

# I

## The Modernist Soundscape

### Ocularcentrism and Auditory Technologies

Let us try to imagine for a moment the modernist soundscape.<sup>1</sup> While the Western world may not have gotten noisier in the early twentieth century, there is evidence that people perceived the world as noisier. Emily Thompson helpfully shows that in the Victorian period the “sounds that so bothered Carlyle and Goethe were almost identical to those that had been identified by the Buddha centuries earlier: organic sounds created by humans and animals at work and at play” (*Soundscape* 116). Victorians tolerated the “clanking din of the factory, the squeal of the streetcar, and other new sounds” as part of the soundscape, but still predominantly complained of the noises created by humans (street musicians especially) and animals (Thompson, *Soundscape* 117). It was not until the early twentieth century, according to Thompson, that machine-generated noises started to impinge on the everyday lives of people. As a 1925 article from the *Saturday Review of Literature* reveals, the soundscape and people’s lives were now dominated by “the steady burr of the motor,” “the clank clank of the elevated,” “the chitter of the steel drill,” “clattering ties of the subway,” “the drone of the airplane,” and the “recurrent explosions of the internal combustion engine” (qtd. in Thompson, *Soundscape* 117). Hillel Schwartz confirms the significance of coalescing noises from auditory technologies (the microphone, radio, telephone, and phonograph), public transportation (the elevated train and subway), World War I, construction, factories, steam locomotives, industrial whistles and bells, machine shops, cash registers, washing machines, sewing machines, vacuum cleaners, typewriters, printing machines, automobiles, trucks, and motorcycles: “In this ‘Age of Noise,’ as people began to call it, hearing was crucial in order to make one’s way in the world and to keep from being run over when crossing the street or the train tracks” (“Indefensible Ear” 491–92). Thus, between 1860 and 1930, noise changed from being understood as a sporadic disturbance or clash of particular noises to a continual background noise that was, potentially, psychologically disruptive (Schwartz, “Noise” 6).

As a consequence of such noise, anti-noise societies such as Julia Barnett Rice's Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise, which was started in 1906, flourished during this period. Such societies continued, even into the 1950s, when Edith Sitwell became the vice president of the Noise Abatement Society of London's Mayfair district (Greene 431).<sup>2</sup> Some members of the upper class believed that "the refined mind and cultivated self-control" were "threatened by the mechanical and non-mechanical sounds of the lower classes, the lowest emotions and brutal self-diffusion" (Bijsterveld, "Diabolical" 168). For others, noise indicated that machines were not running efficiently, making them a threat to public health (Bijsterveld, "Diabolical" 173). Yet these same noises of a typical Western city at the turn of the century could just as easily be positively interpreted as the by-product of production, labor, and commerce. Rather than categorizing the noise of the early twentieth century as an overall negative experience for people, it is helpful to keep in mind that the soundscape in general is a complex intermingling of sounds that create a sense of community among those within the range of hearing. For acoustic "signals are always reminders of the dominant institutions of the community and reflective of its social and economic base" (Truax 61). Just as R. Murray Schafer explains that "acoustic communities" were once "defined by the range of church bells" or the "area over which the muezzin's voice can be heard as he announces the call to prayer from the minaret," the early twentieth-century urban community was defined by industrial, electrical, and human sounds (*Our Sonic Environment* 215). The daily experience of such sounds allowed people to identify themselves as modern city dwellers.

Equally important within the modernist soundscape were the sounds of World War I, which were made by the telephone, wireless, loudspeaker, tanks, aircraft, and artillery. In the trench warfare that dominated the Great War, projectiles were aimed without relying on a direct line of sight with the enemy, altering the dominance of sight that one would assume to be typical in war. A soldier who was trying to hide from the enemy was reliant on his auditory perception to hear approaching bullets and bombs. Robert Graves, in his autobiography, *Good-Bye to All That*, attests to the significance of sound in World War I through his generous use of onomatopoeia: shells that go "whoo-oo-oooooOOO-bump-CRASH!" (94); "the roar of artillery" and "shells bursting" until "the whole air rocked and shook" (107). In one scene, as Graves hears "a curious singing noise in the air, and then flop! flop! little pieces of shell-casing . . . buzzing down all around," a sergeant remarks, "They calls [*sic*] them the musical instruments" (94–95). This same sergeant then advises the

soldiers to avoid wasting their energy hitting the ground every time that they hear incoming artillery. Instead, he recommends, “Listen by the noise they make where they’re going to burst” (95). Eventually, the soldiers learn to “pick out at once the faint plop! of the mortar that sends off a sausage, or the muffled rattle noise when a grenade is fired” (Graves 112). Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) likewise affirms that in addition to having an eye and feel for the land, a good soldier must have an “ear for the sound and character of the shells” (97). Italian futurist Luigi Russolo, in a chapter called “The Noises of War,” written in 1916 during a break from the front, also attributes a soldier’s survival to his ability to listen: “From noise, the different calibers of grenades and shrapnels can be known even before they explode. Noise enables us to discern a marching patrol in deepest darkness, even to judging the number of men that compose it. From the intensity of rifle fire, the number of defenders of a given position can be determined. There is no movement or activity that is not revealed by noise” (50). Of course, visual cues were still of great importance, and the Great War was not the only one to be noisy. But one gets the sense that World War I was the first mass war with weapons so loud as to make a soldier’s “ears [sing] as though there were gnats in them” or cause a “vibration” that “made [one’s] chest sing” (Graves 112).

This modernist soundscape, consisting of the noise of war and urban life, galvanized the sound poetry and avant-garde music of the period. Just as listeners interpreted the noise of industry differently, artists too ranged in their responses to noise. For example, the futurist F. T. Marinetti’s sound poem *Zang Tumb Tumb*, which first appeared in journals between 1912 and 1914, revels in the noise of the Battle of Adrianople in the First Balkan War, which he witnessed as a reporter. The poem exemplifies Marinetti’s idea of *parole in libertà* (words in freedom) and makes use of unconventional typography along with onomatopoeic words that represent the sounds of gunfire and explosions.<sup>3</sup> The Dadaists likewise created sound poetry, but their intent was to combat the mechanization of modern life, consumerism, and nationalism, and to allow the individual body to be heard. When the German poet Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916, he explained in his Dadaist manifesto that his sound poems were meant not only to disrupt the accustomed reception of language but “to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by stockbrokers’ hands, hands worn smooth by coins” (221). The *simultaneous poem*, in which poets would recite words and make noise at the same time, and *chants nègres*, “whimsical abstractions designed to evoke the rhythms and ‘semantics’ of African songs,” were also

performed at the Cabaret Voltaire to fulfil the Dadaist objective of subverting the Western ideology inherent in European language through one's sense of hearing (McCaffery 119). Although they took different positions, Dadaists and futurists explicitly incorporated the modernist soundscape into their poetry to jolt the reader with a sense of reality and to subvert the conventional logic of language.

Both incorporating and contributing to the turn-of-the-century soundscape, modernist music broke with the musical tradition in much the same way that writers broke with the literary tradition. Two of the more notorious examples of music that appropriated the soundscape are Erik Satie's ballet *Parade* (1917), which used a typewriter, lottery wheels, pistol shots, foghorn, and Morse code apparatus, and George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* (1926), which included airplane propellers, sirens, and player pianos. Both of the premieres of these works resulted in violent reactions from audiences, and both were closely linked with modernist visual art: Pablo Picasso designed the costumes and sets for *Parade*, and in a letter, Antheil describes his score as "us[ing] time as Picasso might have used the blank spaces of his canvas" (71).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Jean Cocteau, who wrote the one-act scenario of *Parade*, explains that the score "was meant to supply a musical background to suggestive noises, e.g. of sirens, typewriters, aeroplanes and dynamos, placed there like what Georges Braque so aptly calls 'facts'" (326). In both these descriptions, sound is used like scraps in a collage, as a way of incorporating the materials of modern life into a score.

In his 1913 "The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto," Russolo reasons that because the public's ears have grown accustomed to "variegated noises," they have come to "demand more and more violent acoustic emotions" (179). In his manifesto, Russolo catalogues the noises that the modernist artist must not only contend with but encounter as an aesthetic experience:

Let us wander through a great modern city with our ears more attentive than our eyes, and distinguish the sounds of water, air, or gas in metal pipes, the purring of motors (which breathe and pulsate with an indubitable animalism), the throbbing of valves, the pounding of pistons, the screeching of gears, the clatter of streetcars on their rails, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags. We shall amuse ourselves by orchestrating in our minds the noise of the metal shutters of store windows, the slamming of doors, the bustle and shuffle of crowds, the multitudinous uproar of railway stations, forges, mills, printing presses, power stations, and underground railways. (180)

As Russolo summons his reader to experience the city with her ears above all else, he is participating in the larger cultural shift of artists and modern technologies drawing the public's attention to the value and significance of audition. While the sounds Russolo lists are not all specific to modern technology, it becomes clear from the above sampling of sounds that mechanical and urban noise intensified the soundscape of everyday life for an early twentieth-century Western public. As we will see and hear throughout this study, avant-garde poets and composers were not alone in this desire to aestheticize and incorporate such real-world sounds. Although grounded in a different ethos, modernist fiction writers too attempted to cut and paste the soundscape into their art—sometimes to jolt the reader into listening more closely, sometimes to disrupt the linearity of their prose, and often to represent the effect of these shared auditory experiences.

Keeping in mind this more general sense of the modernist soundscape and the ways that such noise inspired European poets and composers to break with the artistic traditions that shaped them, in the next two sections of this chapter I will consider what I believe to be the two most important contexts for my reading of auditory narrative in the modernist novel: first, a growing skepticism of and break with a philosophical tradition that valued vision above the other senses; and second, a climax in the popularization of auditory technologies that altered sound perception—creating new pathways for intimate connections, bringing sounds from different cultures and walks of life into the home, and aestheticizing noise through mechanical reproduction. As the public became disillusioned with vision and inundated with auditory technologies, modernists realized that if they wanted to be heard, they had to appeal to the reader's ear.

## Ocularcentrism

Thus, from the outset in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought of in terms of *seeing*. . . . If one considers how easy it is for sight unlike the other senses to shut out the outside world and if one examines the early notion of the blind bard, whose stories are being listened to, one may wonder why hearing did not develop into the guiding metaphor for thinking.

*Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind*

In Greek philosophy, sight was considered the noblest sense, metaphorically associated with the work of the mind and search for truth. For instance, Plato referred to the “eye of the soul,” and in the first paragraph of *Metaphysics*, Aris-