УДК 82-312.9
ББК 83.3(О)

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NERVOUS SOUNDS: AUDITIVE ASPECTS IN AMERICAN CITY TEXTS

НЕРВИРУЮЩИЕ ЗВУКИ: АУДИАЛЬНЫЙ АСПЕКТ АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ ГОРОДСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

В статье внимание уделяется в первую очередь историческому периоду модернизма и специфике изображения звуков города в американской литературе. Основные рассматриваемые вопросы: Какова история передачи звуков в литературе США? Какие функции выполняет передача звуков в городских романах и пьесах, написанных на рубеже XIX–XX вв.?

Ключевые слова: *звуки города, звуковая картина, аудиальный аспект восприятия, городская литература, американская литература, модернизм, романтизм, «другой», вытесненный смысл, субъект повествования, социальная дискриминация.*

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This article presents some results of my current research on immersive spaces in different media.[1] Whereas cultural studies have mostly been interested in the iconic, pictorial, or visual turn, I deal with acoustic phenomena. I approach the topic of sound by way of soundscape studies or acoustic studies, a relatively recent field which originated in Great Britain as early as in the late 1960ies, was influenced by Canadian scholars, and is only now becoming increasingly important for different fields of study.

In 1977, R. Murray Schafer, famous Canadian composer, writer, and music educator, created the term ‘soundscape’ in his monograph *The Tuning of the World* in order to explore the aural aspects of space in its historical and cultural specificity:

The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape. [...] A soundscape consists of events heard not objects seen. Beyond aural perception is the notation and photography of sound, which, being silent, presents certain problems [...]. [Schafer 1977: 7]

Schafer divides acoustic phenomena into four distinct fields of study, “according to their physical characteristics (acoustics), or the way in which they are perceived (psychoacoustics); according to their function and meaning (semiotics and semantics); or according to their emotional or affective qualities

(aesthetics)." [Schafer 1977: 133] For this article, the function and the affective qualities of sounds are of interest.

According to Schafer, the acoustic scholar should ask: "what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change?" [Schafer 1977: 3f.] Schafer thinks of the world as a macroeconomic musical composition and assumes that the acoustic world is constantly transforming. People are repositioning themselves within their changing soundscapes. Mostly neglected by literary, cultural, and media studies, the acoustic scholar investigates soundscapes, searching for traces of cultural change.

In the title of his 1984 monograph, Acoustic *Communication*, the Canadian Barry Truax calls attention to the overall "acoustic environment" as a field of acoustic communication, of sound exchange, of conscious and unconscious listening (xvii-xviii). In his book, Truax analyzes not only the human voice and music, but also noise as an important means of communication. For him, acoustic communication changes along with people and with sound technologies. He registers the changes in acoustic communication since the arrival of electroacoustic media and of the acoustic community as market: "The impact of electronic technology on sound (what we will call 'electro-acoustic' technology) has a profound effect on communication because, among other things, it can take a sound out of its original context and put it into another." [Truax 2001: xviii] Contexts are essential for the meaning of sounds; they help us decide whether sounds are to be called voice, noise, or music.

It is important to stress that a soundscape is not simply to be found 'out there' in the world. When describing the "World Soundscape Project" founded by Murray R. Schafer, the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada describes the specifically Canadian interest in soundscapes and insists:

> 'Soundscape' like landscape, is not an ontolocically existent reality outside of human perception. Instead, "the term indicates how the environment is understood by those living within it. Indeed, the individual listener within a soundscape is part of a dynamic system of information exchange" (Truax, *Acoustic Communication*). Thus soundscape ideology recognizes that, when humans enter an environment, they have an immediate effect on the sounds; the soundscape is human-made and, in that sense, composed. Soundscape is the acoustic manifestation of place, where the sounds give the inhabitants a 'sense of place' and the place's acoustic quality is shaped by the inhabitants' activities and behaviour. The meaning of place and its sounds are created precisely because of this interaction between soundscape and people. Thus, the sonic environment (or soundscape), which is the sum total of all sounds within a defined area, is an intimate reflection of the social, technological, and natural conditions of the

> area. Change in these conditions means change in the sonic environment. [Kallmann, Potvin, and Winters 1992: 1424]

Sound – everything that has to do with listening and hearing – is at the moment becoming increasingly important as a means of completely immersing audiences in blockbuster films or enveloping players in computer games[1]. This development is of special interest to Canadian scholars who have a tradition of demonstrating that soundscapes are socially relevant. They point out that contemporary immersive strategies have a history which goes back far into the nineteenth century and to the print media. During my short essay, l want to look at some written examples of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American texts which build city soundscapes.

So far, there exists no "coherent tradition of audio art" [Kahn and Whitehead 1992: ix], practice, history, or theory. Generally one can distinguish different aspects of the aural: music, spoken language, and noise. The boundaries between these categories become extremely instable toward the end of the nineteenth century. Sounds may count as music for some, or be interpreted as language by others, whereas still others may consider them noise. Accordingly, recent Canadian scholars like John Shepherd and Peter *Wicke in Music and Cultural Theory* stress that sound has to be considered an "inherently social process" and cultural phenomenon. [Shepherd and Wicke 1997: 95].

In *The Noises of American Literature*, Philipp Schweighauser writes about Dos Passos' soundscapes:

> His depictions of urban and industrial acoustic environments belong to a tradition of technology critique that can be traced back to writings on technology by Karl Marx, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, and Martin Heidegger and that surfaces in the literary works of, among others, Henry David Thoreau, Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry Adams, Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck, and Don DeLillo [...]. [Schweighauser 2006: 5]

Schweighauser argues that Dos Passos' soundscape does not only criticize technological change; additionally, it helps to illustrate and criticize social hierarchies. In the soundscape, technological and social changes make themselves heard.

But if acoustic scholars agree that as beings and as readers we are guided not only by our visual sense of orientation, but also by aural information, why has the war for attention between vision and sound been decided in favor of vision? What is so unsettling about sound, or, more specifically, about the relationship between visual and aural aspects of the body and space?[2]

In my opinion, the reasons for this can be seen in modernist urban texts. In these texts, changes that threaten the individual may at times become invisible, but they return as part of the soundscape – and they return with a vengeance, as the uncanny. As Samuel Weber reminds us in his article "The

Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," the uncanny signals a crisis of perception. Crises of perception have to be repressed in order to stabilize the subject position from which we see, hear, and speak. In Weber's words, the "desire to [...] conserve the integrity of perception: perceiver and perceived, the wholeness of the body, the power of vision [...] implies a *denial (Verneinung* is the Freudian term) of that almost-nothing which can hardly be seen [...]" [Weber 1973: 1132f.] '[T]hat almost-nothing which can hardly be seen,' the uncanny, often becomes, as I want to point out, part of the soundscape.

Therefore, I want to introduce the following hypothesis: There is more to learn about modernist crises of perception when including aural phenomena in literary and cultural analysis. I consider the aural in modernist literature as the sense of the repressed. In the soundscape the repressed returns, betraying the subject's insecurity which often stays carefully hidden from view. My article is divided into three parts: I will start out writing about the auditive as the repressed sense of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then I will concentrate on exemplary readings of city sounds, and I will finish with an example of the return of the repressed.

1. The Auditive as the Repressed Sense of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Both Freud and to a greater extent Lacan[3] define the self as a visual construct. Walter Benjamin (1974) considers the *flâneur's* exploration of cities an adventure of the eye. Michel Foucault (1975/1976) describes the nineteenth century as a century of vision, the surveillance and penetration of bodies as an achievement of optical technologies. Accordingly, scopic regimes dominate different fields connected to cultural studies like gender and African-American approaches, or film and urban studies[4]. Following these approaches, recent research on modernist texts and specifically on the city novel have turned to the role of vision for constructions of space[5]. But James Lastra (2000) tells another story in his book *Sound Technology*: according to Lastra, the aesthetics of vision had to compete with an aesthetics of sound as early as in US-American literary Romanticism.

Lastra analyzes Edgar Allan Poe's "Man of the Crowd" (1850/1902) and argues that the narrator's optical obsession, which has always been the focus of literary critics, is underlined by an aural murmur. While the narrator is obsessed by visually deciphering the man of the crowd, indistinguishable sounds keep creeping up, making the cityscape even more motley and mysterious:

> [...] the city's voices creep in again and again, [Lastra writes and then quotes Poe] in the gambler's "guarded lowness of tone in conversation," the "inarticulate drunkards," the organ-grinders, the "ballad mongers," and in the "ragged artizans and exhausted laborers of every description [...] all full of a noisy and inordinate vivacity which charred discordantly upon the ear [...]" [Lastra and Poe cited in Lastra 2000: 3]

Poe's narrator confronts speech deteriorating into sound, losing its function as a means of communication, and ultimately falling silent. He keeps searching for counterstrategies against his impending loss of interpretive mastery within the visual realm, neglecting sound altogether. Similarly, readers have been voyeuristically concentrating on the optical attractions of the city and its inhabitants, oblivious to urban sounds and noises which have become ever louder, illegible, more disturbing.

Earlier US-American texts already hint at the power of sound to disturb the rational equilibrium of the senses. In 1798, the protagonist of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland, or, The Transformation*, is driven to madness and murder by a ventriloquist, by a mysterious voice without a body, a voice which Wieland takes to be divine. The introductory poem, one of the 'pretexts' of the book, warns the reader of "[t]he double-tongued." Voices without substance endanger the citizens of the Early Republic, citizens who have to rely on their fellow subjects' truthfulness, rationality, and sanity. When evaluating others, American citizens have to be able to trust their senses.

Forty-five years later, in 1843, Edgar Allan Poe makes a "Tell-Tale Heart" the title and protagonist of a tale. Here the narrator who killed an old man can no longer trust his own senses and he loses control over his reality and over himself. In his ears, the heart of his victim keeps beating: "It was *a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*." [1843/1902: 177] The mechanical, incessant, inhuman ticking proves to be stronger than the narrator's attempt at denying the murder and finally makes him confess his evil deed.

Some years later, the rural workplace of Herman Melville's "Tartarus of Maids" (1855) is invaded by the industrial noise of a phallic machine that gags the maids who work there:

> In one corner stood some huge frame of ponderous iron, with a vertical thing like a piston periodically rising and falling upon a heavy wooden block. Before it – its tame minister – stood a tall girl, feeding the iron animal with half-quires of rose-hued note paper [...]. Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, steady, overruling hum of the iron animals. The human voice was banished from the spot. Machinery – that vaunted slave of humanity – here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels. [Melville 1855/1987: 328]

Here the sounds encrouch not only on the maids, but also on the narrator who is being pounded into awe and sympathy with the girls. Despite his position as a man and as an entrepreneur, he feels pity with these working women who are being exploited by 'masculine' machines which stand for sterile 'masculine' capitalism.

The dark texts of American Romanticism keep pointing to the uncanny power of sound: on the one hand, sounds can be made to exist independently of their source, independently of bodies, subjects, and machines; they are potentially sourceless, masterless, and bodiless like ghosts. On the other hand, like ghosts, they have the power to enter our bodies against our will. Hearing functions involuntarily, and sounds can intrude upon the body even when we do not want them to. Both aspects undermine the potentially self-reliant, powerful subject as early as in the literature of the Early Republic.

Later in the nineteenth century, aural technologies literally split the voice from the body and enable Thomas Edison to speculate on the future of the phonograph. He envisions, in Douglas Kahn's words, the "machined fusion" of orality and inscription [Kahn 1992: 5] and hopes to bring sound under "the visualist and scriptural logic of Western culture," a logic which is dominated by images of visual mastery and surveillance. [Kahn 1992: 18] Even so, the danger of a loss of aural control stays virulent.

Aural inventions which try to master the potential loss of control over sounds go back into the nineteenth century when they were introduced at world expositions. Entertainment sections presented audiovisual attractions, the 1900 "Exposition universelle" in Paris for example several virtual spaces (cf. Wörner 2000: 229). Here, technologies took advantage of the invasive quality of sound. One kinetic panorama including sound was the "Transsiberian Railroad," another the "Grand Globe céleste" where spherical organ sounds composed by Camille Saint-Saëns made the corporeal experience more immersive than visual effects could have done.

The third audiovisual attraction was the Maréorama, a reproduction of a ship's deck which held up to 500 passengers and which simulated not only the movement, but also visual and auditive elements. A 'traveler' describes the Maréorama's immersive appeal:

> The boat's whistle blows, commands are shouted, the engine rumbles. [... A] queer feeling seizes my stomach and immensely heightens the illusion of a sea-voyage. For one Franc, people with a sensitive disposition can experience every stage of seasickness. [Cited in Wörner 2000: 229, my translation]

At the same time as the markets for immersive multimedial environments, but also for the phonograph, the telephone, the grammophone, the radio, popular dance, and musical styles expanded, auditive aspects were excluded almost altogether from theoretical consideration. For the benefit of the visual, the aural became "modernity's repressed sense," as Lastra puts it (2000: 3). This cannot be attributed to a lack of artistic practices; Kahn for example stresses the fact that "few arts [...] are mute [... Yet] there was no artistic practice outside music identified primarily with aurality." [Kahn 1992: 1f.]

Throughout the nineteenth century, sounds became increasingly important in print texts and other cultural practices. At the same time, image and

sound, body and voice, vision and hearing began to fall apart – in fiction as well as in visual and aural technologies which continued to be developed unsimultaneously. The scopic regime took the lead in at least temporarily taming the loss of control over vision by ever new artistic and technological practices. Sound and voice continued to haunt the visual as its untamed other. Near the end of the century, auditive technologies became popular which could temporarily bridge the gap between the visual and the aural by synchronizing pictures with concomitant sounds. This gap and its continuous closure or *suture* became one of the central concerns of the early twentieth century, as I want to discuss in the second part of my article.

2. Reading City Sounds

City literature around the turn of the century confronted its protagonists with many disorienting sensual experiences. At the same time, it worked at solutions to this disorientation. When Henry James returned to America in 1904 after many years in Europe, he recorded his impressions in a series of essays. As Hana Wirth-Nesher explains,

> [...] it was the auditory dimension of the city that left the most profound impression on him. Most shocking to James was what he heard, the garble of foreign tongues, the invasion of this other language [...] that was sure to leave a mark on James's only permanent homeland, the English language. He describes this invasion of another language in terms of a torture chamber [...] [Wirth-Nesher 1996: 136]

Henry James writes in *The American Scene:*

> [T]he East side cafes [...] showed to my inner sense, beneath their bedizenment, as torture-rooms of the living idiom; the piteous gasp of which at the portent of lacerations to come could reach me in any drop of the surrounding Accent of the Future. The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become [...] the very music of humanity [...]; but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English – in any sense for which there is an existing literary measure. [James 1907/1968: 139]

Henry James notices a break between the decked-out *look* of the East side cafes and the *voices* he hears there, voices which he cannot understand, at best he can listen to them as music. The multicultural mix of languages is as undistinguishable and foreign to him as this immigrant part of the city.

In 1893, Stephen Crane had already published a naturalist text, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*. Maggie's poor Irish immigrant family grows up in the Bowery. The story demonstrates both the dangers of immigrant degradation and its aesthetic antidote in auditive terms. When we are introduced to a group of local boys fighting, they are "swearing in barbaric trebles" [Crane

1893/1993: 1]. But even in times of peace, "there were notes of joy like songs of triumphant savagery" "[i]n the yells of the whirling mob of Devil's Row children." [Crane 1893/1993: 2]

As we approach a tenement house, we hear women scream "in frantic quarrels" [Crane 1893/1993: 4]. The members of Maggie's family are constantly shouting, crying, and fighting as can be heard in the following scene when the mother 'welcomes' her son Jimmie after one of his fights:

> 'Eh, what? Been fightin' agin', by Gawd!' She threw herself upon Jimmie. The urchin tried to dart behind the others and in the scuffle the babe, Tommie, was knocked down. He protested with his usual vehemence, because they had bruised his tender shins against a table leg. The mother's massive shoulders heaved with anger. Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder she shook him until he rattled. [...] The father [...] turned about and bellowed at his wife: 'Let the damn kid alone for a minute, will yeh, Mary? Yer allus poundin' 'im. When I come nights I can't git no rest 'cause yer allus poundin' a kid. Let up, d'yeh hear? Don't be allus poundin' a kid.' The woman's operations on the urchin instantly increased in violence. At last she tossed him to a corner where he limply lay cursing and weeping. [Crane 1893/1993: 59]

Here individual voices and bodies do not follow a dialogical theatrical script, they deny any civilized, productive, let alone polite familial exchange. The mother eventually kills one son, drives the other away and her daughter Maggie into prostitution.

Marshall McLuhan states in *Explorations in Communication:* "Until WRITING [*sic*] was invented, we lived in acoustic space, where the Eskimo now lives: boundless, directionless, horizonless, the dark of the mind, the world of emotion, primordial intuition, terror. Speech is a social chart of this dark bog." [Marshall McLuhan 1972: 207] In this sense, Crane's poor, illiterate, immigrant characters people their own precivilized world, a purely acoustic, frightening space without hope for inner reform. In this way, Crane and later McLuhan help to construct every stereotype in relation to sound which is still with us: sound and language devoid of meaning and therefore experienced as sound, without connection to inscription, stand for boundless, directionless, dark, primordial, physical emotion without social refinement.

In 1929, Elmer Rice staged his play *Street Scene* which is set in "a mean quarter of New York" [Rice 1929/1947: 113]. He describes the setting with the following words:

> Throughout the [first] act, and, indeed, throughout the play, there is constant noise. The noises of the city rise, fall, intermingle: the distant roar of El[ectric] trains, automobile

> sirens and the whistles of boats on the river; the rattle of trucks and the indeterminate clanking of metals; fire engines, ambulances, musical instruments, a radio, dogs barking, and human voices calling, quarreling, and screaming with laughter. [Rice 1929/1947: 114]

In this play, sounds stand for the sheer power and energy of the city. The sounds of traffic, the workplace, of emergencies, communication, and entertainment "intermingle," creating a specific soundscape whose foreground, middle ground, and background are blended. Public sounds invade the homes of people whose speech – no longer recognizable as English – in turn spills out onto the street. The theatres are invaded by the city sounds of modernity which start to dominate over constructive dialogue.

Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal* from 1928 stages sound effects in order to link the nine only loosely connected scenes in the life of a typical American woman which Treadwell introduces: "[The unnamed woman is] going any day to any business. Ordinary. The confusion of her own inner thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams cuts her off from any actual adjustment to the routine of work." [Treadwell 1928/1993: 1] Before the curtain is even drawn, the audience hears machine sounds which last throughout the first episode. "Mechanical Offstage Sounds" can be distinguished throughout the play: a hand organ, an electric piano, the radio, a jazz band, a steel riveting gun, typewriters, telegraphs, an airplane engine "carry the sound of capitalism's progress," as Sally Burke writes in *American Feminist Playwrights* [Burke 1996: 78]. Treadwell calls for "the rhythm of our common city speech" to sound "brassy", for voices which sound metallic and thus inhuman. She uses bodiless offstage voices, "Heard, but Unseen" [Treadwell 1928/1993: xii], to create the impression of the mechanization of everyday life and the loss of synchronized vision and hearing. The characters, rather than being shown as individuals gifted with rational speech, are invaded by sounds; they blend into an impersonal soundscape, losing the capacity for speech altogether. Eventually, this modern soundscape proves to be deadly: After having murdered her sexually abusive husband because she is unable to speak out against her sexual exploitation, the unnamed woman is killed on the electric chair. The woman's last words are cut off by death, fading into the final hum of electricity.

In his novel *Manhattan Transfer* from 1925 John Dos Passos realized his dream of presenting the city of Modernism, Manhattan, in a symphonic totality. Dos Passos creates a polyphonous mixture, a simultaneity of time, space, and sounds, dissolving both objects and subjects into processes, making them part of the great consonant machine of the city, the novel's main protagonist. Whereas Crane concentrated on the poor immigrant women's bodies and voices as the forgotten other of capitalist society and Treadwell showed the ordinary woman being physically gagged, *Manhattan Transfer* makes a social climber the only continuous female presence of the text: Ellen, Helena, Ellie,

or Elaine, her name changing with each of her husbands and professions. By profession she is a skillful charmer, a temptress, an actress, a dancer, a musical singer, and the editor of a society and fashion periodical, in short, like Maggie and like Treadwell's unnamed woman before her, she is a commodity, selling her self, giving her voice and opinion, in order to become a success in New York.

Dos Passos not only visualizes Ellen's career as she makes an alluring spectacle of herself. [Dos Passos 1925/1986: 14] Rather, he makes her inner and outer voices fall apart, "[s]he was saying words while quite other words spilled confusedly inside her like a broken package of beads," [Ibid: 222] or, in Ellen's voice, "[i]t's like a busted mechanical toy the way my mind goes brrr all the time." [Ibid: 356] In the end, Ellen's many images and voices can no longer be synchronized.

Fourteen years later, in 1939, Nathaniel West illustrates this process of female disintegration even more drastically in his novel about the Hollywood of the talkies, *The Day of the Locust*. Every man in the text has sexual fantasies about the actress Faye Greener, the siren of the text. Closing out her voice when she talks about her career plans, she's supposed to reproduce standard lines without meaning on screen. Men only listen to her sexual body language, a language telling them everything they want to know about her.

In her only film role, Faye is voyeuristically watched by all the major male characters as she delivers her lines on the screen:

> None of them really heard her. They were all too busy watching her smile, laugh, shiver, whisper, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs, stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head so that her platinum hair splashed across the red plush of the chair back. The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they didn't really illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were and tried to excite her hearers into being uncritical. [West 1939/1983: 387]

Faye's body is exclusively being perceived as spectacle, her voice which spins out clichés totally disregarded. Just like in "L'Eve future," Villiers De L'Isle Adam's story which is over fifty years older, visual beauty and an artificial, cliché-ridden voice are synchronized by male technologies silencing the woman's own voice which cannot be synchronized with the voyeuristic image.

The mixing of media created an obvious need for framing theories of montage and synchronization. With respect to film practice, the synchronization between images of women's bodies and women's voices was soon conventionalized, as both Kaja Silverman (1988) and Mary Ann Doane (1980) make clear. Silverman claims that because synchronization functions as

a ‘virtual imperative’ in mainstream cinema, “the female subject inevitably has a ‘receptivity’ to the male voice as well as to his gaze.” [Silverman 1988: 310] Accordingly, classic cinema’s female subject “is associated with unreliable, thwarted, or acquiescent speech.” [Ibid: 309]

I would argue that this practice already had a history in printed texts. The urban novel disqualifies the voice of the woman who in turn (re-)presents and stands for the disintegrating qualities of urban life. In modernist novels and in traditional films, the dynamics of the embodied and disembodied voice works against the trauma of symbolic castration; “classic cinema [...] projects male lack onto female characters in the guise of anatomical deficiency and discursive inadequacy,” as Silverman puts it [Ibid: 1].

The most effective way of keeping the authority of the Anglo-American male voice intact is to silence everything and everybody which or who might function as an aural ‘excess’ in which meaning might wander and undermine the male gaze and voice. One example for this strategy of silencing can be found in a scene from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* published in 1926, where the narrator and Jay Gatsby are overtaken by two cars:

> A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by [...] more cheerful carriages for friends. The friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe [...] As we crossed Blackwell’s Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.
>
> “Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,” I thought; “anything at all ...” [Fitzgerald 1926/1975: 75]

Not only the immigrants but also the African Americans are shut off from being heard, silently and spectacularly acting out their stereotypical essence. By overtaking the white men, the cars signal the rivalry between Anglophile, ‘white’ Modernism and its others, the ghostly, “tragic” immigrants and “haughty” African Americans. At the same time as Anglo-centric texts sought to keep strange, not synchronizable voices and sounds away from modernist literature, the voices of immigrants, women, and African-Americans were already fighting hard to be heard, as will be seen in the final part of my essay.

3. The Return of the Repressed

“The Noisiest Novel Ever Written,” Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* from 1934, is characterized by Walter Allen as one of these aural intrusions [Allen cited by Adams 1989: 43]. The noise in this novel forces the readers to listen to the city with the immigrant’s ears and to acknowledge that the newcomer experiences the strangeness of place as strangeness of sound. The American language is

foreign to David, the novel's nine-year-old protagonist; therefore, in his ears English is reduced to nothing but acoustics. Here is David's perception of his new world, the lower East Side, after he has immigrated to Manhattan with his mother from Poland in 1907:

> For David it was a new and violent world, as different from [... his former home, Brownsville] as quiet from turmoil. Here in 9th Street it wasn't the sun that swamped one as one left the doorway, it was sound – an avalanche of sound. There were countless children, there were countless baby carriages, there were countless mothers. And to the screams, rebukes and bickerings of these, a seemingly endless file of hucksters joined their bawling cries. On Avenue D horse-carts clattered and banged. [...] Beyond Avenue D [...] was the East River on which many boat horns sounded. On 10th Street, the 8th Street Crosstown car ground its way toward the switch. [Roth 1934/1963: 141]

But not only American English cannot be translated into comprehensible language by the boy. He speaks Yiddish at home, but his mother's tongue is Aramaic which is mysterious to him, and besides English he has to study Hebrew, the sacred language of the hedder, his religious school. He remarks that the "world had been created without thought of him" [Ibid: 17] – a truly Babylonian world full of frightening sounds which he has to learn to make sense of and cope with. In response to this loss of control through language, David makes sense of the city (9th street – Avenue D – 10th street) by (re) creating it as soundscape.

The overwhelming attention which has been given to visual aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century media is, I want to suggest, itself an effect of certain strategies of *suture*, of visibly re-assembling the subject in the face of both optical and aural attacks. Since gender as well as ethnicity are fantasized as visible signs of difference and since the other bears the burden of this difference, the other's aural excess has to be silenced where it cannot be framed. In turn, the repressed often returns in aural terms as J. A. Rogers argues in his essay "Jazz at Home" from 1925, and for Rogers it returns in Jazz, as "a joyous revolt:"

> The true spirit of jazz is a joyous revolt from convention, custom, authority, boredom, even sorrow – from everything that would confine the soul of man and hinder its riding free on the air. The negroes who invented it called their songs the "Blues" [...] Jazz was their explosive attempt to cast off the blues and be happy, carefree happy even in the midst of sordidness and sorrow. [...] It is the revolt of the emotions against repression. [Rogers 1925/1968: 665]

Whether or not jazz meant all these things to modernist African Americans, – it certainly was understood this way by white people. As Kristin K. Henson points out in her monograph *Beyond the Sound Barrier: The Jazz Controversy*

in Twentieth-Century American Fiction, the idea "that music and listeners' response to it can stimulate social disruptions" goes back as far as to Plato's *Republic* (Henson 2003: 1) and is still with us in today's literature and theory: unfamiliar popular music, foreign spoken languages, and non-synchronized sound point toward the possibility of change. The "anxiety over the cultural amalgamation [...] permeates [not only] American Modernism" [Henson 2003: 8], but the theory and history of the media ever since. The careful taming of sound tries to fight this power, whether it be illusionary or real. Because, as Simon Frith, who studies the cultural implications of popular music, tells us: sound "is the cultural form best able to cross borders – sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races, and nations" [Frith 1996: 276] and, as I would add, across theoretical boundaries.

Conclusion

The essay explored historically specific arguments concerning the use of sound in American city texts. Reading early Romantic and Modernist texts, we find that long before sound and image were synchronized in films or computer games, print texts had established conventions of bringing the two senses together – or refusing to do so. For a long time, sound has served as a means to disturb the reader and make him aware of a protagonist's or narrator's insecurity. If the social or ethnic other can be overlooked as part of the visual cityscape, it cannot be neglected as part of the soundscape. There it stands in the tradition of unsettling narrators and readers alike since the early Gothic tradition.

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[1]With respect to sound in Hollywood films this has been pointed out by Robert Blanchet (2005), with respect to both films and computer games by Gunter Süß (2005).

[2] In this article, I am not so much interested in possible physiological explanations for this phenomenon. Rather, I explore historically specific arguments belonging to a discourse on different media of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The article deals with an argument, not with biological 'facts.'

[3] Cf. the visual concept of the 'mirror stage' as a stage of ego formation (Lacan 1949/1991).

[4] Studies on Modernism tend to concentrate on visual aspects, cf. David Frisby's *Fragments of Modernity* (1985), as well as texts on gendered relationships of power like John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) or on power relationships in film like Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975/1988); not only urban scholars like Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean in "The American City: 'The old knot of contrariety'" (1997) privilege visual aspects, but also literary scholars, for example James Donald in *Imagining the Modern City* (1999).

[5] Cf. for example Hana Wirth-Nesher's *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (1996) *and Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer: Avantgarde – Avantgardekritik – Avantgardeforschung*, edited by Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders (2000).

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