

Publication

Introduction

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This is the introduction to a book in which Schweighauser traces the acoustic imagination of American literature from naturalism to postmodernism. He reads the noises writers represent as fictional responses to the social, cultural, and political changes and conflicts of modernity and postmodernity. Exploring the social functions of literature, he also suggests that literature itself, in its constant search for new language forms, has become a source of revitalizing noise in the channels of cultural communication. The author provides substantial new readings of a broad range of canonical texts, from the naturalism of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane to the modernism of Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, John Dos Passos, and Djuna Barnes, to the postmodernism of Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Don DeLillo. Across almost 100 years of literary history, he listens to the hum of traffic and the fracas of war and to immigrant accents and African-American vocalization. From the late 19th-century writers' often anxious responses to the new soundscapes brought about by industrialization and urbanization, to the modernists' decision to let the noises of social discontent seep into the very forms of their texts, to late 20th-century literary oscillations between acoustic mysticism and ecological critique, he shows that changing representations of sound indicate writers' stances on issues of class, gender, and race. Drawing on soundscape studies, systems theory, sociology, media archaeology, and literary theory, this book explores the acoustic worlds and changing social functions of American literature.

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