

Publication

The noises of modernist form: Dos passos, hurston, and the soundscapes of modernity

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This paper argues that the sounds and noises of modernity are not merely privileged objects of representation of a literary modernism that has developed a refined sensorium for the new shapes and structures of an acoustic environment deeply affected by urbanization, industrialization, and newly emerging technologies of communication. These sounds and noises infiltrate the very forms of modernist fiction, rendering it unavailable as a vehicle for the communication of self-identical information. The difficulty and recalcitrance of modernist literature can at least partly be understood as the result of a change in the very mediality of literature that responds to changes in the media landscape. Modernist writers consciously refuse to deliver on the promise of communicative transparency so powerfully evoked by the new sound media. Instead, they create fictions whose formal innovations and dislocations impede communication to such an extent that it seems fair to say these fictions assume noise as a constitutive factor of their formal organization. In systems-theoretic terms, modernism is perhaps best understood as a form of cultural perturbation, as "the noise of culture" (William Paulson). Modernist literary texts, then, are sites of both the representation and the cultural generation of noise. Drawing on soundscape studies and reflections on the social functions of literature, this paper addresses the convergences between the sounds/noises literature represents and the sounds/noises it produces in a reading of two apparently very different modernist texts: John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Once we perceive that both Hurston's introduction of African-American orality into a literary format and Dos Passos's disintegration of narrative continuity are part of an aesthetics that valorizes the disruption of established patterns of cultural communication, commonalities between their projects emerge that overlay obvious differences in terms of narrative and syntactic structure, geographical and cultural setting, and political outlook. Both writers respond to a changed acoustic and communicational environment by a highly productive refusal to make their fictions conform to the communicational needs the new media respond to as well as generate. As a later writer, Conrad Detrez, would put it: "I want a novelist to produce a painting or a movie for me. As for the rest, I've got the telephone."

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