

*DISTANT
MURMURS*
Gothic Soundscapes in Literature

Lewis Gittus

*World Forum For Acoustic Ecology, Miami
2023*

Distant Murmurs: Gothic Soundscapes in Literature

Lewis Gittus

The University of Melbourne
lewis.gittus@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the literary soundscapes of Matthew Lewis' 1796 Gothic novel *The Monk*, with particular attention afforded to instances in which the interpretive ambiguities of listening serve to blur ontological distinctions between bodies and landscapes. In keeping with the genre's preference for labyrinthine architecture and nocturnal settings, *The Monk* unfolds almost entirely within darkness, its characters' ears straining towards the gloom as they desperately seek to interpret their surroundings. Amongst the novel's passageways, sepulchres, monasteries, and forests, a procession of low murmurs, faint echoes, and indistinct groans all serve to dramatise the semiotic ambiguity of the auditory. In doing so, *The Monk* provides an ideal case study of sound's entangled status; simultaneously material and interpretive.*

*This paper takes place against the backdrop of literary sound studies; a rapidly evolving discipline advanced by scholars such as Isabela van Elferen, Elena Glotova, and Kristie Ann Schlauraff, whose publications have recast the Gothic genre as a reservoir of historical listening and sounding practices. In dialogue with this emergent discipline, this paper, *Distant Murmurs: Gothic Soundscapes in Literature*, hazards a departure from historical analysis and closes with a consideration of the potential for Gothic literature's sonic tropes to inform contemporary sound-based practices.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the gloomy landscapes and cloistered architecture of Gothic literature it is often the simple act of listening that provides a source of both wonder and terror. Amongst the genre's ruins, graveyards, and crypts, protagonists strain their ears toward the invisible menace of faint rustlings, distant murmurs, and muffled footsteps. Within such tropes, sound functions as a signifier of bodily presence, yet always a presence that is plagued by uncertainty. Is the creaking staircase merely caused by the wind or has the castle's previous owner risen from the

grave? Is the eerie cry heard in the night that of a bird or that of a wanderer? Such uncertainties are of course interpretive but they are also closely linked to sound's material attributes; primarily, its invisibility and transience. As Isabella van Elferen has articulated, 'Sound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and is thus closely related to the ghostly'¹. Moreover, sound is always on the move, crossing boundaries as it passes through locked doors, stone slabs, and heaped earth; where it comings, muddies, and then ultimately vanishes. For all these reasons, sound's materiality is repeatedly dramatised within the Gothic genre as a method for blurring distinctions between presence and absence. However, perhaps where the Gothic disturbs us most, is among those passages where we sense that it is the very categories of presence and absence that are altogether impossible. In such moments of radical uncertainty, sound's semiotic ambiguity corrodes the ontological bedrock that guarantees such distinctions to begin with.

1.1 Narrated Listening

From the outset it should be acknowledged that the soundscapes of Gothic literature are rendered via an imagined listener, related to us—the readers—either through the embodied life of a character or through the omniscient flow of narration. To put this another way, the genre's soundscapes are always already mediated through fictional consciousness, resulting in a subjective *listening toward*. This is certainly true of Matthew Lewis' novel *The Monk*², a story told almost entirely via the personal recollections of its characters. Under such conditions the possibility of the soundscape as a transcendental and autonomous *thing in itself* is denied (that is, if it were ever possible to begin with). It follows that to explore such literary soundscapes we must first direct our attention to a Gothic phenomenology of listening; a *listening toward* that is not only riddled with interpretive difficulties (as those previously mentioned) but from the beginning, influenced by an accumulation of culturally pre-inscribed fears, desires, and biases.

¹ Isabella van Elferen, *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 4.

² Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, (London: Penguin, 1998).

1.2 Generative Listening

This *listening toward* constitutes both a reversal and a challenge to the understanding of listening as a passive act, in which a subject merely registers their acoustic surroundings. In contrast, the Gothic genre inverts the transferences of meaning from soundscapes to individuals, instead narrating acts of listening as a dynamic outward projection of the subject. Such listening operates along pathways of contagion from the imaginary into the real, in which all manner of repressed content becomes manifest, rendering psychic disturbances as tangible, aesthetic experiences.

2. DARKNESS

However, to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the Gothic listening experience we must forestall such content (repress it yet again) and turn our attention to those most basic conditions that enable such *generative listening* to begin with; most notably, to the Gothic's characteristic use of *darkness*. Such a prerequisite milieu can be both literal and metaphorical. In the former sense, Gothic tales—such as *The Monk*—have a strong preference for the nocturnal and the subterranean; environments in which seeing ends and listening begins. The genre's ubiquitous ruins, crypts, tunnels, coffins, pits, monasteries, prisons, torture chambers, castles, cellars, forests, caves, and closets are all characterised by an absence of light; denying a visible horizon against which to orient oneself. Within these cloistered spaces, darkness extinguishes the preferential treatment afforded to vision and obstructs the optical distancing that renders objects and individuals discrete and manageable. As a metaphor, darkness also reminds us of sound's immersive thickness. It provides what Elena Glotova describes as a 'tactile sensation'³ in which a listener becomes connected via a gloomy viscosity to a range of real and imagined horrors.

2.1 Subterranean Listening

Nowhere is the immersive thickness of darkness more apparent, more 'perfectly dark'⁴ than within *The Monk*; a tale that unfolds almost exclusively at night. As if the sun's absence were itself insufficient, the novel's crucial scenes are then set within a network of subterranean passageways connecting a larger constellation of crypts and dungeons, all buried beneath a medieval monastery. Within this doom-ridden setting, the novel's characters attune their ears towards hidden depths, as they attempt to distinguish between those sounds imagined and those that are 'real'. Like the 'sound of dripping water in the darkness of a ruin'⁵—as Juhani Pallasmaa writes in, *The Eyes of the Skin*—the act of listening 'structures and articulates

the experience and understanding of space'⁶; though what happens when this sonic articulation of space is contaminated from the outset by the phantasmagorical projections of the listener? Under such conditions, the boundaries between bodies and landscapes, the past and the present, the real and the imaginary are progressively invalidated, giving way to an unclean alloy of psychic-materialist disturbances. Take for example the listening habits of *The Monk's* main character, Ambrosio:

...he listened—all was silent, except at intervals he caught the sound of Matilda's voice, as it wound along the subterranean passages, and was re-echoed by the sepulchre's vaulted roofs. She was at too greater distance for him to distinguish her words, and ere they reached him, they were deadened into a low murmur. He longed to penetrate into this mystery.⁷

And then soon after:

Profound darkness again surrounded him, and the silence of the night was only broken by the whirring bat as she flitted slowly past him.⁸

In this example of Ambrosio's narrated listening, the tomb's profound darkness leads to a hyper-sensitisation to even the most delicate sounds. As he strains to hear, he no longer only passively registers the receding murmurs within the sepulchre but becomes an active participant in the production of its soundscape, imbuing its echoes with his own phantasmagorical fears and desires.

3. SILENCE

From within these darkened environments, emerges yet another requisite condition of this *generative listening*, and that is the novel's instance of the possibility of absolute silence.

This literary silence—used by authors such as Lewis—is perhaps best understood through the phenomenological work of Salomé Voegelin, whose scholarship explores silence as 'not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening'⁹. For Voegelin, silence provides the conditions necessary to approach the critical edge of conscious experience; that wafer-thin horizon upon which recognizable forms take shape via the ceaseless task of interpretation. Within the Gothic, this model of silence is pushed to hysterical limits, diminishing the availability of external sensory information, leaving more work to be done by interpretation alone and consequently, increasing the likelihood that a character's listening will be subject to distortions, informed by mental projection rather than the 'real'.

³ Elena Glotova, *Soundscapes in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Short Stories*. (PhD diss, Uemå University 2021), 95.

⁴ Lewis, *The Monk*, 198.

⁵ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. (West Sussex: Wiley, 2012) 50.

⁶ Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 49.

⁷ Lewis, *The Monk*, 200.

⁸ Lewis, *The Monk*, 201.

⁹ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 83.

From within such otherworldly silences, sounds emerge that—as Voegelin suggests—‘do not represent the real but produce a reality all of their own.’¹⁰ As Isabella van Elferen has similarly articulated regarding Gothic soundscapes, ‘It is this ambiguity...that allows receivers to project onto them the haunting agency of their own repressed anxieties.’¹¹ Like EVP enthusiasts who listen for voices of the dead amongst the noise floors of blank cassette tapes¹², the occurrence of silence within novels such as *The Monk* provides a sensorial vacuum. It is within such vacuums that the strange contours of the psyche (with its repressed cartography) rush in; leaving the characters stranded amid a sunken present, in which the ‘real’ loses all sovereignty. For the novel’s unlucky nobleman, Alphonso d’Alvarada, ‘...the clock in a neighbouring steeple struck “one”. I listened to the mournful hollow sound, and heard it die away in the wind, I felt a sudden chilliness spread itself over my body.’¹³ Eerie silences such as these are repeated throughout the novel, often heralding the imminent arrival of the supernatural.

4. TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

Thus far, a particular phenomenology of listening has been articulated, a *listening toward* that is recognisable in both Lewis’ novel and the Gothic genre more widely. What might be abstracted from such literary devices and format shifted towards a contemporary sound-based practice? In the most straightforward adaptation, the suppression of vision through dimmed lighting or other means may prompt closer listening. As sound artists practising today so often find themselves exhibiting within venues shaped by the conventions of visual art (bright white cubes with concrete floors and open-plan architecture), the challenge of prompting one’s audience to *listen* rather than *look* within these spaces is acute. Here the darkness of Gothic novels—as well as the genre’s characteristic use of sight blockers such as veils, closed doors, stained glass, and curtains—offers a vest reservoir of strategies for creating sensory environments in which seeing ends and listening begins.

5. CONCLUSION

Perhaps more subtly though, the ‘phenomenological possibilism’¹⁴ of the Gothic offers an invitation to reconsider the role of content within contemporary sound-based practices. At the heart of Gothic listening is a contradiction, in which the obstruction of content provides

the necessary conditions for that which is otherwise repressed to rush into the frame. It is the very obscurity of *The Monk*’s imagined soundscapes; the interpretive difficulties associated with their ‘low murmurs’¹⁵, ‘faint echoes’¹⁶ and ‘rustling noises’¹⁷ that engage the reader’s curiosity. In narrating these auditory spaces of radical unknowing, Gothic literature plays upon the most intimate fears and desires of its audience, dissolving boundaries between the psychological and the material. As contemporary sound artists now find themselves working in an era characterised by high-fidelity digital recording and editing (working within digital platforms whose claims are to an absolute clarity and reproducibility of auditory experience), what might be gained from instead adopting methods that are predicated on a radical sonic ambiguity? This paper concludes with an advocacy for sounding out that which is obscure, and it asks what might be gained from a championing of those soundscapes most resistant to direct interpretation.

Acknowledgments

This research has been undertaken on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin nation; lands whose sovereignty has never been ceded.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Elferen, Isabella van. 2012. *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny*. Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press.
- [2] Glotova, Elena. 2021. *Soundscapes in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Short Stories*. PhD diss. Umeå, Sweden: Umeå University.
- [3] Lewis, Matthew. 1998. *The Monk*. London, UK: Penguin.
- [4] Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2012 *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley.
- [5] Schlauraff, Kristie A. 2017. *Sounding Bodies and Voices in Nineteenth Century British and American Gothic Fiction*. New York, USA: Cornell University.
- [6] Voegelin, Salomé. 2010. *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*. New York, USA: Bloomsbury.
- [7] Voegelin, Salomé. 2021. *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*, Revised Edition. New York, USA: Bloomsbury. Accessed August 23, 2022. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501367656>.

¹⁰ Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 84.

¹¹ van Elferen, *Gothic Music*, 25.

¹² EVP is a listening practice in which participants listen to blank media, listening for supernatural sounds within the chosen media’s noise floor.

¹³ Lewis, *The Monk*, 139.

¹⁴ Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*, Revised Edition, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 6.

¹⁵ Lewis, *The Monk*, 234.

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Monk*, 309.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Monk*, 290.