

**STREET, S. (2017). *SOUND POETICS. INTERACTION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY*. CHAM: PALGRAVE.**

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There are at least two particular ways of speaking of sound as language support. The material point of view emphasises the physical properties of the vibrational waves produced and propagated by air, while the symbolic point of view shows the significant and cultural character of sound expression. The first is part of a kind of sound engineering, an area that has developed in close connection with editing techniques aimed at a certain artistic elevation of audio production. In this field, music, as a major expression of sound language, has always been a field of surprising exaltation of the plastic and aesthetic versatility of aural stimuli. However, other areas previously diminished by the image have favoured, with special acuity in the last two decades, an increasing sensitivity to the value of what one hears, such as sound effects and sound design. The second corresponds to an extension of the studies on the construction of meaning and interpretation to the sound environments, recognising a sign character in what the ear perceives, that is, an ability to produce meanings. It may be said that the first point of view necessarily presupposes the second. In *The sound handbook*, for example, Tim Crook does not ignore the importance of reflecting on sound philosophies and technologies in an articulated way (Crook, 2012). It is, however, perhaps through a more emotive than technical approach that sound studies today have their main source of inspiration.

Seán Street introduces himself as a poetry writer who does radio and is Emeritus Professor of Bournemouth University, UK. In *Sound poetics. Interaction and personal identity*, the author clearly expresses the benefits of this double condition of poet and someone who knows profoundly the magic of radio. The book is small, “as books by poets sometimes are” (p. ix), and its *leitmotiv* does not explicitly concern radio. It is indeed an essay –, the third in the trilogy that began with the publication in 2012 of *The poetry of radio: the colour of sound* (Street, 2012) and continued two years later in *The memory of sound: preserving the sonic past* (Street, 2014), an essay that takes sound and poetry as kin, because “both provide images that the mind is required to interpret” (p. xi). *Sound poetics* is also not a classic academic book, because it does not pretend to provide the reader with the results of an empirical study planned according to the norms of scientific procedures or even to follow a more or less uniform structure that supposes introducing a problem, situating it in the state of the art, and then developing an allegedly original theoretical or practical proposal. In it, however, a thesis is stated: “sound defines us” (p. 4), being “a fundamental part of what we are” (p. xii).

Organised into six chapters, this book from Seán Street is presented as an interdisciplinary work. However, it is not necessary to recognise it as more than a proposal in the field of semiotics of sound to take it as a reference publication in the field of sound

studies. It is, above all, an exercise in understanding a sound culture parallel to an image culture. By speaking of sound in assumedly poetic terms, because “sound is itself a poetic concept” (p. 3), it is the author himself who announces the dual purpose expressed in this work: “to explore the relationship between sound, interaction and identity, using the concept of poetics both as a metaphor and actual expression of the human condition”, and “to examine sonic signs as something heard internally and externally, through imagination, memory and direct response” (p. ix).

In the first chapter, entitled “Poetry and the idea of sound”, the reader may realise that “hearing is the first sense to awaken in us, and the last to leave us” (p. 3). In addition, the author recalls that “we can close our eyes, but we cannot close our ears”, which is why sound “affects us at a subliminal level, bypassing our emotional and cultural filters” (p. 3). It is for this reason that, according to Seán Street, “we are defined by sound” and cannot “escape its influence and affect” (p. 4). Even when we seem to have distracted ourselves from the words one directs to us, other sounds exercise a greater power over our imagination.

What we hear situates us, on the other hand, in space. As the author explains, “reverberations and echoes govern us”, hence “for a number of reasons, we may become disoriented when we are left with only our internal sound world, without the surrounding soundtrack of an external context” (p. 13). However, what really brings the sound closer to life is the fact that sound exists in time; “we catch it as it passes us, and as we do so, it is already fading, moving on and away from us, becoming memory” (p. 15). In a chapter focused on the idea that sound exists because it is heard, the author ends by pointing out a curious “accident” of the English language: the fact that the word *silent* is an anagram of the word *listen*. Perhaps for this reason, he suggests that “we must begin, not with sound, but with silence, not with sending audio signals, but with listening” (p. 16).

It is with this motto that Seán Street introduces chapter two, dedicated to an apparently paradoxical *silent sound*. Under the title “Silent sound: imagination and identification”, this second section reinforces the idea that sound has a close relation to the imagination and, consequently, to the ability to evoke images. If, for Emma Rodero, a story narrated only through sound has the capacity to increase the imagination (Rodero Antón, 2011, p. 43), for Seán Street, the sound “creates pictures in the mind, visual images that reverberate in the memory” (p. 18), so that sound is the fundamental medium for storytelling (p. 27). Corroborating what other researchers have advocated for the power of sound to produce images, the author argues, on the other hand, that “we have the capacity to *make* sounds in our imagination, as well as to *interpret* sounds heard externally” (p. 21). In other words, “just as sound can evoke pictures, so too can pictures make sound in the minds, be those pictures physical or words on a printed page” (p. 29). It can thus be stated that, according to Street, even in the silence that can accompany the visual, the mind interprets a sound mode, which makes each of us a composer, being “our orchestra our imagination” (p. 31).

The third chapter, which is titled “Transmitters and receivers: shared and selected sound”, is the most tuned to radio throughout the book. Assuming that the television experience is more observational than immersive, Seán Street believes that radio makes

us capable of being part of a community experience, that sharing experience mentioned in the title. By registering a kind of acoustic identity of listeners (Oliveira, 2013, p. 186), radio promotes an “artificial kinship between the broadcaster and the listener through a range of recognisable sound codes” (p. 47), which we have been absorbing throughout life and subconsciously using to build the fabric of our personality (p.38). The development of other technologies, however, enables the “personalisation of sound” (p. 47), to the point that “the smartphone carries everything we need in order to tune to our sonic identity, with the capacity to transmit this identity to others in the tribe” (p. 47). Today, for Séan Street, real “reality” may lie therefore “not in what we receive, but what we transmit to ourselves from within” (p. 54). This comes from the selection that we have made in the commutation between *hearing* and *listening* and from an interaction that we operate on the basis of sources and points of reference whose validity has become a sensitive and extremely complex value.

With the evocative title “Invasion of the sound aliens”, chapter four returns to the idea that “hearing is compulsory in normal circumstances, but listening is a conscious decision” (p. 57). One of the reasons why this is also a necessary chapter for the reader interested in understanding the expressive power of sound is that the author suggests that “the sounds we do not recognise alert us to potential danger” (p. 59). Confessing to having discovered that he had hearing problems while writing this book, Séan Street also notes the curious resistance that some people seem to demonstrate regarding the idea of using hearing aids, a resistance that seems to have no equivalent in the need for spectacles, recognised not only as a sign of insufficient vision but also as a fashion accessory. Likewise in this everyday gesture, “there is a defensive propensity within human beings to auditory prejudice; a voice, a dialect, or a foreign accent may alert us to a supposed risk” (p. 74). In fact, “next to physical appearance – the colour of skin, age, gender and other visible attributes – nothing activates the snap judgement in us so much and so quickly as the sound, timbre, pitch and ethnicity of the voice” (p. 74).

In the penultimate chapter, entitled “Uncomfortably numb: alone in the sound world”, Street recalls that “silence may be a spiritual state” (p. 75) and that “the loneliest place can be in the midst of a crowd, surrounded by the noise and laughter of a party or other form of celebration” (p. 76). Recognising that “there is a compulsion to communicate” (p. 78), the poet understands that in a screen-based culture, we may find ourselves silently shouting back, developing the illusion of a conversation, even as we sit within the silence of ourselves. In a sense, a photograph or a painting “may evoke silent sound or may reflect profound silence” (p. 81). This is, in fact, one of the differences between photography and sound. The first freezes the time, as it is a *silent stationary moment*; the second preserves the decay of time. “The other significant difference”, adds the author, “is that a photography – like a moving image – places us as a witness to an event, whereas a sound record sets us in the frame of a participant” (p. 81). Although the auditory capacity is associated with the ear, sound actually needs the whole body, because we hear “the world as a vibration and as actual sound” (p. 83). For the same reason, “total stillness in our relationship with the world is inhuman” (p. 89).

In chapter six, which closes the book under the title “Searching for the sound of self”, the reader finds again the author’s proposal regarding the connection between what we hear and what we are. Suggesting that “the key to our sonic identity is listening and creating conditions in which creative and positive listening can exist” (p. 94), Seán Street argues that “the ear can be a dominant force in ‘reading’ our environment and will therefore be required to work harder than ever to absorb this increasingly complicated world of sound” (p. 98). Technology has granted us, through recording devices, the possibility of recovering the sound that naturally fades with time, but it is, the author warns, changing the memory and, in a sense, our own personal identity. However, “to communicate our true sound is a right and a duty” (p. 110). No further arguments are necessary to recommend the reading of this book with the same delight with which birdsong can be heard in the wake of a spring morning. Still, listening to *Sound poetics. Interaction and personal identity* is to listen to a recommendation that Seán Street mutters at the end in the same intimate tone that runs through the whole text: “It is best that we begin with ourselves, listen critically, carefully, compassionately, and express ourselves with sound that remains faithful to our unique human essence” (p. 110).

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