

## Book review

**Justin St. Clair:**

***Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature: Novel Listening*, Routledge, 2013.**

Not only is *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature: Novel Listening* by Justin St. Clair the first book-length publication on sound and aural media in postmodern literature, an occupation of new territory, it is also a pleasure to read. With a firm and qualified grip the author leads the reader through analyses of the use of sound and aurality in a selection of novels. Through analysis characterised by both accessibility and solidity St. Clair illustrates what he names the ‘aural fixation’ of postmodern writers. Postmodern literature is, according to the author, characterised by a focus on media influence and the historically specific soundscape. According to St. Clair, the postmodern writers represented in this publication seem especially sensitive, and especially concerned, when it comes to soundscapes and the possibility of using those to manipulate the human mind. How these postmodern writers are defined as postmodern and how postmodernism, and by that the framing of the selection of objects for analysis, is characterised is, however, never set out explicitly, though the selection of texts points to a certain generation, and a certain segment, of writers with certain thematic and stylistic traits in common. The texts also seem to share a certain paranoia with regards to electronic and digital media, an aspect one could have wished elaborated, especially since the discussions regarding the demarcations of postmodernism still do not seem to have been decisively settled. This reservation aside, the publication works quite well. The analyses are exemplary, both thematically tight and linguistically delightful. The chosen examples are as written for this purpose, and the themes of each chapter seem thoroughly, theoretically qualified and exhaustive.

In the introduction St. Clair qualifies his analysis, in part through discussing the field of sound studies and its position within the field of aesthetic research, and in part through an update and rewriting of Bakhtin’s term ‘heteroglossia’, multilingualness, to ‘heterophonia’, multisoundedness. By doing this St. Clair points not only to the multiplicity of voices in the literary work, but also to ‘a multiplicity of media transmissions, pervasive to the point of aural ubiquity’, a plurality of sound that constitutes the background sound, the soundscape, that (post)modern humans live in, a plurality of sounds that the chosen writers seem highly aware of. It is this plurality of sounds that St. Clair takes as his theoretical starting point, and during the four chapters of the publication, which are chronically organised based on the heyday of the medium, the influence of four audio transmission technologies on selected postmodern novels is analysed. With the piano player as a point of depar-

ture and muzak, background sound extraordinaire, as an exit point, St. Clair places, with precise methodology, the role of these media in the tradition of sound studies, with theoretical reference to Bakhtin and R. Murray Schaefer, among others, and within the novels selected for the purpose. These novels, all written by male, American writers born in the 1920s and 30s, deliver a shared focus on sound and a concurrent critique of the electronic and digital development. Several of these novels can be classified as dystopian sci-fi, and a theme of fear of manipulation and the extinction of the human will and independent thinking seems to seep through both the novels and St. Clair's publication.

Thus, the focus of chapter 1, *The Player Piano: Musical Programming in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, is the player piano and the problems concerning manipulation and authenticity brought forward by the spreading of the medium. The chapter analyses the novels *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut, *We Can Build You* by Philip K. Dick and William Gaddis' *J R* and *Agapē Agape*. The chapter opens with a thorough and readable historical introduction to the player piano focusing on both the techniques and the implications on the cultural consumption by the invention and distribution of the instrument. Through his analysis of the mentioned novels St. Clair shows how the player piano is used to point to the deafness of Western culture, to the visual focus that leaves us deaf to the aural manipulation that all four chapters point to. Besides rendering the pianist superfluous and thereby confusing the question of authenticity (by faking the presence of a pianist) the player piano also commoditised music. By changing the quality of music from something that had to be learned to something that was meant to be consumed, music became a background phenomenon, only rarely paid attention. Thus, the listener lost some of his sensibility towards the environmental sound, leaving the door, or the ears, open to manipulation. By focusing on the difference between human- and machine-made sound, and on the confusion of the difference introduced by the player piano, St. Clair illustrates how we cannot necessarily trust our ears to actually hear what we think we hear.

The focus on aural manipulation continues in chapter 2, *Radio for Dummies: Alien Invasions, Déjà Voodoo, and the Ventriloquy of America*. The chapter takes off by considering the tendency of the radio listener to half-listening, to listen somewhat not attentively while doing other things. Thus, the author turns to Oscar Welles' *War of the Worlds* and the massive panic provoked by the radio show. Despite several notices on the nature of the show, a radio play, the contexts of the show seemed to slip past most listeners. Common for the testimonies from the ear witnesses presented by St. Clair is that the listener had only been listening sporadically, which left the notices unheard and the show was taken for a real live broadcast. With this anecdote as a point of departure St. Clair moves into the analysis of Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, Phillip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth* and Don DeLillo's *White*

*Noise*. The analysis focuses on the discrepancy between the intended function of the radio as a foreground medium and the often experienced position as a background medium, as the medium that is allowed to buzz in the background, but only rarely gets the full attention. Common to the three novels is the inscription of the radio as a medium for manipulation of the listener. By taking advantage of the half-listening habits of the radio user, the radio is used as a medium for ‘mass ventriloquy’. Through the radio the listener is filled with standardised articulations which are repeated, as if through a ventriloquist’s dummy. Through the radio the listener is deprived of some of his autonomy, of some of his will.

Chapter 3, *Sounding Off: The Postmodern Novel Considers Television Audio*, focuses on the authorship of Don DeLilo, a career spent on ‘muting televisions’ and on the aural presentation of the paranoia that seems to pervade a generation of writers: the fear of being replaced by a newer, less demanding medium. By considering the soundscape work of R. Murray Schaefer, and especially his term *schizophonia*, a term describing the split between an original sound and its electroacoustic reproduction, St. Clair illustrates the transition TV goes through when its sound is removed or replaced. Thus, the chapter pays attention to the discrepancy between what is seen and heard when the sound of the TV is removed in DeLilo’s novels. DeLilo uses this muting of the TV partly to write ironically about the superficiality of the TV, but also to point to how subtly television can be used to manipulate the viewer, especially since TV has become an almost mandatory part of home decor. Thus, DeLilo also marks literature as something quite different, a medium that cannot hide things from its reader.

The fourth chapter, *Listen to the Muzak: The Social Implications of Background Sound*, is dedicated to Thomas Pynchon and the novels *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. The chapter, which might be the one carrying the strongest media criticism, considers Pynchon’s use of ‘wordless melodies’, so-called ‘muzak’, and the implicit critique of the targeted use of muzak for manipulation of the American worker. As in the others chapters this one opens with a historical presentation of muzak and of the Muzak Corporation, the corporation which conducted several experiments using music to make workers more effective. These studies explore examples on how music, unconsciously, affects a person’s frame of mind. The analysis of Pynchon’s novels thus centres on the ability of background music to manipulate the listener without his or her knowledge. The chapter ends somewhat pompously and politically with considerations of the ability of muzak not only to replace silence, but also to generate silence. By masking human discontent and by muffling all human-made sound, including conversation, muzak not only affects our frame of mind, but also the possibility to utter opinions.

In this final chapter St. Clair pushes some of his points. Here the dangers of digitalism, and especially of digitally produced sound, are emphasised. Simultane-

ously, this chapter clearly demonstrates how the awareness of sound enriches the selected novels and gives the authors, here Pynchon, a both subtle and effective tool for media critique.

The coda, the conclusion, seems very brief. St. Clair makes a sympathetic attempt to draw a connection to the digital environment of today. However, he seems to forget to place this development from a literary point of view. Besides a point about the younger generation of writers not suffering from the same fear, or scepticism, concerning digital media as the generation represented in *Sound and Aural Media*, St. Clair only exemplifies with the cut-and-paste method, a method coincidentally used by Burroughs, among others, a consequence of the influence of digital media on literature. Thus, one is left wishing that St. Clair would, at least, point in the direction of some of the digital circumstances that really influence the soundscape, and thereby presumably the literature, of today: YouTube, streaming services, personal soundtracks, podcasts etc. Furthermore, St. Clair takes a somewhat one-sided approach to media scepticism, an approach that coincides with the selected objects of analysis. It would have been interesting, though, to occasionally challenge this view. The variety and distribution of aural media does not only imply the danger of manipulation, it also brings forth new potentials, new aesthetic possibilities, new territories to occupy. This and the lacking definition of postmodernism are the most obvious weaknesses of this volume. St. Clair writes unpretentiously, yet unerringly, and *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature* is both an easy read and an enriching acquaintance, if not for anything else, then for the exemplary well-written analyses.

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