Tonic Ambiguities

Exhuming Gothic Soundscapes

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The following paper was presented at the Aural Diversity Workshop #4 (Soundscape and Sound Studies), Led by: Prof John Drever (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Prof Josh Reiss (Queen Mary University of London). The workshop sought submissions from those undertaking research and practice into soundscapes and sound studies; stretching and breaking a "one size fits all" approach to hearing.'

Abstract

Background: While Gothic literature's thematic content has long been the focus of scholarly research, it is only more recently that the genre's uniquely unsettling soundscapes have come under sustained attention. The Gothic novel's historical contribution to sound-based practises within the arts, now constitutes a rapidly expanding field of research and discourse.

Aims: The primary aim of this paper is to examine sound-specific methods of representation within examples of Gothic literature from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In doing so, the paper will consider the ways in which Gothic literature has historically exploited sound's volatile materiality, such as its invisibility, its propensity to leak, bleed, and ultimately dissipate; as it passes through walls, locked doors, and passageways. In doing so, I will seek to establish a phenomenological account of Gothic soundscapes, one that may subsequently be adapted toward contemporary sound-based practices.

Conclusion and Implications: Working against the dominant and normative narratives of hi-fi tech branding, acoustic control strategies, noise cancelling, and naturalist phonography – all of which are predicated on notions of objectivity, clarity, transparency, and reproducibility – the Gothic novel offers an alternative vehicle for listening that instead produces meaning via obscurity, instability, and location specificity.

Aural Diversity, a Definition

Before we proceed with an analysis of Gothic literature's soundscapes and their historical contribution to sound-based practices, let us begin by addressing the concept of Aural Diversity directly. The very first sentence on the homepage of auraldiversity.org states that 'Aural Diversity arises from the observation that everybody hears differently' (2019). Reading further through the website's definition as well as Andrew Hugill's infographic chart, a concept of Aural Diversity emerges that is tightly bound to empirical understandings of the body; that is to say, a diversity of hearing shaped by physiological and neurological contingencies such as the effects of aging, environmental damage, temporary blockages of the ear canal, as well as misophonia, phonophobia, and hyperacusis.

However, in addition to being influenced by these empirically understood contexts, it is worth considering that hearing is also a process of interpretation, of recognising incoming sound waves as signifiers of particular objects and events. I would like to suggest from the outset, that hearing is not only an embodied, physiological experience, but at the same time, an interpretive and aesthetic experience, inseparable from the complications of language, ontology, ideology, discourse, cultural prejudice, and so on. To quote Salomé Voegelin's account of listening, 'there is no pre-linguistic, naïve, unspoken moment, the aesthetic moment is always already in language…' (2010, 108). Consequently, we might approach hearing as simultaneously shaped by those physiological and neurological contexts outlined by Hugill, and at the same time shaped by interpretation and all its associated complexity.

Aural Diversity Within the Arts

Acknowledging that hearing is – at least in part – an interpretive, aesthetic experience, would seem to afford artists a unique vantage point when seeking to understand Aural Diversity's fullest implications. For artists undertaking practice-led research within the academy, the notion that an audience will experience a sound-based work in diverse ways is not exceptional, nor is it necessarily considered a "problem", but is widely considered the norm. This is due not only to the physiological, neurological, and interpretive contingencies we have already discussed, but is furthermore shaped by characteristics of the listening environment and the location of the listener.

For example, imagine yourself attending the opening event of an exhibition of sound-based works, where inside the gallery a speaker array plays back delicate assemblages of environmental recordings. On the opening night, these fragile sounds are forced to compete with the hum of conversation, with the clinking of glasses, and the dry shuffling of shoes on the concrete floor, and consequently the artwork itself is barely audible. Later in the week, you return to the gallery, where this time you're the only listener in the room. Amongst this relative quiet, the same field recordings now seem too loud, their potential delicacy clogged by a lack of dynamic range and a brash tonal balance. Additionally, the emptiness of the gallery now poses other listening challenges. Without the acoustically absorbent mass of bodies, these field recordings reverberate freely across the cavernous space, intermingled with your own echoey footsteps as well as the intermittent drone of hand driers in the adjacent bathrooms.

Clarity and Obscurity

In light of these environmental and interpretive variations, artists working with sound typically acquire methods for dealing with the medium's volatility. While the imperative for greater accessibility might at first seem to demand clarity, paradoxically, artists increasingly navigate this ambiguity of listening using methods that subtly infer, imply, prompt, invoke, and suggest; alongside negative strategies that deliberately obscure, frustrate, deny, and disown. This is consistent with a growing body of literature suggesting that the instability of sound and its associated interpretive difficulties is where the most important work remains to be done. Theorists such as David Toop and Salomé Voegelin have gone as far as suggesting that the concept of clarity itself is one inherited from an ocular-centric tradition, emerging from the enlightenment onwards (a term which itself is telling in its use of metaphor). Voegelin addresses this problem of clarity directly, contesting that, contrary to '...the illumination of visual comprehension...[sound]...enjoys the obscurity of nonsense...' (2010, 84). In his volume, *Sinister Resonance, The Mediumship of the Listener* Toop is even more emphatic, suggesting that 'Given its contradictory properties, the most sensible approach to sound is through incoherence.' (2010, 48). At the very least, a preference for clarity within sound-based works cannot be taken as self-evident.

This is not to dismiss the challenges facing Aurally Diverse audiences, a grouping which the concept suggests, includes us all, but I would like to suggest that seeking to afford audiences access to a standardised, universal experience, is contradictory to

the full implications of aural diversity itself. What might we gain if we set aside the impulse for a standardized listening and instead pursued a methodology capable of producing works that are engaging in diverse ways; a methodology that fosters a richness of experience, by virtue of differences in hearing, rather than in spite of? What would such a methodology entail and are there usefully precedents we might draw upon when seeking to accommodate sound's sensorial ambiguity? This question of precedent brings us to the primary topic of this paper; that is, the recovery of Gothic literature's weird soundscapes as a reservoir of potential methods with which to navigate the ambiguity of the audible.

Exhuming the Gothic Soundscape

It may be instructive, to begin with the genre's well-trodden clichés, those Gothic tropes in which protagonists are haunted by malevolent environments, by the howling of the wind or the creaking staircase. In addition to these environmental sounds, we find within the literature a disorderly hoard of bodies, not quite living, not quite dead, but animated via a chorus of ambiguous groans, croaks, gurgles, and shrieks. What is common across these tropes, is the exploitation of sound's ambiguity; a cliché that in turn haunts the entire Gothic genre. This preference for uncertainty is pursued firstly via sound's materiality, in which it leaks through walls, drifts on the wind, intermingles, muddies, and ultimately dissipates. These material attributes then engender subsequent interpretive ambiguities, which include, sound's propensity to be misheard and misunderstood, and its facility as an unstable signifier of objects

and agents within the world. As Brandon LaBelle writes in his book Sonic Agency, 'Sound is always moving away from its source; it abandons origin, it longs to be perennially leaving. In traveling and migrating, in brushing up against numerous surfaces, being absorbed or reflected as it moves, it is equally losing weight, shedding identity.' (2018, 127). Is the creaking staircase caused by the wind, or does it imply a bodily presence? Is the eerie cry in the night that of an owl, or the call of the damned? Within such clichés, sounds material volatility and the resulting interpretive difficulties become densely knotted together.

This material and interpretive ambiguity is used within Gothic literature to enact one of the genre's primary obsessions, that of the body and its relationship to the law, (both natural and otherwise). Across this backdrop of the permissible, the bodies of Gothic literature engage in passionate transgressions, whether in defiance of the "natural" laws of death as in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, or the laws of birth, as with Mary Shelly's Frankenstein, or the legal performatives of pious society, in Matthew Lewis' The Monk. Central to the representation of these transgressions is sound's capacity to bleed, to waft through locked doors, prison bars, monastery chambers, laneways, and landscapes. In these instances, sound's material volatility is used to represent those bodies that are beyond the reach of the law. This transgressive use of sound is best articulated by Angela M. Archambault who notes that '...the Gothic novel's tendency to depict sound as being an ungovernable power connects it with the notion of the uncontrollable body.' (2016, 8). Such bodies may be radically dematerialised, as is the case of the spectre, the ghost, a body of pure aesthetic experience. What medium other

than sound could conjure so well these weightless bodies? Other times, the Gothic body is so radically de-textualized, so resistant to society's logics of representation, that it arrives on the page as an incoherent mass of raw material; dug up, sewn up, jolted into life by electricity, lurching across the countryside in search of its own image. What could better represent such radical materiality other than a series of non-verbal groans, grunts, rumbles, and gurgles? In all these instances, we find an account of hearing in which the frustration of clarity forms the very basis of rich sonic encounters.

In keeping with this theme of transgression, we can recognise yet another recurring motif within Gothic literature, which is that of the threshold. These thresholds are often represented architecturally, as the entrance to the tomb, the labyrinth, or the sepulchre. Other times, thresholds may be represented ontologically, such as those boundaries that partition living from non-living, animate from inanimate, the real from the imaginary, bodies from landscapes, liquids from solids, and other such binary concepts. Over these thresholds, the Gothic soundscape spins invisible threads; threads that meticulously draw a protagonist over, into darkness, into the unknown, and ultimately ruin. Again, this trope is often enacted via sound's interpretive ambiguity, its tendency (when not readily attributable to a visual source), to seem as if it is coming to us from an elsewhere, from down the hallway, under the floorboards, within the walls, across the moors, or deep within the tomb.

To illustrate, let us consider this passage from the opening pages of Ann Radcliffe's, *The Mysteries of Udolpho.* 'The evening gloom of woods was always delightful to me,' said St. Aubert. 'I can linger, with solemn steps, under the deep shades, send forth a transforming eye into the distant obscurity, and listen with thrilling delight to the mystic murmuring of the woods.' (1794, 15). What is established so early in this novel, is a creative device in which unattributable sounds beckon from an imagined elsewhere. It's a motif in which delicate sounds draw St. Aubert and his daughter, Emily towards that which is utterly formless, that which is always obscured by darkness. Throughout the novel, these enchanting sounds repeatedly take the form of music; the maker of which is always out of sight, suggestive of an invisible agent, of a point of origin that is otherworldly. To offer another example, take the distant chanting of monks, heard by Emily near freshly heaped graves, as voices that '…mingling with the low querulous peal of the organ, swelled faintly…' (91). But whether these sounds are real or imaginary, becomes increasingly doubtful, for soon after '…[Emily] believed that her imagination had deluded her, or that she had heard one of those unaccountable noises, which sometimes appear in old houses.' (96)

Within this long shadow cast by Gothic literature, Salomé Voegelin's aforementioned scholarship takes on a somewhat more romantic complexion. Historical sympathies begin to emerge between Gothic literature's exploration of sound's material attributes and interpretive ambiguity, and Voegelin's more recent proposition that 'unlike the "illumination" of visual comprehension… Sound, by contrast, enjoys the obscurity of non-sense' (2010, 84). Similarly, we can Gothically re-read

Brandon LaBelle's brand of sonic ontology, in which, sound is always 'shedding identity' (2018, 127) as indebted to the Gothic tradition. Returning to Radcliffe, is this 'querulous peal of the organ' (1794, 91) referring to an instrument of the church, or the bodily organ of speech? Is there really a procession of Monks in the distance, or are these merely the unaccountable noises of Emily's imagination? This ambiguity, in which potentially all or none of these possibilities are correct, is precisely that which affords the reader such a richness of experience.

Gothic Strategies for Contemporary Practice

In light of Gothic literature's aural ambiguity, what sound-specific methods of representation might be salvaged and incorporated within a contemporary practice? Retracing our footsteps through some of the previous examples, we have looked at instances in which the sound's material volatility and interpretive ambiguity are mobilised in order to produce radical doubt; doubt as to whether those footfalls in the dark are from a creature living or dead, doubt as to whether certain sounds signify presence or absence. Importantly, this doubt never occurs in isolation but is always relational, attaching itself parasitically to established patterns of thinking and in particular, to established oppositional concepts.

I would like to suggest that this relational doubt is where Gothic soundscapes are most readily adaptable toward contemporary sound-based practices. By approaching these doubts as relational, we are afforded a requisite level of abstraction, enabling a format shift away from the pages of literature, into the artist's studio and the gallery. One possible means with

which to undertake such format shifting is by combining sound recordings with other mediums. For example, if using recordings chosen for their aural ambiguity, it may be advantageous to exhibit these recordings in conjunction with sculptural work, text-based work, video, projections, dramatic lighting, or detritus from the recording process. By providing a constellation of sensory outputs, audience members are subsequently able to modulate their own engagement, navigating their way through the interpretive doubt that sound engenders. Such encounters aren't then anchored to a singular, prescribed auditory experience, but rather, constituted within a relational field; a semiotically antagonistic space induced between various media and objects. Within such relational fields, the interpretive ambiguity of sound retains its generative force, while also accommodating a diversity of hearing.

Conclusion

Such a methodology predicated on sound's material and interpretive instability doesn't seek to diminish the challenges facing Aurally Diverse audiences. If we can extract one last thing from the Gothic novel, it might be that difficulties with hearing can indeed be terrifying. As an aesthetic experience however, Gothic literature endures as the paradigm of sonic ambiguity, its weird soundscapes beckoning those who listen towards the unknown.

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