

## Fictional narratives of listening: crossovers between literature and sound studies

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### Abstract

This paper explores how literature has been incorporated into sound studies in recent decades. Although the mobilisation of literary texts for the purpose of investigating sound and listening predates the establishment of a field of inquiry named sound studies, as Pierre Schaeffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* exemplifies, the rise of this field of research brought about completely new forms of dealing with literary accounts of sound and listening. If, for a long time, literary narratives fell short of engendering a theory of sound and listening of their own, serving mostly to exemplify theories and meditations exogenous to them, several studies on sound use literature for theoretical purposes other than exemplification. Focusing on four different uses of literature by sound studies scholars, this paper aims to indicate how varied can be the uses of literature for thinking sound and listening.

**Keywords:** Literature, Functions of Listening, Figures of Sound, Soundscape, Acousmatic Listening

### Introduction

Literature has been incorporated into sound studies in myriad ways, yet a systematic account of these mobilisations is still to be given. Contributing to mapping out these crossovers, this study provides a fourfold survey of the presence of literature in research devoted to sound by examining how scholars associated with what came to be called sound studies turned to literary works to tackle questions of sound and listening. By gathering together authors whose publications span over four decades, this paper evinces a set of methodological trends and suggests a possible evolution concerning the role of literature in sound studies. While *literature* relates here primarily to fictional, diegetic accounts of acts of listening and sound description, which I will henceforth refer to as fictional narratives of listening, *sound studies* stands for any scholarship on sound and listening that examines these phenomena through the prism of their historical, social, philosophical, and cultural aspects, as opposed, on the one hand, to purely acoustic and physiological discourses on sound and listening, and, on the other hand, to the hegemony of music regarding these discourses<sup>1</sup>.

Although literature is conventionally understood as a silent form of art that would not enable direct access to sound, it has been used as a source of information about sound and listening. Those uses come as no surprise, not least because of the privileged place literature occupies in the Gutenberg galaxy and beyond<sup>2</sup>. Much has, therefore, been said about the relevance of written texts and literacy (as opposed to orality) to studies devoted to sound, listening, and sound technologies. Notions of writing are, for instance, located at the very origin of sound technologies, as attested by Thomas Edison's phonograph, which is identified "as a textual device, primarily for taking dictation" (Gitelman, 1999, p. 1), and Leon Scott's phonautograph, which was intended "to make sounds visible to the eye and specifically to create a form of automatic sound writing" (Sterne, 2003, p. 41)<sup>3</sup>. The reshaping of experiences of sound and listening by ideas of writing and reading are also extensively discussed in some of the most influential studies of the field, such as *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* by Friedrich A. Kittler, and *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* by Lisa Gitelman. Furthermore, inherently literary concepts underpin recent considerations upon the very nature of sound. David Novak and Matt

Sakakeeny state that “sound resides in [the] feedback loop of materiality and *metaphor*” (2015, p. 1, my emphasis), whereas Rey Chow and James A. Steintranger propose that “the object of sound” must be pursued through an inquiry into a terminology that slides “between referential and figurative registers” (2011, p. 2), such as resonance, timbre, whisper, echo, silence, noise, voice, and dissonance. Finally, written documents emerge not only as key sources of knowledge about sound and listening but also as a point of debate on method, particularly with regard to their status in studies of the aural dimension of the pre-Edison era. In this respect, while Emily J. Cockayne stresses that, “although problematic, written texts are the most important sources by which we can gain access to past sensory experiences” (2000, p. 13), Mark M. Smith notes that “while actual sounds could not be reproduced with true fidelity until the invention of electromagnetic recording devices, print itself provided a form of recording, as the use of aural metaphors, similes, and onomatopoeia, and even mundane descriptions, attests” (2002, p. 319). It is out of this polyphonic and multifaceted theoretical setting, dominated by dichotomies such as literacy and orality, vision and listening, speech and writing, heard and unheard sounds, direct and indirect perceptions, that literature stands as an adequate, if insufficient, source of knowledge, as a necessary yet unreliable way into the sonic world. By focusing on literature, therefore, this paper aims to show that its engagement with sound and listening is unique and its contribution to the field is radically different from those afforded by sounding art forms, such as film, video and radio art, theatre, music, and others. This focus, moreover, shifts the debate from wider notions of writing and literacy towards more specific relations between fictional and scientific accounts of listening and sound.

### **From sound studies to literature**

Identifying and examining all of the crossovers between literature and sound studies is no easy task, be it because references to literature abound in the human sciences more broadly or because delimiting sound studies thematically and historically is an often unfeasible and ungratifying endeavour. Yet, hypothetical and malleable boundaries must be drawn so that these crossovers could be better understood as methodological trends. Thematically, this paper focuses on scholars whose works engage with a range of literary texts in a sustained way, and in relation to key sound studies categories such as functional listening, figures of sound, soundscape, and the acousmatic. I comment on Pierre Schaeffer’s anticipatory use of literature in a pre-sound studies era, before examining the way in which Douglas Kahn, John M. Picker, and Brian Kane interact with literature. Examined alongside each other, these studies, published over the course of thirty years, offer a historical outline of the field and comprise paradigmatic forms of reading literature. Historically, this paper proposes a non-conventional starting point. In “Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?”, Michele Hilmes draws on Rick Altman to date the beginning of sound studies “back to 1980 with the publication of the *Yale French Studies* issue on sound edited by Altman” (Hilmes, 2005, p. 249). Sterne however seems to suggest that the institutionalisation, as it were, of sound studies dates to the early 1990s (2012, p. 1), though its roots stretch back to after 1945 (Ibid., p. 3). Adopting neither of these origins, this paper locates one of the possible origins of sound studies in 1966, at the moment of the publication of Pierre Schaeffer’s *Traité des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines*, a study that posited defining problematics of sound studies even before the publication of groundbreaking studies such as Don Ihde’s *Listening and Voice* (1976), Jacques Attali’s *Bruit* (1977), and R. Murray Schaeffer’s *The Tuning of the World* (1977). Schaeffer’s *Traité* advances the debate on sound technology and auditory perception, in addition to taking to task the limits of musical listening as well as calling for a much-needed interdisciplinary methodology for research on sound.

French telecommunication engineer, musicologist, composer, writer, and sound studies pioneer, Schaeffer turned to literature on several occasions to illustrate his ideas on sound, listening, and technology. His recurrent references to Marcel Proust, veiled or otherwise, are a striking

example. Schaeffer refers to Proust for the first time in “Le pouvoir créateur de la machine”, when discussing the auditory shift promoted by sound recording<sup>4</sup>. Proust’s influence echoes in the title of *A la recherche d’une musique concrète*, published in 1952, and in the last paragraph of “Introduction à la musique concrète”, where Schaeffer explains the dichotomy between concrete music and abstract music in terms of *temps retrouvé* and *temps perdu* (1950b, p. 52). For him, Proust is “un précurseur et un initiateur” (Schaeffer, 1950a, p. 34) who theorises forms of experiencing time that may shed light on changes in perception afforded by sound-recording technologies. His engagement with the celebrated French writer is, however, neither sustained nor prominent, and he refers to Proust’s ideas without ever directly citing his work. It is only in *Traité* that Schaeffer will engage with literature more explicitly, when he resorts to the novel *Homo Faber*, by Max Frisch, to elucidate his language-based theory of listening. The use of Frisch is crucial, insofar as it sheds light on one of the key concepts of Schaeffer’s theory: the function *entendre*. Schaeffer contends that listening is a multi-functional mechanism. Akin to language, which is primarily an instrument of communication, according to functional linguistics<sup>5</sup>, listening corresponds to a circuit of sonic communication stretching from emission to reception (Schaeffer, 1966, p. 113)<sup>6</sup>. This circuit, however, does not comprise a sequence of perceptual stages but a set of autonomous activities proper to listening, each of them bearing specific purposes and modes of intentionality:

Our intention is not to decompose listening into a chronological sequence of events ensuing one from the other as effects follow causes, but, for a methodological purpose, is to describe the objectives corresponding to specific functions of listening. (Ibid., p. 112)

Therefore, before bringing in literature, Schaeffer attends to language as a privileged source of knowledge on sound and listening. He retains four of the fifteen definitions of *entendre* given in *Littré* – the etymological one and those corresponding to the definitions of the verbs *écouter*, *ouïr*, and *comprendre* – as a means of examining the connections between intention and intentional object that underlie our use of hearing-related verbs, that is, that reveal our mechanisms of listening. In this view, Schaeffer’s understanding of listening suggests a theory of language as much as a phenomenological account of listening, and prepares the shift from lived experience to literature.

To show the reader how the functions of listening operate around the shifting concept of *entendre*, Schaeffer carries out a close reading of two episodes of *Homo Faber*, which I quote here so as to give a clearer idea of his method:

Every morning I was woken by a curious noise, half mechanical, half musical, a sound which I couldn’t explain, not loud, but as frenzied as crickets, metallic, monotonous; it must be mechanical in origin, but I couldn’t guess what it was, and later, when we went to breakfast in the village, it was silent, nothing to be seen.

... It was Sunday when we packed... and the queer noise that had woken me every morning turned out to be music, the clatter of an antiquated marimba, hammer taps without resonance, a ghastly kind of music, positively epileptic. It was some festival connected with the full moon. They had practised every morning before going to work in the fields, so that now they could play for dancing, five Indians who struck their instruments with whirling hammers, a kind of wooden xylophone, as long as a table. (Frisch, 1959, pp. 38 & 44)<sup>7</sup>

Schaeffer’s method differs quite radically from more common uses of literature by scholars from other disciplines, which tend to refer to writers’ ideas without closely engaging with the text. In other words, scholars tend to borrow more abstract, general concepts for which the

literary text is only an embodiment. Schaeffer, on the contrary, reads Frisch closely, aligning himself with what Barbara Herrnstein Smith diagnoses as “a persistent feature of Anglo-American literary studies” (2016, p. 57) and Matthew Jockers deems the “primary methodology” of literature (2013, p. 6). To clarify the concept of qualified listening (*écoute qualifiée*), Schaeffer attends not only to the events depicted in the extract by Frisch but also to its “linguistic features and rhetorical operations” (Herrnstein Smith, 2016, p. 57)<sup>8</sup>. In a two-paragraph long analysis of Frisch’s narrative of listening, which represents Schaeffer’s main attempt to assimilate literature into his theory, he shows how a literary text paves the way for theoretical reflexions:

The two descriptions clearly match: frenzy, monotony and hammer taps, rumour and absence of timbre, metallic sound and hammer-blows on a xylophone. From his bed, every morning, and then from outside when he is about to leave, Walter Faber virtually heard [*a ouï*] the same thing.

We would not say the same about what he listened to [*a entendu*]: In the first scene, he heard [*entendait*] a *sound*, whose cause he tried to *work out* [*s’expliquer*]; in the second scene, informed of the causes, he *appreciates* [*apprécie*] a piece of *music*. As a result, what was only “odd” [*curious* in the English translation, and *bizarre* in the *Traité*], becomes “frightful” [ghastly in the English translation, and *effroyable* in the *Traité*]. The “frenzy” that appears in the first scene simply as a descriptive analogy (our hero does not even think about directly attributing it to the crickets) is more powerfully perceived when it is revealed to be the result of a furious instrumental activity, becoming “positively epileptic”. In contrast, the monotonous hammering, which could evoke a piece of machinery, becomes less perceptible. Having managed to *qualify* listening, Walter Faber began to listen out for [*entendre*] and then to understand [*comprendre*] according to a precise signification (Schaeffer, 1966, pp. 109-10)<sup>9</sup>.

For Schaeffer, Frisch’s fictional narrative of listening not only exemplifies qualified listening, but also fully shows listening as a functional mechanism. And even though the four verbs of listening do not feature in the extract, the functions they stand for still govern the verbs used by Frisch. The attention paid by Schaeffer to adjectives and nouns and, subsequently, to verbs, not only corroborates Schaeffer’s ideas that language embodies our mechanisms of perception but also announces an aspect of his theory that will be introduced later in the *Traité*, that that “there is no verb [of listening] without object” (Ibid., p. 148).

Though brief, Schaeffer’s analysis suggests that studies devoted to listening can benefit from literature’s ability to describe auditory behaviour and foreground listening without rejecting, disposing of, or effacing the non-aural dimension of any auditory experience. His enterprise is, however, still very limited, and his use of Frisch’s fiction is decontextualised and unidimensional. He shows how literature illuminates listening without discussing the role of listening and sound in Frisch’s novel or even giving the context from which the narrative of listening is extracted. Schaeffer’s use of literature overlooks the fact that listening, too, can be thought of as a literary category. It fails to indicate, for instance, why literature is more suitable for exemplifying ideas on sound and listening than any example borrowed from everyday life. That is to say that, as used by Schaeffer, literature exemplifies concepts that are not inherently literary, notions that are not specifically tied to Frisch’s fiction. Yet, Schaeffer’s use of literature holds a historical and methodological value, insofar as it points to close reading of literary texts as a fruitful avenue of inquiry into sound and listening.

### Literature, sound, and history (I): figures of sound

Douglas Kahn does not engage in any close reading of any work of fiction in his insightful, groundbreaking essay “Histories of Sound Once Removed”, an introduction to the collective volume *Wireless Imagination* that he edited alongside Gregory Whitehead. He shows, however, how literature keeps and passes on a myriad of forms of looking at and listening to sound. Discussing the challenges faced by those who attempt to understand the historical connotation of sound in the arts (Kahn, 1992, p. 1), Kahn examines artistic expressions associated with sound reproduction technologies in order to propose a way of surpassing the problem that scholarship “on the arts of recorded and broadcasted sound, and of conceptual, literary, and performative sound, is scant at all levels, from basic historical research to theoretical modelings” (Ibid.). He attributes this gap to three major problems: the absence of “artistic practice outside music identified primarily with aurality” (Ibid., p. 2), “the privileging of music as the art of sound in modern Western cultures” (Ibid., p. 3), and the difficulties of “merely thinking about sound within a culture that so readily and pervasively privileges the eye over the ear” (Ibid., p. 4). To tackle this cluster of problems he then devises a twofold method whereby he “will first point to various artistic links to sound recording technologies and then propose a schema of three figures of sound operative in the arts since the late nineteenth century” (Ibid.). It is in relation to this twofold method that literature emerges, surprisingly, as the most varied and comprehensive source of models for pinning down and historicising sound. And this is probably so because literature is the realm of narrative *par excellence*, and one of Kahn’s main concerns is that, “as a historical object, sound cannot furnish a good story” (Ibid., 2).

While for Schaeffer, fictional narratives of listening seem to be a good way of clarifying a complex theory whilst underscoring the proximity between language, theory, and lived experience, for Kahn, literature not only illustrates but also reveals the foundations of the history of sound in the arts. More than a mere support for an inquiry into sound, literature becomes the very object of research. Therefore, a closer look at Kahn’s abundant use of literary examples indicates how literary works take precedence in his analysis, in spite of the multiplicity of artistic forms and currents that engage with sound or the fact that Kahn’s ultimate goal is to write the history of sound in the arts and not just in literature<sup>10</sup>. Stretching from François Rabelais’s *paroles gelées* (*Quart Livre*, chapters LV & LVI) to William Burroughs’s novels and experiments via French symbolism and Russian modernism, references to literature substantiate all of Kahn’s major claims about the relation between sound technologies and figures of sound<sup>11</sup>. His privileging of literature has implications not only at the level of theory but also at the level of practice. The focus on literature’s engagement with sound suggests that literature can be understood as an art form deeply grounded in aurality, which both undermines music’s monopoly over aestheticised sonic experiences and the hegemony of vision in the realm of literature and literary criticism.

It is not only Kahn’s object of study that is literary, but also his figurative method, insofar as it relates to a long-standing and multifarious literary and philosophical tradition that stretches from ancient rhetoric to narratology and structuralism. To write his history of sound, he puts forwards the idea of figure, proposing to attach sound either to *figures of a more abstract character*, such as vibration, inscription, and transmission, or to *figures of a more concrete character*, which are associated with actual and specific technological forms (Kahn, 1992, p. 14). Each of these two lines of inquiry touches upon a particularly interesting aspect of literature’s contribution to thinking about and historicising sound and listening. As regards the figures of concrete character, Kahn interrogates “the familiar figure and functioning of the phonograph, or of any technology for that matter” (Ibid.). Tackling the relation between practical applications and conceptual implications of phonography, his analysis is biased towards the conceptual aspect, insofar as Kahn attends primarily to the fact that literature depicted and accounted for phonography’s future before the device itself could reach maturity. The underlying thesis is that *representation* of newly invented technology often anticipates,

surpasses, and even conditions the *experience* of it. As he puts it:

The ideational mission of the phonograph, in fact, totally outstripped any practical application for decades to come, for its conceptual implications were much more accessible, mobile, and workable than its actual mechanics. (Ibid., p. 5)

In aid of this thesis, Kahn shows how short stories, novels, poems, and manifestoes, ranging from more faithful accounts to far-fetched narratives, account for the ideological construction of phonography. He moreover demonstrates how the figure of phonography anticipated the reality of the phonograph, as, for instance, when he speaks of conceptual and literary sound (Ibid., p. 1), points out the issues of orality and literacy (Ibid., p. 5), talks about the acts of writing and representation related to phonography (Ibid., p. 6), states that authors and artists tended to internalise the attributes of phonography so as to move from representation closer to experience (Ibid., p. 7), discusses onomatopoeia (Ibid., pp. 7 & 8) and verbal imitation of worldly sounds (Ibid., p. 9), alludes to “a new vocal form of sound synthesis” (Ibid., 11), and analyses William Burroughs’s “technical difficulties while moving from metaphor to artistic technology” (Ibid., p. 13). Because representation often outdoes experience, literature outdoes not only the actual phonograph but also the desired idea of phonography. More than simply representing the auditory dimension of reality, literature begets new aural dimensions that would not be experienceable without it. Therefore, as regards sound and listening, it not only portrays but creates.

The abstract equivalent of the concrete figure of phonography is the figure of inscription, which is “associated with the phonograph of the late nineteenth century and the phonograph not too long before it” (Kahn, 1992, p. 17). Inscription refers to a “phonographic collapse of speech and writing into visible speech and vociferous graphemes” (Ibid., p. 18), which indicates that “sound was finally brought into the visualist and scriptural logic of Western culture” (Ibid.). It, moreover, relates to the question of human agency (or the absence thereof) for “inscribed sound [...] meant something distant from the conceit of nothing-but-consciousness, from the necessity of human agency and metaphysical presence” (Ibid.). This visualist, scriptural, and human-agency free class of figure not only relates to literature for the reasons discussed so far, but also because, for Kahn, it is best embodied in the work of two writers: Raymond Roussel, for whom “sound is written on the *surface* of objects”, and William Burroughs, for whom “writing occurs submerged within a secretive *interior* [...], or in a way not easily readable” (Ibid., p. 19). It is not only through ideas of writing, but also through writing itself that sound takes on form and meaning, be it the concrete form of recorded sound, afforded by phonography, or the abstract attributes of phonography represented, enacted, and explored in the literary realm.

While Schaeffer’s use of literature, as we have seen, touches upon the specifics of the relations between fiction and scientific accounts of listening and sound, Kahn’s analysis tackles the unending interchange between actuality and representation, concepts and materiality, and refers the debate back to some of the overarching dichotomies that ceaselessly haunt sound studies. Clustered as figures, localised literary forms enable Kahn not only to historicise the use of sound by a range of art forms but also to link apparently irreconcilable dimensions, such as literacy and orality, vision and listening, direct and indirect perception, concrete and abstract categories of sound.

### **Literature, sound, and history (II): literary soundscapes**

The turn of the century witnessed a sudden and enlightening interest in the historical soundscapes of England. In 1999 appeared the innovative *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* by Bruce R. Smith. In the following year, Emily Cockayne received her PhD for a thesis entitled “A Cultural History of Sound in England 1560-1760”. Three years later, John M.

Picker published *Victorian Soundscapes*. Linking all of these readings is not only England or the notion of soundscape, but also the conception of literature as a historical document capable of providing evidence of the ways in which spaces sounded in the past. Their main difference is, however, the object on which each author lays emphasis. Smith aims primarily to reconstruct the acoustic reality of performances and spaces in the past. Cockayne focuses mainly on the specifics and meanings of a repertory of sounds that filled up historical spaces over two centuries. Picker emphasises neither the space, properly speaking, nor the sound, but the accounts and forms of representation that brought together space and sound in the Victorian period. As he seems to suggest, a soundscape is less a category of space or a set of acoustic features and more the interplay between the “figurative and literal manifestations of sound” (Picker, 2003, p. 12) and its material consequences in the lives of people. By displacing the focus to a range of accounts of sound (i.e. scientific, fictional, religious) that modelled people’s use of space as well as writing techniques, Picker not only introduces the soundscape as primarily a literary category and an aural condition for writing, but also discredits an anachronistic concern raised by Steven Connor in a lecture given in Cambridge, on 10 July 2015, where the latter categorically asserts that the soundscape “is probably the most important carrier of the idea of the pure and autonomous order of sound” (2015, p. 6)<sup>12</sup>. As conceptualised by Picker, the soundscape is everything but an example of sound’s autonomy. Rather, it is an example of sound’s ubiquitous presence and pervasiveness as well as its sway over the creative and subjective processes of artists and scientists.

Picker’s book advances the methodological use of literature to thinking questions of sound and listening, insofar as it combines a few close readings of literary texts with an array of all sorts of texts and even illustrations in order to interpret, especially in the two last chapters, those figurative and literal manifestations of sound. In more general terms, it investigates how Victorian writers responded to changes in the status of sound during the reign of Queen Victoria and in listening, summarised as a “cultural shift toward close listening” (Picker, 2003, p. 8). According to Picker, “Victorians in their scientific and technological discoveries and literary innovations went a long way toward dispelling, or at least redefining, the mysteries of hearing and sound” (Ibid., p. 10). Their literary innovations and narratives of listening and sound were thus entwined with an epistemological, aural turn whereby “what Romantics had conceived of as a *sublime* experience” was transformed “into a quantifiable and marketable *object* or *thing*, a sonic commodity, in the form of a printed work, a performance, or, ultimately, an audio recording” (Ibid.). In order to analyse the stages by which this transformation took place and the close relation established between literature and sound, as both aesthetic concept and urban sign, Picker delves into Victorian soundscapes and tells the stories “of figures at once attentive and investigative, those who both contributed to and, consciously or not, hoped to control, even to dominate, their acoustic worlds” (Ibid., p. 14). Biographical and historical narratives illuminate fiction as much as fictional narratives offer a way into biographies and history. For Picker, a soundscape resides precisely in the overlapping between these varied narrative forms, being neither here nor there, but hither and yon. Picker, therefore, argues for a non-unifying conception of the soundscape in Victorian times – as his use of the plural form of *acoustic world* indicates. Ultimately, he desires to move the concept of the soundscape “away from a monolithic conception of a singular soundscape toward an analysis of the experiences of particular individuals listening under specific cultural influences and with discernible motivations” (Ibid.). In Picker’s study, the soundscape designates a set of ideas about sound and of sonic experiences lived by an individual or shared by a group of individuals which come to be associated with a space and a time by virtue of a narrative. Since a soundscape does not represent the acoustic world in its fullness anymore but only one perspective of this world, soundscapes can be manifold, overlapping, harmonious, or contradicting – simultaneous, but not necessarily contemporary. And because what constitutes a soundscape for Picker is not simply the sound itself but a set of experiences organised in relation to sound according to a narrative, literature emerges as a privileged territory of inquiry.

Picker's analyses are chiefly comparative. He repeatedly confronts literary texts with more theoretically orientated texts, such as Charles Babbage's *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment* (1837) or Hermann von Helmholtz *Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen* (1863) – whose third edition was translated into English by the mathematician and philologist Alexander J. Ellis as *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (1975). It is in relation to Helmholtz's *Sensations of Tone*, for instance, that Picker reads George Eliot's last completed novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a parallel he justifies as due to the fact that "Helmholtz's new understanding of the physiology of hearing sympathetically resonated not only in Eliot's fictional project, especially the strained silences and stifled speech of *Daniel Deronda*, but also in the technological and psychological discoveries that occurred alongside it" (Picker, 2003, p. 12). Helmholtz's and Eliot's ideas, therefore, resonate not only with each other but also with their time – and it may not be a coincidence that *Daniel Deronda* is Eliot's only novel to be set in the contemporary Victorian society of her day. The convergence of ideas and practices related to sound is theorised by Picker in a manner analogous to Kahn. He introduces what can be considered a figure of sound, the figure of sympathetic vibration (which can be located somewhere in between Kahn's figures of vibration and transmission). In doing so, he brings together Helmholtz's theories and Eliot's fictional project, devising an analytical category that allows him to tackle the much more diffuse and indeterminate form that narratives of listening assume in Eliot's literature. In her novels, sound and listening do more than characterise specific moments or scenes. They saturate the narrator's language and imagery informing a "language of sound" (Ibid., p. 89).

Aurality is explored in *Daniel Deronda* mainly through the figure of sympathetic vibration, which according to Picker, is rephrased by Eliot as "separateness with communication" (Ibid., p. 99). "With the idea of 'separateness with communication'", Picker explains, "Eliot very nearly captures the essence of *Deronda* in a single phrase, one that evokes the tenuous balance between self and other, individual and community, and home and world, that so often is the goal of her fictional project" (Ibid.). This idea also offers a way to think about the telephone, invented at the same time:

The idea of "separateness with communication" can be considered an acoustic process, a distillation of the essence of sympathetic vibration. And such a Helmholtzian echo in the theme of this, Eliot's grand finale in fiction, was at the same time sounding in the telephone, the mechanism that made aurally possible the psychological and nationalist condition *Deronda* espoused. (Ibid.)

Patented in the same year *Deronda* came out, the telephone represents the technological embodiment of "separateness with communication" and, despite being actually absent from Eliot's literature, it partakes of the same ideational ground of her fiction. As Picker puts it:

There are, of course, no telephones in *Deronda*, set as it is in the 1860s, a decade before its period of composition. But it is a novel that, like Eliot, dreams of the possibilities for "telephonic converse"; a book about which its author well might have said with Bell in 1875, "I feel that I am on the verge of a great discovery". (Ibid., p. 104)

It is this particular converge of contemporary authors, ideas, and devices that engender what Picker understands by the soundscape. Something that, ultimately, is more abstract and discursive than sensorily experienceable. And it is precisely his attempt to revitalise the notion of the soundscape that reveals that the gap between sound and literature is, perhaps, narrower than we might otherwise believe: the soundscape being a literary category as much as it is a key concept of studies devoted to sound.



### From literature to sound studies

In 2014 Brian Kane published *Sound Unseen*: “a book written to develop a theory of acousmatic listening as a historical and cultural practice, one with clearly defined characteristics” (2014, p. 7). The notion of acousmatic is indelibly associated with Schaeffer, whose work offers the counterpoint to Kane’s ideas, and is also targeted by Connor in his decrying of what he calls *acousmania*, that is, an “exorbitance within sound studies” (2015, p. 3) that takes place “whenever a) it asserts the possibility of identifying or experiencing sound in a raw or pure condition and b) when it affirms some particular value in such a condition” (Ibid., p. 7). According to Connor, “acousmania [...] is often twinned with, and perhaps often depends on what has been called the idea of the acousmatic” (Ibid.). As Kane explores it, however, the concept of the acousmatic is far from exhibiting the symptoms of acousmania, not least because the core of his inquiry lies not in any purely aural dimension, but in a fictional portrayal of a creature whose obsessive attention to sound is localised and contingent. The key argument of his book is introduced in the fifth chapter, in which Kane devises “an alternative theory of acousmatic sound by way of a close reading of Kafka’s tale ‘The Burrow’” (2014, p. 11). The chapter “attempts to rethink the terms of acousmatic sound apart from the ontology of the sound object” (Ibid.), to which end it steers the analysis away from philosophies of listening to fictional narratives of listening. Literature does not feel the need to resolve problems, thus enjoying more freedom in raising questions and exploring unsettling issues.

Kafka’s story “The Burrow” was written in the winter of 1923-24, published in *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*, and reprinted in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. It depicts a burrowing creature who has just completed the construction of its den, which comprises an elaborate system of tunnels and round cells. Not quite in the centre of the burrow lies the chief cell, the Castle Keep, as the creature names it. The main feature of the burrow was its stillness, which was only really perturbed by the noise with which the creature occupies itself in the second half of the story. “The most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness” (Kafka, 2005, p. 351), which is indicated by an omnipresent silence whose disruption has to be readily counteracted: “For hours I can stroll through my passages and hear nothing except the rustling of some little creature, which I immediately reduce to silence between my jaws, or the pattering of soil” (Ibid.). Silence is, for the creature-narrator, the sign of security and a reassuring reply:

What if my foes should be assembling even now up above there and their muzzles be preparing to break through the moss? And with its silence and emptiness the burrow answers me, confirming my words. (Ibid., p. 368)

However, whenever the silent atmosphere of the den is spoilt by a sound, insecurity and uncertainty take hold of the creature. These feelings reach a critical level when suddenly a prolonged unseen sound is ubiquitously heard without its source being identified. Not even the creature’s fine hearing, which sharply attends to the quality of the sound, succeeds in explaining the origin of this sound. The cause of the noise will remain unknown: “But whether trifling or important, I can find nothing, no matter how hard I search, or it may be that I find too much” (Kafka, 2005, p. 370).

The episode shows how an ordinary encounter with an acousmatic sound can amount to an excruciating experience of listening filled with paranoid confabulation and poisoned by an anxiety, which is not only caused by a sound but ontologically aural itself. It is Kafka’s depiction of acousmatic listening as characterised by insecurity and uncertainty, therefore, that leads Kane to conceptualise acousmatic sound as a source of anxiety *par excellence*, an anxiety that, “inherent in acousmatic sound” (2014, p. 159), is caused by insecurity and indeterminacy rather than lack of visual references. Based on Kafka, Kane will re-evaluate the concept of the

acousmatic and assert that “acousmatic sound is unsettling because it depends on a structural spacing of sonic source, cause, and effect that is fundamentally insecure” (Ibid., pp. 157 & 159). Having brought the problem of insecurity and uncertainty to the core of his theory of the acousmatic, Kane draws to a close his reading of Kafka by comparing his account of acousmatic listening to the two conventional, philosophical approaches to acousmatic listening:

On the one hand, there is the drive to secure certainty by discovering the material source of acousmatic sound, by lifting the mythical Pythagorean veil and seeing the source in all of its nakedness. On the other hand, there is the drive to secure certainty by bracketing everything that is inessential to encounter the sound object in all of its absolute and essential detachment. (Ibid., p. 159)

Deemed reductive, these approaches’ aim is to dispel the epistemological uncertainty that characterises acousmatic listening, yet their only contribution is to theorise away the problematics of acousmatic sound. In contrast, Kafka, due to his predilection for unresolved tensions, engages with the problematics posed by the acousmatic, “choos[ing] neither of these routes, [thus] maintaining the anxiety inherent in [the] acousmatic” (Ibid.). Kafka’s adamant indecision unveils that an acousmatic sound, to be acousmatic, has to remain perpetually veiled. The veil is the source of anxiety and the inescapably ontological condition of an acousmatic sound. By fictionalising the acousmatic, Kafka contributes to its radical reconceptualisation.

Ultimately, Kane uses Kafka to show how it is possible to bracket out the inherent differences regarding philosophical and literary forms of inquiry. He thus questions why we should give more credence to Hans Jonas, Erwin Stein, or Pierre Schaeffer than to Kafka when it comes to thinking about acousmatic sound. “Why should the philosopher be a more insightful, more systematic researcher than the novelist?”, he asks (Ibid., p. 161). His challenging of the epistemological status of literature allows it to be thought of as something more than mere illustration or historical document, but as theory and history itself. Although Kane’s chapter on Kafka goes beyond Kafka’s fiction, incorporating historical and philosophical ideas of acousmatic listening, literature remains the ground upon which the innovative reading of acousmatic listening is constructed. And even the examples drawn from other art forms, such as music and film, and disciplines, such as sound studies and philosophy, primarily provide a field where Kafka’s notion of the acousmatic can be tested. Literature thus becomes an autonomous source of ideas on sound and listening, a field where theories are tested as well as a source of theories to be applied elsewhere.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to lay the foundations for a thorough account of the crossovers between literature and sound studies. The use of literary texts in studies devoted to sound has served several purposes over the years: from a mere source of examples, to an object of theorisation and historical evidence, to a basis for autonomous and accomplished theories.

In the first section, a brief analysis of Schaeffer’s anticipatory and archetypal use of an excerpt from Frisch’s *Homo Faber* to elucidate one of his functions of listening showed how Schaeffer sees language and literature as the arena where listening and ideas of sound are not only represented but dramatised. They are, moreover, understood as a means through which aurality is actually experienced. His focus on hearing-related verbs indicates that our use of language is evidence of the way listening and sound works; literature, by extension, emerges as a privileged laboratory where hypotheses regarding auditory categories can be tested.

In the second section, a reading of an essay by Kahn suggests how literature can theorise, materialise, and shape auditory experiences. It offers solutions for problems regarding sound’s elusiveness whilst returning the debate to the broad categories that underpin sound studies as a

field, such as orality and literacy, vision and listening, direct and indirect sound, and figures that are either concrete or abstract in character. These figures, in particular, as Kahn asserts at the very end of his article, amount to a method “to cohere a wide range of scattered events and ideas” (1992, p. 26), a method that is not only derived from the Western literary tradition, but which also finds in literature its most accomplished form of expression. The cohesion sound historians are seeking “need not be a narrative one”, as he notes (Ibid.). And yet, his reading is indeed inherently narrative, insofar as each figure comprises a set of micro-narratives, themselves springing from major narratives, whether historical, theoretical, or philosophical narratives, or simply the plot of a novel, of a short story, or the ideas voiced through a manifesto or populating a piece of literary criticism.

If by tracing figuratively the ephemeral life of this fleeting and scattered *entity* that is sound Kahn brings literature – the realm of representation, figurative expression, and narrative – to the fore of an inquiry into sound, listening, and aurality, Picker does not bring literature to the fore of a quest for sound so much as he brings sound and listening into the world of narrative and literature. In doing so he reveals how soundscapes tell stories as much as stories unveil past, forgotten, or unknown soundscapes. Historical soundscapes become less a reconstruction of past aural spaces than forms of rereading, rewriting, and retelling the past.

Finally, the fourth section examines Kane’s close reading of Kafka’s “The Burrow” to show how literature engenders its own productive, informative, and thought-provoking accounts of sound and listening. It not only offers a solution to problems of sound and listening, but also presents puzzles to be solved. What Kane’s reading of Kafka reveals is that while key theoretical categories related to sound and listening seem to be *always already* given – such as the dichotomies listed above –, literature, in dislocating the reader’s attention from sound and listening to other subjects at the very moment it speaks of sound and listening, invites the reader to reassess what they know about what they read, to rethink in novel terms auditory experiences and aural-related concepts that seem far too common or familiar. As regards research methodology, literature can be thought of, therefore, as the written equivalent of sound, as accounted for by Kahn:

“sound”, rather than being a destination, has been a potent and necessary means for accessing and understanding the world; in effect, it leads away from itself. A very nebulous notion of methodology, but also something that kicks in before methodology. (Kahn cited in Sterne, 2012: 6)

In the case of Kafka’s acousmatic, for instance, the structural insecurity, or epistemological uncertainty, that characterises acousmatic listening for Kane is insightfully and uncannily dramatised with a poetic eloquence that offers unexpected ideas on listening. It moreover sets in motion a ceaseless conceptual logomachy, which is in embryo the ruin of the very ideas it inspires – literature transforms thoughts into thinking. Paraphrasing Kahn, literature may be, as well as sound, a nebulous notion of methodology, but also something that kicks in before methodology.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> My understanding of the field is indebted to Jonathan Sterne's idea that '*Sound studies* is a name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival' (2012, p. 2). I would like to narrow down this definition so as to point out that sound studies is not only inherently grounded in the human sciences but is inescapably at odds with 'music's dominance' (Kahn, 1990, p. 67). For a short and enlightening commentary on the contentious and complex relation between sound studies and music, see the introduction to *Keywords in Sound* (Novak and Sakakeeny, 2015, pp. 5-6).

<sup>2</sup> The reference to Marshall McLuhan's idea of Gutenberg galaxy here aims to stress the tension between literacy and orality that lies at the very origin of sound technologies. For further discussion on literacy and orality, see McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, and Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* and 'The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality'.

<sup>3</sup> The phonograph, particularly, plays a very unique role in the problematics of orality and literacy, since, as Sterne writes, Scott's invention 'would smash the distinction between orality and literacy because sound could literally write itself – hearing and speaking would become equivalent to reading and writing' (2003, p. 45).

<sup>4</sup> This text is a version of a homonymous lecture given on 3 December 1949 published by the Centre d'Études Radiophoniques on 6 January 1950. Revised and expanded, this conference was republished in 1970 under the title 'Pouvoirs de l'instrument', in the first volume of *Machines à communiquer*.

<sup>5</sup> Functional linguistics is referenced throughout the *Traité* (see Chion, 1983, p. 179). Central to the notion of functions of listening is André Martinet's *Éléments de linguistique générale*. When discussing language as an instrumental function, Martinet notes that 'the designation of a given language as an instrument or tool focuses attention on what distinguishes language from many other institutions. The essential function of this instrument, if we regard any given language as such, is communication' (1964, p. 18).

<sup>6</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>7</sup> Here I give Michael Bullock's translation to the same passages quoted by Schaeffer.

<sup>8</sup> By *qualified listening*, Schaeffer understands a mode of listening 'whose diversity therefore stems from an essential law of perception which is that of proceeding by way of a series of ensuing "sketches", without ever exhausting the object, to the multiplicity of our knowledge and previous experiences (according to which the object presents itself immediately imbued with different meanings and significations), to the variety of our intentions of listening' (Schaeffer, 1966, p. 109).

<sup>9</sup> Bullock's translation into English and Schaeffer's analysis, based on an unidentified French translation, are slightly incompatible. For instance, Schaeffer's French translation gives 'martèlement sans timbre' in lieu of 'hammer taps without resonance', and 'rumeur' instead of 'sound'.

<sup>10</sup> See Douglas Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*.

<sup>11</sup> Among Kahn's literary references are Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* (1886), Marcel Schwob's 'La Machine à parler', from *Le Roi au masque d'or* (1892), Alfred Jarry's 'Phonographe', from *Les Minutes de sables memorial* (1894), Maurice Renard's 'La Mort et le coquillage' (1907), Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914), Velimir Khlebnikov's 'Ka' (1915), Guillaume Apollinaire's 'Le Roi-Lune', from *Le Poète assassiné* (1916), and André Breton's 'Ode à Charles Fourier' (1947).

<sup>12</sup> For a more productive yet still reductive critique of the significance of soundscape as a response to the hegemony of vision, see Tom Ingold's 'Worlds of Sense and Sensing the World' (2011, p. 316).

**Biography**

Igor Reyner is a graduate of King's College London, where he obtained his PhD in French Literature, under the supervision of Professor Patrick Ffrench. His thesis, "Listening in Proust", investigates how sound descriptions, metaphors, and listening practices circulate within an economy of the aural in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In 2010, he completed a B.A. degree in Music at Federal University of Minas Gerais (Brazil), where he also gained in 2012 an M.A. degree in Music with an emphasis on Sound Studies, under the supervision of Dr Carlos Palombini.