

# Fearful Sounds: Cross-Platform Studies of Sonic Audio and Horror

Danielle Barrios-O’Neill (Falmouth University)

In *Understanding Media* (1964) Marshall McLuhan discusses the power of a ringing telephone on a stage to create ‘instant tension’—even when we know the call cannot concern us (McLuhan 1964: 296). There is something powerful about the medium of sound—whether a tap, a ringing phone, or a whisper—in its ability to promote involvement on the part of the listener, to compel us to come closer, how it asks us to fill in the gaps. Sound can be an unsettling alternative to the dominant human sense of sight, disrupting what Wordsworth described as ‘this tyranny’ of vision (Howes 2003: xxii). Where sight gives us a sense of objective and verifiable truth, within ‘the mystic screen of sound’ produced by radio, podcasts and even the focal moment of a single ringing telephone, our tether to the objective world becomes loosened (McLuhan 1964: 334). Where sight allows us to make clear delineations between ourselves and that which surrounds us, sound can enter the body and disrupt our sense of safety and coherence *from the inside*. This is the trope of the phantom phone caller, after all—the calls are coming from inside the house. From a physiological perspective, sound enters the body in ways akin to the sense of touch, vibrationally, and we process it via the amygdala. When interesting sounds arise, the limbic system goes into high gear, stirring up memory and emotion, putting us into a vulnerable state of mind (LeDoux 2003: 729). Maybe this is why sound is such a powerful instrument for the project of scaring: because, although we hear with our ears, we listen with our minds.

This special issue of *Revenant* is dedicated to reflection on the relationships between sound and fear, aurality and horror, the audio experience and the supernatural. The ‘cross-platform’ element of this issue describes the variety of linked and overlapping channels and interfaces through which performances of sound arrive to us now: on the radio, streaming on the internet, or in the cinema. Each of the essays and creative pieces here situates the phenomenon of performed sound within a medial landscape now defined by the crossing of boundaries, so that ‘cross-platform’ refers not just to boundaries between media platforms, but also to associated boundaries between digital and analogue, local, national and global. That liminal space between categories or territories, the borderlands of culture, is where much of horror takes place, because its essential feature is interfacing with the unknown. Indeed many of the best scary stories, and many of the pieces here, engage the special

terror that hinges on the unknown, as evoked by sound: sounds whose origins we cannot place; the creak on the stairs when the house should be empty; the voice in the dark.

How we approach and negotiate boundaries is one of the defining conversations of our age. The uncanny, along with almost everything else, has become vastly distributed and vastly distributable, taking little account of boundaries of geographic or medial kinds, mixing old and new. A recurring theme in this issue is the evolution of sound technologies, including tensions between digital and analogue, between radio and podcast cultures. As each evolution in technology produces new cultural configurations, each new way of rendering sound changes our relationship to its content (McLuhan 1964: 98); the authors here pose a variety of possibilities for the trajectory of sonic arts as they come to bear on representations of the strange and frightening. In ‘Audio Nasty: Uncanny Sounds in The Work of Peter Strickland’, John Riley explores the mechanics of haunting, investigating the technological contexts of sound in Strickland’s *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) and *The Stone Tape* (2015) demonstrating the technical composition of Strickland’s ‘weird presences and eerie absences.’ Danielle Hancock examines emergent possibilities for the audio-horror genre in “Put on your headphones and turn out the lights”: Exploring Immersive Auditory Horror in 3D-sound Podcasting.’ Exploring the potentials of 3D sound to produce acoustic virtual realities that are both intimate and invasive, Hancock draws on trends of 3D tech, mobile listening and private headphone use to project futures for audio horror that will rival cinema and gaming in their ability to provoke fear.

Another major theme of the issue is the powerful capacity of sound to approach the unknowable. The essays here explore multifarious ways in which sound can be used to not just inhabit but also generate spaces of uncertainty, to amplify ontological gaps and disrupt our sense of what is, or may be, Real. After all, sound, unlike sight, cannot be verified by concrete objects or an objective gaze, but rather permeates, or invades, the body viscerally (Gordon et al. 2014). Michael Brown explores these ideas in ‘The Demon Pazuzu as Noise in *The Exorcist*’, considering the functions of noise (interruption, interference and distortion) in the production of a unique, diffuse form of psychological dread. Sound design is crucial in creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, Brown argues, where evil may reside in the abyss of meaningless noise itself. Michael Collins and I cast uncertainty in a very different light in ‘At Home with the Weird: Dark Eco-Discourse in *Tanis* and *Welcome to Night Vale*’, applying Tim Morton’s concept of dark ecology to the new genre of weird podcasts (Morton 2016). We link ambience and the lack of aesthetic distance that arrive with new eco-ontologies to the same qualities of sound, arguing for an emergent sonic aesthetics of uncanniness, pervasive anxiety, bodily permeability, and a complicated relationship with one’s own environment, exemplified by the new generation of podcasts. Richard Hand’s critical essay ‘The Empty House’ is cast in a related context, investigating the uncanniness of sound’s immateriality, and its ability to alter our perceptions ‘of time, reality and environment’, and to produce in the listener a condition of *haunting*. Hand’s companion audio play by the same title renders this condition in narrative and

sound. The final creative piece is Alison Bainbridge's 'The Tapping,' another haunting aural horror that uses the vehicles of sleep paralysis and auditory hallucinations to amplify sound's capacity for disturbing reality. This piece is also linked as an audio piece; we recommend listening to both pieces, in addition to or in lieu of reading, to get the full, immersive effect.

Looking at uses of sound across diverse media including audio fictions, podcasts and feature films, this issue delves into the consequences of our cultural and bodily relationship to the sonic arts: how sound has a seemingly limitless capacity to create intimacy, and equally how it can evoke the weird and alien within our very selves. This issue poses new contexts for understanding the evolution of horror in relation to sound, casting ideas that are in some sense timeless—the origins of fear, the way we process reality, the limits of our bodies—in fresh and exciting ways, respective of new and emergent media technologies as well as the cutting edge of eco-philosophy, and drawing from a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches. Childhood fears and primitive emotions surface as we interface with the aural uncanny; as such, I hope this issue becomes a bit of a dark adventure, that it allows you to reconsider sound and horror in ways that are delightfully disorienting and tantalizingly weird.

## List of References

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## About the Editor

**Danielle Barrios-O'Neill** is a Senior Lecturer at Falmouth University. Her research is in the areas of cross-platform narrative and media, with particular focus on emergent technological, and related critical and philosophical, approaches to the text. She has publications in areas including ecological approaches to podcasting, interactive gaming as intervention, transmedia approaches to documentary,

multiplatform approaches to engagement for industry, network approaches to the literary, and chaotic processes in post-digital literature.