

DAVID TOOP, *SINISTER RESONANCE: THE MEDIUMSHIP OF THE LISTENER* (London & New York: Continuum, 2010), ISBN 978-1-4411-4972-5, xv+256pp, £18 (hardback).

David Toop's *Sinister Resonance* begins with the premise that, amongst phenomenal things, sound occupies an ambiguous position. Toop suggests that sound is 'a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory' (xv). The simple activity of listening to musical or non-musical sound, to implicit or imagined sound, and even to silence, Toop argues, can as a result of sound's intangible nature open us up to dramatically uncanny experiences, to that effect of disorientation and estrangement which lies at the heart of gothic and supernatural fiction, an effect that so often turns on implicit or explicit auditory haunting.

The goal of *Sinister Resonance* is to construct something of an archaeology of listening understood in this way. Through the book, Toop attempts to hear mute things within otherwise silent media, and by this means to show in some way that sound 'can be identified as a sub-text, a hidden if uncertain history' (xiii) within those media. A secondary goal, it is reasonable to suggest, is to develop a rich and textured—if highly personal—phenomenology of listening that responds to the full spectrum of sound, from musical to non-musical sound or silence alike.

Toop draws on an extremely wide range of references for his archaeology, using literary fiction, myth, fine art and other resources at length and often in free counterpoint. The breadth and fluidity of this range is matched by those of his two earlier books, *Ocean of Sound* (1995) and *Haunted Weather* (2004), both of which in their own way comprise diagnoses of the permeable experimental musical present written very much from the inside. *Sinister Resonance*, for its part, employs a similar range towards rather distinct ends.

Toop's writing style is manifestly impressionistic. He makes use of a free-flowing discursive approach where connections are made that are more evocative than necessary, suggestive rather than systematic. This approach is the source of *Sinister Resonance's* greatest strengths and also its greatest weaknesses. Arguments have a tendency to drift and get lost in Toop's circling and lyrical literary flow. This is assuredly not a work of disciplined and precise academic scholasticism. But nor is it purely a piece of poetry, or indeed a stumbling or confused attempt to tackle journalistically what is, after all, a complex and not inconsiderable subject. *Sinister Resonance* should be seen more as something like a theory fiction which is akin to late Baudrillard in its position at a tangent to the academy and to mainstream criticism, though we would have to *classicize* the theory fiction form if it is to fit Toop's learned and elegant style.

The intangibility of the subject matter of the book demands sensitivity and a degree of mystery in the prose if it is to be properly attended to, and Toop's writing style is at least entirely fitting in that respect. If the reader sometimes becomes frustrated by the

lack of framing devices or other clear textual signposts that might help to articulate the structure and argument more clearly, then this is surely compensated for by the poetry and enigmatic dimension of the text, which qualities create moments of stunning insight throughout the book.

At its core *Sinister Resonance* features vivid extended studies on the nature of listening and sound within three specific subjects areas: nineteenth-century gothic fiction, seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art, and, to conclude, silence broadly understood. These studies take up parts two, three, and four of the book. The focus of its Prelude and its first part is more diffuse. These sections serve to introduce the subject just broadly surveyed, grounding it in lengthy disquisitions on myth in various cultural and aesthetic contexts.

The Prelude works well enough in introducing the mobilizing themes of the book. It floats from Animal Collective to Paul Auster, *The Last of the Mohicans* to Shirley Jackson, Penderecki to Kafka, touching fruitfully off the themes of sensual ambiguity and ‘the subtle perceptual entwinement of our senses’ (xi), which later will be a preoccupation. It hints also at the buried auditory record contained within apparently silent art by everyone from Duchamp to Reinhardt to Maes, art that seems to make possible the sensation of clairaudience—the hearing of inaudible sounds—by inviting the viewer in some exceptional way to experience and to appreciate the uncanny aspect of sound which our author is so keen to draw out.

The first section proper, entitled ‘Aerial—Notes Towards a History of Listening’, is the most frustrating of the book. Anchoring its first chapter, ‘Drowned by Voices’, amongst a dizzying weave of references, are the myth of Pan and Syrinx as told through Mallarmé, Debussy and Kenneth Grahame; the Irish tale *The Voyage of Maildun’s Boat*, particularly Maildun’s encounter with the Isle of Speaking Birds; Melville’s *Moby Dick*; and *The Odyssey*, particularly the Sirens episode.

Toop demonstrates how, in the scenarios of each of these stories, sound plays a phantasmatic, conjuring role, either being a ‘precursor’ to strange adventure, or a ‘charm, a binding of spells’ (5). He suggests that each of these scenarios can be looked at in ‘their role as metaphors for the act of hearing’, and he discusses ‘how listening is an act that brings us closer to what we are not, the parallel worlds of the extra-human’ (23). Toop demonstrates how each scenario is filled with this vivid awareness of the sensual enchantment that sound often offers to its auditor. We are instructed to look to the Sirens episode, the ‘spectral heterophonic choir’ (23) of Maildun, and the mysterious sensual-sonic allure that is attributed to Pan in most literary invocations for witness of this enchantment.

Toop shows, too, how silence can be disturbing, how it often places the characters of these tales in an uncanny realm of feeling where lack of sound is felt as shrill

absence. Silence is seen as presenting in these cases an enchantment analogous to the effect of sound just surveyed. We can recognize this effect in Tennyson's version of the Maildun tale, where the now dumb birds and their island compose a paradise as 'quiet as death' (20). Tennyson's paradise appears uncannily terrifying to the sailors. This notion of sound and silence as being each other's spectral double is profitably maintained throughout the book.

Sound and sound-in-absence, then, appear by the end of the first chapter as insubstantial and uncertain, as implying 'some potential for illusion or deception, some ambiguity of absence or presence, full or empty, enchantment or transgression' (24). 'Through sound', Toop claims, 'the boundaries of the physical world are questioned, even threatened or undone by instability' (24).

These assertions are well enough supported by Toop's arguments, although arriving at those points of corroboration requires patience; the text has a habit of stumbling through discursive leaps and elisions. The chapter's lack of rigour in argument is experienced not as liberation but rather as frustration, even if the range is as dazzling and the linguistic style as naturally learned as they are elsewhere in the book. We have to wait, moreover, until later chapters for insights on the nature of sound and listening that are a little more original in character—the uncanny affect and strange presence of sound in all of the tales referenced in the first chapter are, after all, something of a commonplace, even if Toop's underlining and expansion of that commonplace produces considerable interest.

Chapters 2–5, all contained within part one, are more satisfying. Chapter two presents a disciplined, though admittedly still highly allusive and free-flowing, phenomenology of listening and hearing in the modern world. Toop asserts that, in contradistinction to the much prioritized study of visual cultures—of seeing (John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is used as an exemplar of this priority)—audio culture has been much neglected. Drawing our attention to the pre-eminence of sound in the first five months of life in the womb, and its eminence for a period thereafter, Toop builds a broad account of the auditory faculty as being an immersive, omni-directional mechanism that, in contrast to sight, gives us 'constant access to a less stable world', a world that is 'always in a state of becoming and receding, known and unknown' (38).

The third chapter provides a valuable look at what Toop had previously described as the curious 'entwinement' (xi) of the senses. Using anecdotes from David Hockney and Oliver Sacks, the first about how deafness can make you see 'clearer' (39), the second about the 'filling in' effect of audio processing where musical imaging can be intensified by an auditory deficit (40), Toop shows how seeing and hearing are intimately connected, how one contains the other and indeed is often understood *as* the other. This chapter presents something again like a phenomenology of hearing, this

time in terms of a multi-sensory apparatus. Within that apparatus hearing is understood, following the eighteenth-century aesthetic theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (though Lessing used the formula to justify the favouring of sight), as being one of ‘the dark senses’ (50), as being one of the poetically ‘ethereal’ (48) senses alongside touch, taste and smell. Hearing is said to provide ambient, even improvised experiences (48). This is contrasted with the experience of sight, which is immediate and direct: ‘seeing is now-now-now-now-now-now-now-n-n-n, whereas hearing is then-and-now-and-then’ (48). Toop praises writing that attends to the ‘complex flux’ (50) of the senses, and, in mentioning work by Kathleen Jamie and Roger Deakin, suggests that ‘such writing can be read as notations of discoveries made within the interstices of experience’ (51).

It is in the end sound’s very ‘incoherence’ (48), its ‘vagueness’ and ‘invasiveness’ (52), that mark it out within the multi-sensory apparatus. Toop concludes that these are qualities ‘that distinguish sound and hearing as vital elements in full knowing of the world and alert movement through it’ (52). This conclusion follows Casey O’Callaghan in repudiating the predominant and unhelpful ‘visuocentrism’ of culture (45).

Chapter four contains some brief personal accounts of auditory experience in action. After the comparatively disciplined arguments of chapter three, the slackness of this section works rather well. We read of buried audio signals, barely-heard caterpillars, and Sidney Bechet in Paris practicing scales and making animal noises, of robins, of a wood, and of a bush thick-knee in Brisbane. All of these events are evocatively brought forward by the author within the composite sensual flux (53–7). The dark senses argued for earlier are vividly brought to life and empirically verified in this short, enigmatic chapter.

In chapter five the ‘conversation between place and person’ (58) of the preceding chapter is theoretically refined and extended, principally by way of Curtis Roads’s concept of microsounds. Microsounds are audio phenomena that Roads categorizes along two lines; as ‘subsonic intensities, those sounds too soft to be heard by the human ear such as a caterpillar moving across a leaf’, and as audible events that ‘in their brevity as micro-events, their infinitely subtle fluctuations, or their placing at the threshold of audible frequencies, ... lie outside the conventional notion of pitch, tone and timbre’ (60). ‘Exercises in microsonic listening’, Toop elaborates, ‘—neither dramatic nor particularly impressive to anybody other than the recipient—can be discounted or forgotten so easily’, but, as he argues, ‘they can ground us in the sense of being in the moment, open us to a form of concentrated attention’, in fact provide ‘a lesson in becoming aware of how strong feelings emerge in relation to barely noticeable elements within an environment’ (61).

Toop's point here is an intuitively strong one, even if its thesis seems to support the framework of his previous books more than it does this one (although there is a certain piquant impression of listening expressed that, on the other hand, fits magnificently the aims of the current text). Regardless, digression must be understood as the quintessence of Toop's style, without which this book, for one, would look very different indeed. It is especially apparent in this chapter, in fact, that, with flow from paragraph to paragraph so often dislocated, it is up to the readers to make their own connections across and within the text. Once such connections are made, *Sinister Resonance* will provide those readers with a rich experience full of unexpected acuteness and acuity.

Parts two, three, and four—'Vessels and Volumes', 'Spectral', and 'Interior Resonance' respectively—build on the sometimes hazy course of the preceding chapters a fascinating, often masterful discourse on listening and silence within ostensibly silent media. Toop's allusive and elusive style comes into its own here. He shows himself to be a fine 'listener' throughout these variegated explorations of art, literature, and music, sensitive always to aesthetic and cultural tensions and likewise always able to draw on an impressively wide frame of reference in building up what, in the end, proves to be a valuable account of the ambiguity and importance of sound and audition within cultural history.

Toop first takes an extended look at art across the centuries; modernist in chapter six, seventeenth-century Dutch in seven, and contemporary in chapter eight (though the nature of the writing is such that the subjects are kept broad within the underlying principal theme). Marcel Duchamp forms the primary focus in chapter six, particularly his works *Sonata*, 'Musical Sculpture' from *Green Box*, and *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. Toop explores these works' curious (implicit) multi-sensory content, showing how Duchamp was 'in search of another dimension, and in that search was contained a refusal of the partition of arts into sensory categories' (70). Duchamp's concept of the 'infra-slim'—a category that embraces things like 'the sound or the music which corduroy trousers ... make when one moves' (70)—is mentioned also as correspondence with Roads's microsounds. This multi-sensory approach is expanded to three dimensions in chapter nine, where the sculptor Juan Munoz's pieces *A Listening Figure* and *A Conversation Piece*, and his *Raincoat Drawings*, are shown to reveal and toy with tensions of audition, silence and spectacle with similar depth to the Duchamp works. George Seurat's 'enharmonic flood of high-frequency silence' (112) is also touched upon with sharpness. The discipline accrued in preceding chapters is somewhat spurned here, though the prevailing thesis is still vibrant enough that the easing of momentum is forgiven somewhat.

One of those preceding chapters, number eight, proves to be one of the highlights of the book. Weaving a dazzling tapestry of criticism around Nicolas Maes's series of

*Eavesdropper* paintings, Toop makes his strongest case yet for the value of constructing criticism not simply in terms of what is seen, but also in terms of what is heard, both within paintings and without, and across other media. Toop is brilliant on the curious valences of space, sound, and silence within Maes's work, and on the textured auditory and physical spatiality in the work of other Dutch (and Flemish) artists such as Rembrandt, Cranach and Vermeer.

In the Maes paintings, 'speech', Toop suggests, 'is marginalised and repressed; action is stilled' (77). Instead, 'the fulcrum of these paintings ... is the silent shhh' (77). An ineffable moment of listening is celebrated in the paintings, all of them depicting in strange and stimulating ways what Toop describes as the 'errant, suspect, uncontrollable, betraying, dislocating and uncanny quality of sound' (75). For the modern viewer, Toop argues, Maes's 'early paintings hover on the brink of replaying audio events from the distant past. In one sense they are theatre, yet they go beyond the conventions of our time, in which the audience ... is expected ... to be passive, looking ahead to the twenty-first-century world of digital interactivity' (91). Maes and the others are shown to work 'with a consciousness of sound, incorporating suggestions of its presence within their otherwise silent work' (90). Toop concludes, following recourse to Freud, that what lies at the heart of Maes's *Eavesdropper* series is an 'entwinement of sexuality and epistemophilia' (90), an entwinement shown to turn pivotally on audition and sound. Toop's highly expressive, but always technically and historically on-point criticism provides a valuable corrective here to the privileging of 'sight and text' (99) that so often dominates both academic and journalistic methodologies of art criticism.

Part three sees Toop turning to what is perhaps the site of what has been the most natural and prevalent application of the dark, uncanny, intangible character he imputes (reasonably) to sound, namely nineteenth- and twentieth-century supernatural and gothic fiction. Rising in concert with his source to strange impressions and oneiric visions that are founded on auditory malleability, Toop explores at great length what he describes as the 'eariness of the uncanny' (127) as read in stories by amongst others Poe, Hoffman, Jules Verne, Blackwood, M. R. James and Shirley Jackson. The multivalent condition of sound is shown to play an important, even crucial role in these texts, particularly for its capacity to suggest spectral presences, uncanny hauntings and chilling intangibility. Creaking floorboards, ghostly winds and ticking clocks have never sounded so loud or with as much compulsion as they do here. Toop shows us that these are in fact microauditory stories that vividly resonate and resonate in claustrophobic and occult (sonic) spaces.

Toop is an astute reader. He attends to the hidden, the (un)heard and the estranged in these stories with the alertness of the most sensitive of literary critics. Of particular



interest is his drawing out of the tension evident here between the idea of sound as transcendent force—a force that peels away outside the body as an allure and haunting belonging to the external world—and its spectral internal reality as lurid sensual horror:

This interpretation of sound as an unstable or provisional event, ambiguously situated somewhere between psychological delusion, verifiable scientific phenomenon, and a visitation of spectral forces, is a frequent trope of supernatural fiction. (130)

We can be thankful that we have as sensitive a writer (and musician) as Toop to anchor this trope in such a rich sense of the sounded and the heard as it is here. Supernatural sound, as Toop shows us, is finally an interstitial phenomenon, physically material or immaterial and imagined as the case may be, but always crucial to the fantastical and uncanny effect of supernatural storytelling.

Crowning these sections is the passage on the Sirens episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*. This episode is frequently talked about in terms of its music, but I have read few accounts that are as alive to the many layers of auditory and sonic activity and tension within Joyce's text as Toop's is. Toop, moreover, rises to Joyce's prose with stylistically vivid recreations of his own; so saturated is Joyce's text in music and sound that close reading is seen to be almost 'narcotic':

Through this barroom scene of sirens and sailors, of fluting notes and lamentations, we gain privileged insight not just into Joyce but into the polyphonic complexity of all minds, the ardent resonant depths of all bodies. (142)

Finally and perhaps logically considering the ethereal account of sound provided thus far, in part four, 'Interior Resonance', we are confronted with silence. Toop gives us a lengthy disquisition that draws together themes from earlier in the book such as subauditory events, sonic haunting and intangible and ambiguous audition, and adds new ones, these being primarily concerned with the (almost) dialectical relationship of sound and silence, both of which are shown to introduce confusion and indeterminate sensations in their auditor naturally. 'Sound is the villain', Toop suggests, 'shifting in its allegiances, deceiving, spreading instability, yet silence is equally unreliable' (202). By way of exposing the basic premise of the book, Toop once again contrasts the senses associated with the eye and the ear, demonstrating through the excess of linguistic metaphors for sight that it is by far understood as the most active, most privileged sense. He moves then onto his central subject in these lines: silence.

Through readings of Joseph Conrad's short story *The Secret Sharer* and Kafka's *The Burrower*, silence is shown to present a sort of submerged, underworld impression. The conceptions of silence understood in its pure sense, as Toop suggests, are merely convenient as 'hypothetical absolutes' (216); rarely is its empirical experience possible

in the real world. In real-world auditory experience 'quiet becomes loud' (201), 'silence' invariably calling up fugitive environmental sounds, whilst group silences are filled with expectation and unceasing internal monologues. The condition of apparently monolithic silence is in fact a sort of 'perpetual evasion of fixity' (214). As in Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, Toop suggests, 'everything speaks' (223). This is so even in an exaggerated case, such as we witness in Wilkie Collins's story *The Haunted Hotel*, where a Victorian gentleman constructs a soundproof room to help expel unwanted sonic haunting and bother from his life, but his 'extreme social withdrawal simply opens the door to ambiguous inner phantoms of microsonic hallucination' (209).

We can never escape sound, whether it is inside, outside or imagined. Toop listens to the complexity of silence like few others have done before him; featuring here amongst other riches is a brief critique of John Cage (208–9) that is highly refreshing for its coming, not from a reactionary position, but actually from a sympathetic, fully informed twenty-first-century one. The drawing together, meanwhile, of Rothko, Reinhardt, Sim, Gröning, Kafka and Conrad in Toop's disquisition on silence is typical of the book's perspicacity. It likewise demonstrates the author's rich awareness of the depth of the issue. This chapter is amongst the most valuable writing we have on silence.

The final lines before the book's typically obtuse little coda refer to and feature a quotation from Akio Suzuki on the subject of his interactive paper sculpture *Pyramid*, a work that enigmatically occasions sound production and audition through visitors' free mingling with the little paper structure. These lines return us fittingly to themes of intangibility and the uncanny in relation to audition and sound, themes that straddle numerous points of departure at the heart of this broadly accomplished and ultimately fascinating book:

Who knows what it is that we hear, who knows what it means? Time passes; fixity gives way to destruction; visual perfection is relinquished with the faintest of sound fields. As for the work, this ceremony returns us to nothing, 'to the feeling of not knowing exactly what is before us', so to the uncanny, to the shell-like ear found by the sea, the 'ungraspable phantom of life', the record of a haunting, a time regained. (230)

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