Literature*. In my earlier characterization of the doubleness of literary acoustics as concerned with a) the literary representation of noise and b) the cultural production of noise, I not only had to resort to the rather unwieldy topos of ‘the representability of the unrepresentable’ to bring both the two foci of literary acoustics and my two uses of the word ‘noise’ together; my earlier definition of literary acoustics also only really worked with noise as opposed to sound more generally. And it goes without saying that not everything we hear in our inner ear as we read literature is noise. With our new definition of ‘literary acoustics’ in place, these problems largely vanish, allowing us to focus on the intricate relationship between the intraliterary and extraliterary production of sound and noise. But what role should intermediality studies play in all of this?

2.4 Literary Acoustics and the Limitations of Intermediality Studies

Intermediality studies is of great heuristic use and also highly amenable to my new understanding of literary acoustics because intermediality studies is an approach that does not conceive of the relationship between literature and sound in terms of representation. Instead, it conceives of that relationship in terms of an intricate network of relations and references between different media – which is why Rippl critiques James A. W. Heffernan’s influential definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 1993, 2) in *Beschreibungs-Kunst: Zur intermedialen Poetik angloamerikanischer Ikontexte (1880–2000)* (Rippl 2005, 96–97).

However, I would not go as far as proposing intermediality studies as a guiding paradigm for literary acoustics. Consider the examples I have discussed with the help of intermediality studies. In most cases, the intermedial relations pinpointed were relations between different forms of art: between literature and music, between literature and film. This is no coincidence since, as Wolf notes, "'[i]nterart relations' is [...] a formerly much used synonym of 'intermediality'" and "this collocation is often felt to be problematic since its connotation of 'high art' might lead to the exclusion of artefacts, performances, and new media whose status as art is doubtful" (Wolf 2008, 252). In *The Musicalization of Fiction*, Wolf gives examples of what new media he has in mind here: "new forms of communication that have not or not yet advanced to the status of an 'art' such as computerized 'hypertexts' and 'virtual realities'" (Wolf 1999, 36). From the vantage point of my own, more general inquiry into the relationships between literature and sound, intermediality studies has not dissociated itself enough from the study of interart relations. This also comes out clearly in Rippl's choice of examples in her highly useful definition of intermediality as "a field of studies dealing with interrelations between different media – in the case of the philologies, such relations can exist between texts and paintings, texts and sculptures, texts and architecture, texts and films, and texts and various forms of music" (Rippl 2012, 318–319). For that reason, even though factory whistles, automobiles, and tumble dryers would count as media in McLuhan's broad sense of the term as "any extension of ourselves" (McLuhan 1994, 7), one should not expect from intermediality studies insights into the intermedial relations between literature and factory whistles, literature and automobiles, or literature and tumble dryers. If, as Wolf insists, any comparability between music and literature rests on their conceptualization as semiotic, signifying systems (1999, 14–15), then the sounds and noises produced by the means of industrial production, by traffic, and by household appliances do not fit the intermediality model neatly: unlike literature, these media do not appear to contribute to processes of meaning-making in any straightforward fashion; instead, they more often than not disturb such processes. And yet, these sounds and noises should have a place in our explorations of the literary acoustic imagination – as should the non-media of nature. For that reason alone, sound studies scholars cannot depend solely on intermediality studies for their work; instead, we need to continue to do what we are already doing: engaging with a rich variety of theories, methodologies, texts, and other media in an inherently interdisciplinary field.

3 A Reading: Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String* (1995)

It is, then, with an awareness of both the usefulness and the limitations of intermediality theory for sound studies that I turn to this essay's case study. My tutor text is American writer Ben Marcus's magnificent, highly experimental book *The Age of Wire and String*, which was originally published in 1995 by Knopf and reissued in 2013 by Granta Books in an edition richly illustrated by Catrin Morgan. Marcus's book consists of an introductory "Argument" followed by eight sections labeled "Sleep," "God," "Food," "The House," "Animal," "Weather," "Persons," and "The Society." The first seven sections contain five stories each that range from half a page to twelve pages in length; the final section contains six stories. The stories, many of which are so short that they can be classified as vignettes, carry strange titles such as "Intercourse with Resuscitated Wife," "Ethics of Listening When Visiting Areas That Contain Him," and "The Food Costumes of Montana." Each section ends with a glossary labeled "Terms" that defies the purpose of a glossary in that it is as enigmatic as the stories themselves. *The Age of Wire and String* is hard to categorize in generic terms: It is a collection of stories, perhaps a novel, that comes across as a catalog or encyclopedia of a fictional world called "The Age of Wire and String." As we read in the "Argument,"

> This book is a catalog of the life project as prosecuted in the Age of Wire and String and beyond, into the arrangements of states, sites, and cities and, further, within the small houses that have been granted erection or temporary placement on the perimeters of districts and river colonies. The settlement, in clusters and dispersed, has long required a document of secret motion and instruction – a collection of studies that might serve to clarify the terms obscured within every facet of the living program. (Marcus 2013, 16)

For the most part, the tone of the book is like this: matter-of-fact, detached, and cold, resembling that of an ethnographic treatise, a theological tract, or a technical manual. Yet in some passages, it is lyrical and pathetic in the best sense of the word. Witness the uneasy mixture of both tones in the book's gloss on 'sadness': "SADNESS – The first powder to be abided upon waking. It may reside in tools or garments and can be eradicated with more of itself, in which case the face results as a placid system coursing with water, heaving" (Marcus 2013, 32). Above all, though, *The Age of Wire and String* is a radical experiment in language: This is writing as poetic as Gertrude Stein's prose and as hard and precise as imagist poetry. It is writing that works with pristine, short, and often paratactic sentences; that prolifically invents new nouns such as 'gersh,' 'kerm,' and 'frusc' as well as new concepts such as the 'air tattoo,' the 'fudge girdle,' and 'weather birthing'; that regularly transforms proper nouns into common ones ("NAGLE – Wooden fixture which first subdued the winter Albert," Marcus 2013, 46); and that intimates that everything in its fictional world is linked through wires and strings while leaving us pondering the nature and indeed existence of those links in a universe that remains utterly strange and does not allow us to distil from it any coherent narrative. First and foremost, Marcus's text performs work on language itself, making it strange to allow us a fresh experience of the world we think we already know. The Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky has a word for this: *ostranenie*, or enstrangement. And indeed, Marcus enstranges for us a world that we have become all too familiar with because we perceive it in automatized, habitual ways. *The Age of Wire and String* jolts us out of our linguistic and perceptual complacency to make us see and hear the world anew (cf. also Chénetier 1997; Vernon 2001; Evenson 1996).

Focusing on the presence of sound and noise in this text, we see that its acoustic imagination significantly contributes to this enstranging effect. Witness the beginning of the "Hidden Ball Inside a Song" section:

> Mutilated Stephen on horseback chased into the forest, a game referred to as the "hidden-ball game" or the "bullet game" by the analysts. It is known that certain figures will chase circular objects when a song is played; the wider the song's structure, the longer the person will hunt for the ball, stone, or bullet. Built into each song's melody is a capacity for mutilation that can only emerge when the lyrics are excluded (the melody's force is often muted by nonsensical words rattling at the surface). In hidden-ball, when the lyrics are forgotten (due to irretrievable dance steps that erase the memory for words), the melody slips unbridled to the foreground and crushes the horseman's torso. [...] Games of musical mutilation last as long as musicians can sustain the song's repetition, inventing songs within songs when the need arises. (Marcus 2013, 166)

What is peculiar about the song that resounds in this section is not only its violent impact but also that 'song' is well-nigh a misnomer at least as far as the music's most essential quality, its mutilating force, is concerned: It is the melody that maims while vocal elements, which are traditionally parts of songs, curb the music's destructive impact. The 'song' in question here is not sung, it "is played," and it is performed not by singers, but by "musicians."

What we have here is a case of both explicit and implicit intermedial reference: It is explicit in the sense that a piece of music is explicitly referred to, and it is implicit in that Marcus here evokes the (deadly) effects of another medium. More than that: Marcus here stages a medial competition in the sense that he asserts that the reference medium (music) is particularly destructive when it is shorn of the linguistic signifiers that make up the object medium (literature). What is also of interest is that Marcus here references not a song that exists in empirical reality but an imagined song, thus further adding to the non-mimetic quality of his text. When it comes to music, this method is sustained throughout *The Age of Wire and String*: We read about "leg songs" (Marcus 2013, 164, 170) and learn that "[t]he spicules of skin in most insects approximate musical notation when unwound" (2013, 185), but never encounter actually existing musical pieces. For this reason, too, intermediality studies, with its focus on 'reference' rather than 'representation,' is very well suited to the analysis of the relations between literature and music in experimental, non-mimetic texts such as Marcus's.

More often, though, the sounds that permeate *The Age of Wire and String* are not musical but noisy: we read about a man "maul[ing]" a house "with noise and steam" (Marcus 2013, 76); we discover that "[c]oughing" is defined as a "device for transporting people of goods from one level to another" (2013, 86); we learn that "*Sinter* is an acronym for *sky interception* and *noise transfer of emergent rag forms*" (2013, 113); and we listen to the sound of wind growing so "high-pitched" that "[m]any became deaf or their ears blackened" (2013, 118). For the analysis of these types of sounds, intermediality studies is less suited since it tends to focus on (artistic) media in a more conventional sense (paintings, sculptures, architecture, films, and music in Rippl's list quoted above). This is no flaw in the approach but does suggest that intermediality studies cannot be our only methodology when it comes to exploring the relations between literature and sound.

This becomes particularly obvious as we shift our attention to noise. In *The Age of Wire and String*, the most potent source of noise is the sun:

> There was no season. The sun began to make a noise. There was no rain. Birds began to fly, spooked by the sound. [...] The sun's tumult blasted in through holes they had dug with a wire. [...] The babies' shelters slowly popped under pressure of the sun, and wood was sent splintering into the warm wind. Horses collapsed. Their ears bled. [...] When the grain was depleted, the youngest ones piled out of holes and ran in the grass. The noise could be seen, and yellow waves pushed down on them. Some collapsed and died. [...] The sun was small and hard. Its noise became a new kind of wind. Trees grew soft and crumbly under it. [...] The wind grew strong and reversed. Birds were jerked upward, beyond their ability. The sun became smaller and louder. Holes formed in the earth. Air blasted forth. [...] The morning sun was loud, and they ran into the open and gouged at their ears with wire. [...] The sun could be a tiny dot and it could be anywhere. [...] The sun made a sound. He heard it coming. He pushed the whole structure toward the river. After he died, they spoke to his body. (Marcus 2013, 119–124)

Here, in "The Weather Killer" section, Marcus unfolds a quasi-apocalyptic scenario in which the sun's noise – which we could describe in representational terms as referring to what NASA scientists have identified as the extremely hot gaseous pressure waves that noisily speed across the sun's surface (cf. Sample 2013) – threatens, maims, and destroys life on earth. What gives this and other passages about the sun's noise a strongly non-mimetic slant is both their dystopian and their fantastic, imaginary quality. *This* sun and *this* noise are products of the literary text we read rather than representations of pre-existing phenomena. Equally importantly, the style in which the sun and its noise are brought into existence introduces a second kind of perturbation, a communicational, cultural noise in that the jagged diction, anaphoric quality, and unconventional collocations ("holes they had dug with a wire"; "[t]he sun was small and hard"; "they spoke to his body") of this text radically dissociate it from ordinary, everyday ways of speaking to inject noise into our culture's channels of communication. It is precisely this convergence of two kinds of literary productions of sound and noise – internal and external – that literary acoustics helps us appreciate and describe. Literary acoustics also helps us understand that Marcus's definition of the sun in this section's glossary has a strongly self-reflexive quality in that it alerts us to the intricate relationship between the sun's noise on the thematic level and the text's noise on the functional, communicational level:

> SUN, THE – origin of first sounds. Some members of the society still detect amplified speech bursts emanating from this orb and have accordingly designed noise mittens for the head and back. A poetic system was developed based on the seventeen primary tonal flues discharging from the sun's underskin. (Marcus 2013, 137)

By way of concluding, let us turn to Catrin Morgan's copious illustrations: diagrams, charts, maps, enstranged photographs, and abstract as well as figural drawings. These images add a plurimedial dimension to Marcus's book. At times, they perform an illustrative function, allowing readers to visualize Marcus's strange fictional world. Most often, though, the relation between the images and Marcus's decidedly non-mimetic prose remains entirely unclear so that the text-image combinations create further interferences – noise – that add to the enigmatic feel of the book as a whole. In the context of the present essay's interest in the intersections between literature and sound, Morgan's design of the section titles is of special interest (see fig. 2).

There are at least two thematic relationships between Morgan's section title pages and Marcus's text in that the latter is, as we have seen, suffused with reflections on death and noise. Moreover, Morgan's visual work enacts caesurae in the text whose inherent noisiness both adds to and reiterates the fragmented, recalcitrant, noisy quality of the text itself. Most importantly, though, from the perspective of intermediality studies, the succession of section titles and text formally imitates the switching of channels on an old analog television set. It is important to note that while there is a mimetic dimension to Morgan's design of the section title pages, the relationship between the book as a whole – including Morgan's illustrations – and television is not one of representation. Instead, television is referenced and its formal features are reproduced in intermedial forms. This strongly non-mimetic dimension of *The Age of Wire and String*, which both intermediality studies and literary acoustics help us grasp, is apparent everywhere.

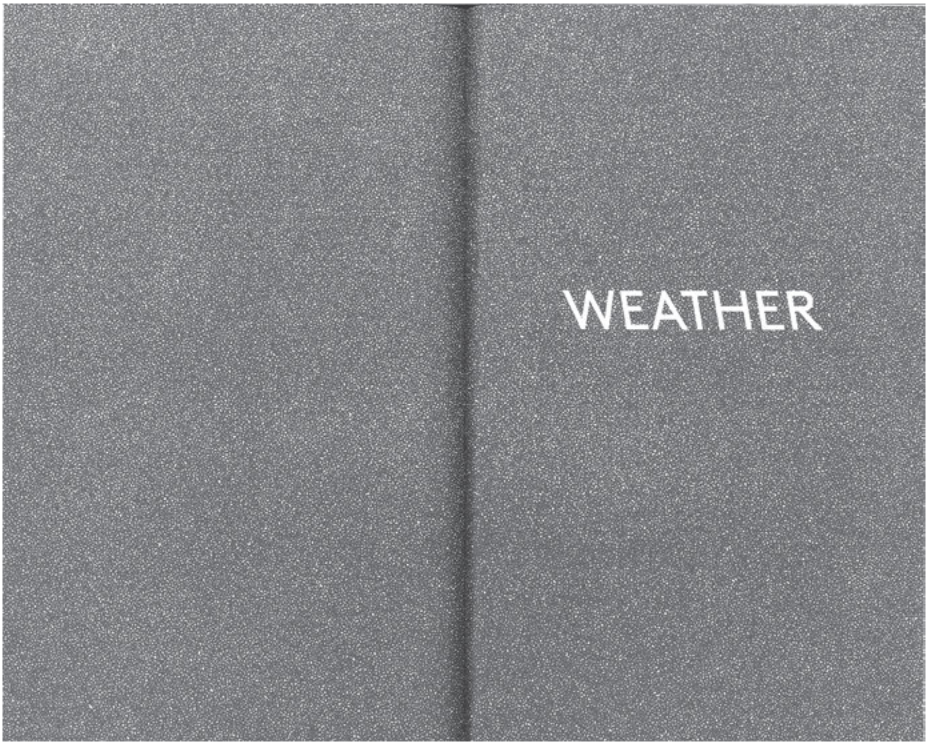

Fig. 2: Catrin Morgan, design of section title page in Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*. Reproduced by permission of Catrin Morgan and Granta Books.
Marcus 2013 [1995], 114–115.

Though there is a Midwestern, Ohioan quality to Marcus's landscapes, and though Marcus liberally includes names of real-life family members – already the book's second epigraph is from his father, the mathematician Michael Marcus ("Mathematics is the supreme nostalgia of our time," Marcus 2013, 13) – neither his topographies nor his biographical references are mimetic. While real place names abound (Ohio, Utah, Arkansas, Detroit, and Buffalo, to name but a few), Marcus's descriptions of these places, of the humans and animals that live in them, and of the events that occur there do not resemble anything that we already know: Ohio, for instance, is glossed as "[t]he house, be it built or crushed" (Marcus 2013, 94) and Jason Marcus, a character who bears the name of Marcus's real-life deceased brother, is described as being "built from food, in the manner of minute particles slowly settling or suspended by slight currents, that exist in varying amounts in all air" (2013, 58). Marcus's prose is a textbook example of literature as *Darstellung* rather than representation, of intermedial, noisy, recalcitrant literature that conforms to the famous dictum of another experimental writer, John Hawkes, who in 1965 noted that he "began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme" (Enck 1965, 141).

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