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Detecting the Domestic Soundscape in the “Age of Noise”: Alcott, Green, Campbell, Gilman

ABSTRACT

Modernism witnessed a radical reconfiguration as far as sound is concerned, since the frontiers of literature and arts were opening up to experimentation and innovation as never before. The new array of sounds and noises in big cities, together with the voices and silences in families, and the sound-marks of war, religion, and racial/gender segregation, gave rise to new cultures of listening, so that sensorial perception started to become a new paradigm of knowledge.

I will briefly concentrate on some literary works by Louisa May Alcott, Anna Katharine Green, Alice Campbell, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which in my opinion anticipated modernism as far as sound is concerned. In each of them, the soundscape (or sonic environment) is pervasive and challenges the hegemony of sight in all its declinations. I believe these works truly deserve a place among the best products of their time and give a fundamental contribution to sound studies. In fact, they highlight such typical practices as overhearing, eavesdropping, crying, whispering, hearkening, and silencing (or being silenced), which are clearly and dramatically linked to gender issues.

KEYWORDS: domesticity, crime fiction, Sound Studies, Alcott, Green, Campbell, Gilman

1. Sound and space

The modernist period witnessed many transformations in Western societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among other things, its wide experimentation and innovations radically reconfigured the experience of sound. While everybody was generally amazed by the emerging new technologies, women writers were particularly concerned with the sonic changes within the home, thus reaching an awareness about gendered domestic listening often ignored by otherwise thorough critics. Though including Alcott, Green and Campbell within modernist discourse might seem implausible, since canonical

periodization typically locates modernism in the first two decades of the 20th century (sometimes in the 1890s), I believe they strongly contributed to the development of a sound sensitiveness and awareness which would characterize modernism and become central in the following decades.

As a matter of fact, sensorial perception became a new paradigm of knowledge long before the term “soundscape” was coined by Murray Schafer in 1977. The process by which our ears detect sound waves or vibrations across a wide range of frequencies and our brains perceive them as sounds had been anticipated by the principle of resonance, which Galileo called sympathetic vibration. Nonetheless, the technology of sound took a long time to enter individual lives. In 1856 Leon Scott invented the “phonoautograph”; in 1874 Alexander Bell patented the “ear phonograph”; in 1877 Thomas Edison announced the invention of the phonograph, which is remembered as one of the technological milestones of the late nineteenth century, and then we have the development of the new graphophone and “perfected” phonograph between about 1886 and early 1888. In 1896 Guglielmo Marconi patented the wireless, and from the mid-1890s to about 1900 “phonograph parlors” were set up in many cities across the United States; in the period before 1910, the phonograph, graphophone, and gramophone improved in quality, and spawned a number of imitators; also, in the years from 1910 to about 1925 the “talking machine” (as the gramophone was now called) reached a peak in sales; in 1927 we find the first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*; and the term “high fidelity” was first used in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

All of this helps the contemporary reader understand the importance of sound and listening in the years comprised between 1870 and 1930. In this span of time, many women writers actively brought this revolution in sound technology into their works. They seemed perfectly aware of the “reformulation of the relationship between sound and space” that took place in those decades, partially because of the increased level of noise due to “modern technology: the roar of elevated trains, the rumble of internal combustion engines, the crackle and hiss of radio transmissions” (Thompson 2004: 2, 6), and partially because of their emergence as “new” women at home and in society. The very architecture of the house started to be analyzed as an engaging arena where the difficult roles of mother, wife, and daughter were to be played. Something of this already existed in gothic fiction, but here we have a more consistent consciousness of the private and political responsibility and consequences of listening in a society characterized by gender inequality,

As cities were growing rapidly and noisily, the study of sound was becoming progressively deeper: Lord Rayleigh’s *Theory of Sound* dates from 1877, and

The Acoustic Society of America was organized in 1928, "institutionally acknowledging the tremendous expansion of the field of acoustics that had occurred since the turn of the century" (Thompson 2004: 60). New products and services, especially the telephone and radio, became important sectors of the American economy and offered new opportunities and resources for the study of sound.

Everybody perceived a radical change in the nature of noise: in 1896 Dr. J. H. Girdner had listed in *The Plague of City Noises* all traditional sounds (horse-drawn vehicles, peddlers, musicians, animals, and bells), but less than thirty years later this "plague" was no longer perceived as organic at all but included motors, elevators, the subway, and building noises (Thompson 2004: 117). Consequently, building materials became crucial to ensure more silence inside the home. In 1892 Samuel Cabot developed "a new type of padded building paper with excellent properties of both heat and sound insulation [...] preventing the transmission of sound from one room to another" (Thompson 2004: 174). Not only that: one started to talk about risks for the health, and a Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noises was founded in 1907 because [quote] "a quieter America would be a healthier America" (Ober 2020: 81). Later, Vern Knudsen studied "the behavior of sound in rooms, and he focused his research on measuring the effect of reverberation on the intelligibility of speech" (Thompson 2004: 101).

In the following years, acoustical experts were constructing new means for defining and dealing with noise in the modern world. Also, they began to measure noise with electroacoustic instruments so that it became an essential aspect of the modern American experience, and an important means of "environmental control" (Thompson 2024: 72). By 1930, the whole process of reconceptualization of sound seems concluded: "The new vitality associated with acoustics [...] was perceived not only by scientists. The public, too, had become 'sound conscious', recognizing the important role that acoustic technologies and commodities now played in modern life" (Thompson 2004: 59).

The connection between sound and space, and especially the idea of environmental control, is an important feature in literary works and its gender implications are often explored, though "not enough consideration has been given to the ways sound may be gendered and gender sounded. [...] Thinking historically about gendered soundscapes can help us conceptualize sound as a space where categories of "male" and "female" are constituted, and by extension the ways that power, inequality and agency might be expressed in the sonic realm. This is really nothing more than tuning in to sound as a signifier of power (Ehrick 2015).

What has literature to do with all of this? In recent years there has been a proliferation of literary studies that have the theme of soundscape at their core, and this diffusion can only reinforce the links between reality and fiction, science and humanities, technology and private life. Having dealt with literary soundscape before, I have chosen to concentrate on four women writers here, starting with Louisa May Alcott and Anna Katharine Green and continuing with Alice Campbell and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The four works I have chosen reflect a common interest in the domestic soundscape, with a slight difference: while Alcott and Green did not seem interested in technology yet, Campbell and Gilman explicitly mentioned technology and insert devices in their plots. All of them, however, were typical representatives of a truly modernist way of listening, which is a fundamental part of their diegetic construction.

These are the titles: *A Whisper in the Dark* (Alcott 1877 an.), a story by the author of *Little Women*, often considered a gothic story due to the absence of a detective; *The Golden Slipper* (Green 1915), a tale by the renowned mother of American detective fiction; *Juggernaut* (Campbell 1928), Campbell's first novel and bestseller; and *Unpunished* (Gilman 1929), the only crime novel by this famous proto-feminist writer, which remained unpublished until 1997. In these works, different as they are from each other in length, plot, setting, and style, the sonic environment is pervasive and strongly challenges the hegemony of sight in all its declinations. Whether or not these authors were aware of being modernist (or pre-modernist, as in Alcott's case), of writing in modernist ways, and for a modernist readership, I believe they deserve a place among modernist writers, even more so because their works create a bridge between soundscape theories and gender studies, by problematizing such typical practices as overhearing, eavesdropping, crying, whispering, 'hearkening', and silencing (or being silenced).

2. Eavesdropping and overhearing

I shall start my journey into sound with *A Whisper in the Dark*, a short novel by U.S. writer Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women* (1868-69). It was published anonymously in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine* in July 1863 and republished in a volume entitled *A Modern Mephistopheles and A Whisper in the Dark* in 1869. Historically, the 1860s were dominated by the Civil War (1861-65) and Alcott herself volunteered as a nurse in the Union Army, serving at

a makeshift hospital in Georgetown, Washington D.C., for some weeks between 1862 and 1863. She wrote *Hospital Sketches* following such an experience (1863).

This short novel is not one of her best-known works, but it ought to be, since it is focused on an issue that was dramatic at her age and is unfortunately still highly topical nowadays, that is, physical and psychological violence against women. Even though the term "femicide" did not yet exist at that time, it is exactly what the story is about: a young woman is deceived, threatened, drugged, and finally accused of insanity and imprisoned, following the common thought by which any smallest deviance from "normality" was seen as a symptom of mental instability.

The plot tells of a nameless uncle who, after trying to make his niece marry his son and then himself, locks her up in a countryside madhouse to lay hands on her money. In his deed, he is helped by an unscrupulous doctor. Cases like this were so frequent in the 19th century that the years from mid-century to the 1930s were called the "Era of the Asylum", due to the significant expansion of confinement structures driven by the belief that moral and humane treatment could cure mental illness (Baron 1998). Such structures, supported by the so called "lunacy laws", were initially intended as supportive and safe havens, but they often became a true hell for patients, most of whom were women. For them, the asylum was not a place of refuge, but a place of incarceration and abuse (Rembis 2024).

As for the so-called rest cure, it was developed by neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell and focused on prolonged bed rest, overfeeding, and massage, often prescribed for women suffering from 'nervous' conditions like hysteria or neurasthenia (Shorter 1997). It involved complete isolation, restricted activity, and overfeeding, sometimes supplemented with electric muscle stimulation. While proponents believed it could restore vitality, it is now viewed as a form of medical misogyny due to its restrictive and often harmful effects, particularly on women. A famous short story by Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, focuses on the rest cure experienced by her female protagonist, who is driven to madness with the complicity of her 'loving' husband. Though this cure was considered better than leeching, cauterization and ovariectomy procedures, still "it too seemed sadistic, controlling, and intrusive" (Bassuk 1985: 245).

In our specific case, the 'asylum' is actually a simple house in the country, and the 'cure' is or should be mere confinement. In reality, no treatment is taken into consideration since the Uncle's true aim in imprisoning Sybil is to dispossess her of her inheritance.

In terms of locations, the story opens with a carriage ride; it continues in the residence that on her coming-of-age Sybil is expected to inherit along with

the estate; and it ends in the madhouse. The two houses are the main setting for the entire narrative. In the first one, Sybil learns about her destiny through attentive listening plus overhearing and eavesdropping. In the second one, the true epiphany of the tale is aural, not visual: the whisper of the title comes to make sense only towards the story's finale, just as the silence that precedes and envelops it comes to signify the silence to which women have long been forced.

In the tale we find the typical patriarchal triangle of family authority: the *pater familias* (who here is an uncle), a subjugated woman, and a compliant doctor. The girl is condemned to the loss of her personal possessions, her space, her freedom, and her identity. It is only through listening that she will be able to overthrow her dramatic situation: first, by *overhearing* and *eavesdropping* through a half-closed door, she learns about her uncle's plot; and then, through a closed door, she receives her mother's dramatic and mysterious message of salvation.

In this domestic context, the theme of eavesdropping is particularly relevant, since it introduces a new element into the narrative in an era when new devices that would enable oral communication were being designed. In Alcott's tale, eavesdropping and ear-witnessing become vital actions which lead to the acoustic climax of the story:

[...] I became aware that the room above my own was occupied by some inmate whom I never saw. A peculiar person it seemed to be; for I heard steps going to and fro, hour after hour, in a tireless march that wore upon my nerves, as many a harsher sound would not have done. [...] day after day I listened to it, till I longed to cover up my ears and implore the unknown walker to stop, for heaven's sake. Other sounds I heard and fretted over: a low monotonous murmur, as of someone singing a lullaby; a fitful tapping, like a cradle rocked on a carpetless floor; and at rare intervals cries of suffering, sharp but brief, as if forcibly suppressed. These sounds, combined with the solitude, the confinement, and the books I read, a collection of ghostly tales and weird fancies, soon wrought my nerves to a state of terrible irritability, and wore upon my health so visibly that I was allowed at last to leave my room. (Alcott 1889: 18)

The quantity of sounds is overwhelming and invites the reader to plunge into this disquieting universe that seems bound to drive the protagonist crazy. The fact that such sounds combine with the protagonist's solitude and confinement (plus the books she reads) adds to the tragedy of her condition. Nonetheless, as we shall soon discover, the training in hearing and listening are destined to prove fundamental to her rescue. The story takes a turn when Sybil dares to go out into the corridor and even upstairs. It is there, in front of a locked door, that she will hear the whisper of the title:

[...] At midnight I woke to find myself standing in a streak of moonlight, opposite the door whose threshold I had never crossed. [...] I saw a ghostly hand emerge and beckon, as if to me. [...] A cloud swept over the moon, and when it passed the hand was gone, but shrill through the keyhole came a whisper that chilled me to the marrow of my bones, so terribly distinct and imploring was it. "Find it! For God's sake find it before it is too late!"

[...] Breathlessly I listened; the sound went on, stopped; a dead silence reigned; then something brushed against my door, and with a suddenness that made me tingle from head to foot like an electric shock, through the keyhole came again that whisper, urgent, imploring, and mysterious, "Find it! For God's sake find it before it is too late!" [...] Till dawn I listened [...] (Alcott 1889: 18-21)

Through this *whisper in the dark* Sybil will be able to save herself, so in this case the soundscape acquires a psychological and political function as well as a crucial gendered and prophetic significance:

Sybil's name underscores the ambiguities inherent in the text. The prophetic sybils of the ancient world were wise and articulate, whether writing their prophecies on the famed sybilline leaves or speaking their predictions. They were also doomed. The explicit prophet in the story is not Sybil herself but her mother, who prophesies her daughter's future in notes and attempts to communicate with her daughter in whispers. The text as a whole, however, can be taken as Sybil's prophetic narrative, directed at a reader/listener who must be warned against any expression of rage similar to Sybil's. (Carpenter 1986: 38)

It is her rage, in fact, that gives her uncle the opportunity to confine her: it is her rage that "her uncle's physician, the sinister Dr. Karnac, labels madness" (Carpenter 1986: 32). Nonetheless, both the rage and the whisper, though differently, are sonic means to communicate a serious disease. Through the former, Sybil will be judged insane and locked up; through the latter, her mother will be able to save her from madness – or worst. The gendered quality of sound and the political importance of listening are here perfectly represented and problematized, not only within the frame of domesticity but also within a mother-daughter relationship which, while reflecting the traditional idea of sentimental motherhood based on piety and morality (Doyle 2018), announces a new era of allyship against patriarchy.

3. Between the audible and the inaudible

A Whisper in the Dark can be considered a Gothic story, a proto-feminist tale, etc. but it might also be read as an intriguing example of a detective story without a detective. According to this interpretation, Alcott's protagonist is not actually

rescued by her cousin at the end of the story but it is she herself who, after investigating inside the house and hard listening to her mother's whisper, rejects the role of victim and faces physical and psychological violence as a true Private Eye – or better, Private Ear – would do (Calanchi 2020).

In Green's *The Golden Slipper*, written some years later, we find a real female detective. It is the first of a collection having young Violet as the protagonist. In all these stories Violet does as a part of her job exactly what Sybil did for herself. This is a step forward in the acknowledgement of the soundscape as gendered and as the sonic equivalent for the expression 'mirror of society'. The fact that Violet, a girl who belongs to New York City jet-set, works and gets money on her own, is so unthinkable at the time that she must hide what she does, in order not to incur the possibility of being disinherited by her father. Moreover, she is led into earning money by her desire to help her sister, who has been banned from the household for making a 'wrong' marriage. Here we have a father instead of an uncle, but again, we meet young women who must struggle hard for their economic independence and social rights.

This tale belongs to Green's mature activity as a writer, being published in 1915. It was a period of significant change, marked by both progress and upheaval. The 1910s saw the end of the Progressive Era, the rise of the United States as a global power, and the devastating impact of World War I. The U.S. maintained a policy of neutrality until the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, which resulted in the deaths of over 120 Americans; this significantly shifted public opinion and fueled debate about U.S. involvement, which occurred in 1917. It was also the period of the 'suffragettes': the right for women to vote was passed by Congress in 1919 and was ratified in 1929 (19th emendment). Though Green published a much discussed article against universal suffrage, she always promoted the female right to economic independence throughout her life and writings (Calanchi and Malatino 2020).

The protagonist of *The Golden Slipper* is a young woman who investigates into typically domestic crimes where other women are involved. It is thanks to her sensitiveness, intuition, and total absence of bias that 'difficult problems' (as *cases* were called) can be solved. Sound performs a crucial function here, partially denoting emotions, in the wake of Edgar Allan Poe's tales focusing on fear, anxiety, madness, but more intensively infecting the very syntax, as if the author were searching for a correspondent of visibility – that is, audibility – in the representation of a criminal context perceived by a woman.

In this story Violet must deal with the disappearance of a jewel after a party. Simple as this crime may seem, it hides a much more complicated and dramatic

situation, which involves a young woman sick with kleptomania. This disease is characterized by an uncontrollable impulse to steal, and it was initially described in the early 19th century, when it was seen as a form of madness or a non-volitional behavior. It is no surprise that it was considered mostly female (just as hysteria) and as something to be ashamed of. In fact, kleptomania was linked to a rigid division of gender roles that assigned consumption activities to women, and, under the rubric "kleptomania", it was used to define gender – as well as class-based notions of theft (Abelson 1989: 123). Over time, the concept of kleptomania has been refined, moving from a general descriptor to a recognized impulse control disorder, though its underlying causes and mechanisms remain somewhat unclear.

The facts go as follow. Violet is invited to Mister Driscolls' house to prove his daughter Alicia is innocent. She is, in fact, suspected of stealing various items which magically reappear soon after. During the gala dinner, Violet makes friends with Alicia and her friends, boasting about a beautiful jewel of hers. After dinner they separate for the night. When Violet is in her room she sets her trap, leaving the jewel in full sight; then she goes to bed leaving a window open and waits for the burglar to appear. She is alone in her room, surrounded by darkness, and seeing progressively gives way to hearing, making her become more and more aware of sounds and noises:

[...] nothing happened, and two o'clock, then three o'clock struck, without a dimming of the blue scintillations on the end of her dresser. Then she suddenly sat up. Not that she heard anything new, but that a thought had come to her. "If an attempt is made," so she murmured softly to herself, "it will be by –" She did not finish. Something – she could not call it sound – set her heart beating tumultuously, and listening – listening – watching – watching – she followed in her imagination the approach down the balcony of an almost inaudible step, not daring to move herself, it seemed so near, but waiting with eyes fixed, for the shadow which must fall across the shade she had failed to raise over that half of the swinging window she had so carefully left shut. (Green 2009: pos. 28160)

This alternation of the audible and inaudible is exactly what Green tries to represent with her magistral double repetition (*listening – listening – watching – watching*) which, by amplifying her anxiety, underlines the echo effect (or reverberation) of her own beating heart – to such an extent that the past simple cannot render the scene and the author must switch to present tense. Violet's emotional reaction to sound shows that sight is revealing its impotence and failure to the advantage of a sonic experiencing of the world. The syntax itself is modified by the

acts of hearing and listening, and the heart beating contributes to the punctuation, rhythm, and suspense – together with the dashes, which graphically accompany the breathing. The repetition of *listening* and *watching* creates a sort of fundamental, and inescapably binary, experience of the world through two different senses, an experience which ought to coincide with a thorough comprehension of reality but gives just a partial knowledge of what is happening.

The investigation ends up with the discovery that the thief of the night before is not Alicia; however, she confesses her previous crimes: “A curse has been over my life – the curse of a longing I could not combat” (Green 2009: pos. 28298). She adds that love saved her (that’s why she stopped stealing) and her father’s acceptance of the truth cancels the reciprocal shame they felt. This is a very naïf solution for a very deep question that involves gender and class. The importance of sound, however, also emerges in the final part of the story, though very differently from the passage previously quoted.

In the last pages, in fact, we find a long conversation between the father (on the one side) and the young women (on the other side). It is a strongly gendered dialogue, where it is only through deep listening that things are finally set. Questions, answers, and silences dramatically alternate in a crescendo of emotions, and Violet acts like an orchestra conductor in her final revelation. Here the female voice is a crucial instrument of communication, knowledge, and retaliation. Speaking out means to get free and be able to start a new life. No letters are involved here (as they are on many other occasions), nor pictures or descriptions whatsoever, but only voices and silences to be heard and understood. Violet wants to hear the other women’s voices. She is not concerned with eyewitnesses, and even visible evidence is secondary with respect to the confession. Hers is an extraordinary intuition, or insight as we might say.

But unfortunately, there is no sonic equivalent for ‘insight’, a term which generally refers to the ability to understand something clearly and deeply, often involving a sudden realization or understanding of a complex situation or problem. It can also refer to the specific understanding or realization itself. In psychology, it is often associated with the Gestalt approach, where a problem is solved by a sudden restructuring of perception. This is exactly what Violet does in this and other stories. Yet, *sight* (the root of *insight*) has little to do with her perceptions, which mostly occur at the level of sonic experiences or, at most, synesthetically. Acknowledging the function of soundscapes in these tales can help critics and readers better understand and appreciate their innovative reach as far as gender, class, and sociocultural issues are concerned.

4. A disembodied voice

As we approach the 1920s, which are often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties", we meet a decade of significant social, cultural, and economic change. It was a period of prosperity and innovation following World War I, and this era brought along shifts in social norms, the emergence of a consumer culture, and the rise of new technologies. Therefore, I believe the time has come to introduce sound technology. Since the turn of the twentieth century, new media such as the phonograph, telephone, and radio had changed how sound was transmitted and perceived, and novelists began to use sound in new ways: to bridge the distance between characters, to connect with the reader on a more intimate level, or simply to experiment on the representation (and mechanical reproduction) of voices and noise. At the time, not only did face-to-face conversation lose its aspect of uniqueness, but:

The deployment of microphones and loudspeakers into the soundscape occurred gradually but persistently over the course of the 1920s [...] In order for a telephone conversation to be audible, the transmitter had to be held close to the speaker's mouth and the receiver adjacent to the listener's ear; thus telephonic sounds did not fully occupy architectural space as did the sounds of an ordinary conversation. (Thompson 2004: 233, 235)

A writer who appears particularly aware of technology is Alice Campbell, from Atlanta, Georgia. At the age of 29, she wrote and published her first novel, a thriller entitled *Juggernaut*, which was serialized in the *Chicago Tribune* starting from January 1928 and was a great success. *Juggernaut* is a long and rich crime novel, full of action and sensation, but it is also a powerful reflection on female work, power relations, and the moral limits of scientific research in a technologically very active period of the U.S. history. The title refers to a character of the story, a wicked doctor (who reminds us of Alcott's tale), but is also more generally linked to any force of evil capable of dragging entire families into ruin. Despite the setting, which owes much to the typical Gothic mansion, modernity creeps in everywhere. Among the several technologies described in the novel, I have chosen the telephone.

From the very beginning of the novel the telephone appears as an important element of the plot. In Chapter 1, Esther, a young Canadian nurse who wants to spend some time in Cannes, France, finds a position as a doctor's assistant and he lists her mansions: "little secretarial work, answer the telephone, and, of course, assist when there are examinations. The usual thing [...]. Can you typewrite?"

(Campbell 2022: 50). If typewriting means a lot for women's emancipation in the previous novel, here the focus is on the telephone, which is mentioned once again in Chapters 7 and 12. Then we have a crescendo... and the telephone is quoted up to 53 times in the novel, while the telegraph only appears twice, and telegrams 11 times. This means that the telephone is not only a modern tool and an important means of communication, but it opens up new possibilities in the unfolding of the plot. The fact that the telephone needs the human voice and the human ear to work changes things completely, with regards to both strategies of narration and gender issues. Campbell shows the reader three important characteristics of this technology. First, the telephone is a status symbol, and not all households have one. Second, the owners of a private telephone can decide whether to permit a stranger to use it – especially if she is a woman, and a woman in distress, therefore weak and vulnerable. Third, the telephone can be used either for a good reason (e.g. to save a person) or for a bad reason (e.g. to call the police and make a false accusation)

As previously noted, the telephone appears in many parts of the novel, and always in crucial situations. The evidence of the murder, for example, is communicated to Esther by telephone. However, I have chosen two different passages. In the first one, Esther has just managed to escape imprisonment after being drugged and kidnapped. She has not drunk or eaten for two days, and she is desperately trying to find a telephone to save her lover's life:

She must at once find a telephone; it was her one chance. A telephone – there must be one in the next villa; she would ring the bell and ask. [...] The old face, unsmiling, critical, looked her over from head to foot. [...] "*On n'a pas du telephone ici*", she replied with a Belgian accent, and pushed the door to in Esther's face.

Outraged and disappointed, the more so as she had caught sight of the telephone-instrument in the hall, Esther stumbled down the steps and out again in the street [...] Oh! To think a simple matter like finding a telephone should present so many difficulties!" (Campbell 2022: 245-46)

After several attempts, she finally finds a telephone, but the line doesn't work well so she eventually catches a cab and goes herself to the villa where one crime has already been committed, and a second one is about to be perpetrated.

The second passage regards the telephone call the suspected murderer makes from her own room:

"The police!"

"Yes, sir, three officers. They say someone telephoned for them [...]"

In blank astonishment Roger stared as three men in uniform filed into the room [...]

"Who sent for you to come here?" demanded Roger, more and more irate.

The question had an unexpected reply.

"C'était moi, messieurs, qui viens de vous téléphoner. Moi je suis Lady Clifford".

The voice, metallic and defiant, rang out from the door leading into the right-hand bedroom.

[...]

"*You* telephoned them?" he repeated, hardly able to believe his ears.

"Certainly. I simply reported the fact to police headquarters that I am being kept prisoner in my bedroom". (Campbell 2022: 289-90)

The murderess's voice sounds *metallic*, and it *rang*. It is a voice that has lost all its humanity. The more she reveals herself for what she is, the more she becomes disembodied. Her voice must sound machine-like so that we can really despise her. The fact that this voice belongs to the "villainess" of the situation complicates things: Lady Clifford is a sort of Lady Macbeth, or dark lady, exactly the negative double of innocent Esther. They represent two opposite sides of femininity in a time when the disembodied voice was both challenged by and challenging in turn the machine-like quality of telephone communication. The medium is not the message yet, but it is on its way.

5. Points of listening

We shall stay in the 1920s, since the discourse on technology is not concluded yet. And I wish to mention Gilman again. The writer's most famous tale, the previously mentioned *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, has been widely analyzed from many different perspectives, including those focusing on men exerting "dissecting gazes" and women being at the center of their "visual attention" (Spengler 2008: 36). A few studies have highlighted the interdependencies between vision, gender, and power, the passivity of women as objects of spectacle, and the role of observation in the construction of female hysteria. As Spengler argues, "Gilman was careful to dramatize the visual dimension of surveillance and its psychological mechanisms" (2008: 41). Even though Spengler makes it clear from the start that her focus is not "on vision in terms of style or point of view, but on vision as action, vision on the level of plot and content, vision as a cultural and social practice" (2008: 4), what lacks here is an analogous 'focus' in the field of sound. I hope it is clear by now that sound has assumed the same importance as vision in the literary works under examination.

Since we have already introduced the use of sound technology in Campbell's novel (microphones, telephones, etc.), I wish to conclude our journey by going back to Gilman and particularly to a lesser-known work of hers. Gilman wrote essays, utopias, short fiction, always dealing with the condition of women and denouncing inequality and male abuse on women. *Unpunished* is the only crime novel she wrote (1927). Her masterpiece, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, lurks behind this novel, even though they seem so different under many aspects. *Unpunished* is, in fact, formally a detective story, but its contents are unmistakably referred to the same issues the author was concerned with all her life, that is physical and psychological violence against women within the very sanctuary of the home. It is a matter for reflection that it remained unpublished until 1997.

Here I am going to briefly concentrate on two different technologies which are both present in the novel: typewriting and the Dictaphone. They are strongly linked to gender, and they both perform an important narrative function. It seems that phonocentric logic faced a crisis of legitimacy once typewriters emerged, yet the dictation business continued with the invention of the phonograph, later renamed either Dictaphone (Columbia Phonograph Company) or Ediphone (Edison's National Phonograph Company). The Dictaphone is an instrument that since its introduction on the market (1907) was associated with the possibility of "spying" on employees – so much so that it was called the "Detective Dictograph," and the various models included an "Eavesdropping clock" that was in all appearances an innocuous clock laid on the desk. As one may expect, gender roles were tightly predetermined.

Another technology we find in the book is a system of pipes through which it is possible to listen to private conversations inside the house: it is based on "transduction", that is the conversion of acoustic waves in the air to waves of electromagnetism or pulses of electrical current. This system is called "Dionysus' Ear" in the novel, and it allows the occupants to hear conversations between two people in a room as well as the voice of one person speaking to a Dictaphone.

A short passage describing this "Ear" reveals its importance as a turning point in the plot, the major source of evidence in the investigation, and a modernist strategy of creating a powerful narration through sound. Here we do not have a traditional "point of view" or "perspective", or "focus"; on the contrary, all turning points are aural – we could call them "points of *listening*":

We were in slavery, pure and simple! [...] He let me have this room on account of the speaking tube to the kitchen, lucky for me.

(Gilman 1997: 81-82, 90, Chapter 8)

September 1925

I found it quite by accident, sitting there and waiting for a telephone connection and playing with the standard. "They don't an –" said central, and I happened to turn something on the standard, and central was cut off and I could hear the cook talking in the kitchen! I listened in amazement, and while I was turning it back and forth to see how it worked I heard the maid setting [the] room beneath me in order, Vaughn's study.

[...] Now I shall find out perhaps why he sees so many clients in the evening [...] I've heard the vague sound of voices below me.

(Gilman 1997: 94-95, Chapter 9)

"It's a relief to get out of that house," she proclaimed, "and be able to walk easy and talk out loud. Secret ears are worse than secret passages I think. I like investigation, but I hate creeping around [...]. She doesn't know that I know anything about her 'ears,' and further she doesn't know about the eyes-and-ears in that disused pantry, where I was".

(Gilman 1997: 127-28, Chapter 12)

"After your father's death Mr. Vaughn moved into the house? [...] And you were given the room which had been your father's?"

"And my mother's when she was alive. He gave it to me because of the speaking tube to the kitchen and upstairs telephone. In using these I discovered a mechanical trick of my father's by which he could listen to conversation in the study below, or in the kitchen." [...]

"And you made use of this device?"

"I did."

"Will you tell us something of what you overheard, so far as it may have a bearing on the tragedy?"

"I learned that Mr. Vaughn was in the habit of receiving clients in the study, which he used as an office. [...] As I listened it became apparent that most of them came to pay him money as the price of silence. He was a blackmailer."

(Gilman 1997: 156, Chapter 14)

"Points of listening" is not just a duplicate of "points of view", but it refers to actively listening to others. In other words, it is something more than simply hearing words – it involves a full understanding of the speaker's message, emotions, and aims. Many events and laboratories inspired by this concept appear in the realm of sound studies (cfr. website <pointsoflistening.net/>) while in psychology this term is used to combine understanding and empathy, relationship building, and problem solving /decision making. In some contexts, this expression starts being used instead of "perspective" (which is linked to view, sight, and vision), while in business language we have *mission* and *vision* but

still no word indicating sound. A change of paradigm was urged by philosopher Roberto Barbanti, who considers “decolonizing the imaginary” a necessity for human survival (2020).

The four case studies we have shortly analyzed give us the opportunity to reconsider the multifaceted nature of domesticity by interpreting the soundscape not only as functional to the plot, but as an arena of female resistance to patriarchy and control. I believe there is a strong potentiality in the intersection between sound studies and gender studies, for mutual benefit; and I hope I have raised questions and curiosities that can lead to studying other works in an unconventional, sound-centered way.

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