

SPECIAL ISSUE

CULTURAL RESONANCE AND THE ECHO CHAMBER OF READING

INTRODUCTION

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The initial proposal for this special issue was largely inspired by the seminar series organized by the relatively newly established research group Komplitt: Forum for Comparative Literature (www.komplitt.com), at the Centre for Languages and Literature (SOL) of Lund University, Sweden. Colleagues from different language sections at the Centre came together with the aim to re-address the disciplinary *raison d'être* of Comparative Literature, particularly in the context of Swedish higher education. Very quickly, we realized that what truly unifies and complements our different expertise and areas of focus is the hermeneutic and transformative act of crosscultural reading and, indeed, misreading. What was repeatedly attested through the various literary examples discussed in those seminars is that reading comparatively and crossculturally can dramatically change our perception of each *compared* text, sometimes in utterly unexpected ways, giving us an enhanced understanding of the resistance, interference, manipulation, and transformation that intrinsically characterize world literary relations. *Doing Comparative Literature* is, therefore, much more than gathering a set of literary texts delimited by particular nationhood or languages; rather, it signals many ways of dealing with textual relations transnationally and across communities, histories, and languages, and, increasingly, of putting word in relation with other artistic or media forms.

Our followup intellectual endeavour, which motivates this special issue, is to challenge, expand, and reconfigure the established notion of *reading* literature as

a primarily *ocular* activity. Such an assumption persists partly because our relation to language nowadays is implicitly yet hegemonically defined through written, visual signs, which impose themselves even when we intend to talk about its sound. However, the eye has not always been the primary bodily gatherer of information throughout history, not even in the Western tradition, which has been routinely criticized as “ocularcentric.” For instance, R. Murray Schafer makes the following telling remark:

In the West the ear gave way to the eye as the most important gatherer of information about the time of the Renaissance, with the development of the printing press and perspective painting [...]

Before the days of writing, in the days of prophets and epics, the sense of hearing was more vital than the sense of sight. The word of God, the history of the tribe, and all other important information was heard, not seen. In parts of the world [such as rural Africa], the aural sense still tends to predominate. (10-11)

- 400** In this respect, our special issue shares a key motivation in literary and sound studies to rebalance “ocularcentrism in conceptualizations of modernity.” As Anna Snaith summarizes, “Hearing is associated with interiority, subjectivity, affect, temporality, and passivity, whereas sight is harnessed to distance, reason, spatiality, and control. This sensory hierarchy binds vision to knowledge” (7). Yet, it is not our purpose here to set up any critical opposition between the ocular and the sonic; rather, we would like to explore the latter as an alternative, and, in many ways, a complementary *mode* and *analogy* of reading. In other words, attention to the physical qualities of sound, its mechanics of transmission, sound-inspired metaphors, and the processes of listening and hearing, can help us rethink and revitalize what we mean by reading and reading literature comparatively.

Three of the nine contributions in this special issue deal explicitly with *physical sound* in literature—that is, literary representations of sound—and the sound of literature—for instance, audiobooks. Sara Tanderup Linkis’s opening essay on born-audio narratives, texts written to be heard and conceived specifically for an auditory literary experience, tackles precisely the question of how we can qualify “listening to literature” as “reading.” Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy’s *À l’écoute* (2002; translated in 2007 as *Listening*) and Lutz Koepnick’s formulation of “resonant reading,” Linkis advances the concept of “resonant listening,” which describes the quasi-synesthetic literary experience of carrying out “reading” in the real world of mobility, situatedness, and relatedness. In a similar vein, Karin Nykvist’s article on contemporary Scandinavian multilingual sound poetry highlights the metalanguage experience through vocal performances. In her case study of the Icelandic poet Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, she not only inquires into the ontological properties of poetic language, but also exposes the ideological and political intervention manipulated specifically through linguistic sounds. Both of these essays engage with the immediacy and elusiveness of sound and highlight the enhanced reality, semantic instability, and narrative malleability of such literary works, especially as they are heard or listened

to crossculturally. The distinct qualities of sound have led David Toop to brand it with the epithet “sinister resonance”; that is, “an association with irrationality and inexplicability, that which we both desire and dread” (vii). To listen, then, is to discern and to engage with not only what adds to but also “what lies beyond the world of forms” (vii).

The distinction between the sounds *in* and *of* literature becomes utterly blurred in Gunilla Eschenbach and Sandra Richter’s exploration of onomatopoeia and bird-song in the transatlantic works of the overlooked American German writer and poet Wilhelm Benignus (1861-1930). To borrow Anna Snaith’s words, “literary culture shapes how and what we hear, particularly in the case of a sonic fetish object” (1) as resonant as birdsong, from the “Tiuu tiuu tiuu tiuu / Spe tiu zqua / Tio Tio tio tio tio tio” of the European nightingale to the “A-e-o-lee” of the American wood thrush. In many ways, Eschenbach and Richter’s study of onomatopoeia dramatizes what Angela Leighton describes as “reading with ears”: to approach and appreciate onomatopoeia, “the ear hovers somewhere between a literal and a metaphorical faculty in the work of reading, between a sense of perception, alert to real noises, and a figure for hearing, which might pay attention to sounds on the page that are self-evidently inaudible” (2). Moreover, in order to systematically examine the cultural differences in transcribing “natural” sounds and in making the acoustic references and meanings of such sounds, Eschenbach and Richter advocate the incorporation of more empirical research methods into literary studies, as assisted by digital database and quantitative analysis frequently used in linguistics and sound studies.

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In comparison, the other six contributions engage with “sound” as an aural analogy or metaphor for reading, without necessarily going into the field of sound studies. This fruitful approach sheds considerable new light on our perception and understanding of an array of literary and linguistic phenomena and relations, such as transmission, translation, circulation, reception, evolution, and spatial construction. Rather than *seeing* works of literature as fixed and stable textual entities, we attempt to “read” them as ceaseless mutational voices, noises, utterances, articulations, and enunciations, which may better capture the various literary dynamics across histories, spaces, and cultures. To this end, the contributors have been encouraged to actively reflect on the two key references to “sound” in the title of this special issue —“resonance” and “echo chamber”—in the theoretical framing of their individual pieces.

The word and concept of “resonance” has regained critical currency in recent years, perhaps most notably thanks to Hartmut Rosa’s seminal sociological work *Resonance*, published in German in 2016 and translated into English in 2019. To be clear, *Resonance* is not a critical work on literature per se, although Rosa does not hesitate to cite canonical literary examples from Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Proust, and other well-known authors, to illustrate what he formulates as a “resonant relationship.” In a nutshell, Rosa employs “resonance” to conceptualize our fundamental relationship to the world and a way of *encountering* the world; and

the “world,” in turn, is “conceived as *everything that is encountered* (or *that can be encountered*)” (34; emphasis in original), such as people, things, matter, history, nature, and life. We, as the subjects *already* in this world, are first affected by what we encounter, and are then called to respond and react to it through body and mind; importantly, during such a process, both the subjects and the world are transformed. This process, according to Rosa, forms a “resonant relationship”: “a dynamic interaction between subject and world, a relation of fluidity and contact that is processual in nature” and “presuppose[s] a kind of *mutual, rhythmic oscillation*, and therefore must also satisfy certain demands of synchronization” (27; emphasis in original). As Rosa explains more concretely in an interview with Bjørn Schiermer, “Whenever someone has an experience of resonance—with a person, a book, an idea, a melody, a landscape etcetera—he or she comes out as a different person. And the other side is transformed as well” (3). Moreover, just like the elusive nature of sound that refuses to be fixed and transfixed, “it is impossible to predict or control what the result of
 402 an experience of resonance will be, what the process of transformation will result in” (3). In Ana Calvete’s article, the resonant relationship between the subject and the world is put to the test in two travelogues centering on the experience of Siberia: one written by the British traveller Colin Thubron, the other by the French traveller Sylvain Tesson. She questions whether such encounters with radical otherness in nature achieve meaningful transformations or simply end up nostalgically hearing and reproducing echoes from the subjects’ own cultural past, as in a kind of internalized “echo chamber.”

Rosa’s conception of resonance also inspires us to perceive, negotiate, and configure the relationship between individual texts and the world of literature. Reading comparatively can thus be reimagined as a way for individual texts to transformatively encounter the world of which they are already part, striving for a resonant relationship. Astrid Møller-Olsen’s article on the crosscultural literary encounters, or what she calls “reverberations,” between the contemporary Chinese avant-garde writer Can Xue and the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, via the ancient Chinese Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, in many ways, exemplifies such a resonant literary relation.

Indeed, Stephen Greenblatt had already proposed a theory of resonance in literature and art criticism in the early 1990s, in the broader intellectual context of new historicism. Greenblatt uses the term “resonance” to mean “the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand” (42). More specifically regarding literary texts, Greenblatt is keen to investigate the relationship between “the historical circumstances of their original production and consumption” (42) and those of our own. He understands the “intersecting circumstances not as a stable, prefabricated background against which the literary texts can be placed, but as a dense network of evolving and often contradictory social practices” (42). Such a characterization of

resonance points, again, to the unstable, unfixable, and ungraspable nature of sound and voice, and by analogy, our perception and reading of literary texts and relations across time and space.

Perhaps the most frequently cited theoretical reference throughout this special issue is Wai Chee Dimock's 1997 essay "A Theory of Resonance." Dimock addresses and elaborates, more systematically and "with the languages of the natural sciences," the particularities of sound in the ways we historicize and contextualize "the phenomenon called *literature*" (1060). Where Greenblatt may still have kept certain reservations about "the tangibility, the openness, the permeability of boundaries" (43) of historical artifacts and literary texts, which are mediated by "resonant contextualism" (54), Dimock fully embraces "the dynamics of endurance and transformation that accompany the passage of time" in what she formulates as "diachronic historicism" (1061). In a pivotal passage of her article, Dimock accentuates the primarily aural and interactive aspects of her conception of diachronic historicism *as* resonance, which deserves to be cited at length:

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Modeled on the *traveling frequencies* of sound, it suggests a way to think about what (following Ralph Ellison) I call the *traveling frequencies* of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving father and farther from their points of origin, causing *unexpected vibrations* in unexpected places. A theory of resonance puts the temporary axis at the center of literary studies. Texts are emerging phenomena, activated and to some extent constituted by the passage of time, by their continual transit through new semantic networks, modifying their tonality as they proceed. The "object of literary studies is thus an object with an *unstable ontology*, since a text can resonate only insofar as it is touched by the effects of its travels. Across time, every text must put up with readers on different *wavelengths*, who come at it tangentially and tendentially, who impose semantic losses as well as gains. Across time, every text is a casualty and a beneficiary. (1061; emphasis mine)

Several articles in this issue follow these configurations of resonance closely, often with the contributors' own theoretical twists or fine-tuning. Oscar Jansson's study of the transatlantic reception of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) demonstrates how the meaning of the text, as well as the public perception of the authorial intention and the literary genre, has drastically changed against the conflictual international geopolitics played out in the second half of the twentieth century, with historical events such as the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Quite compellingly, the novel's "travelling frequencies" did cause "unexpected vibrations in unexpected places" such as Sweden, in which the earliest reviews of the novel were produced.

Meanwhile, Alfred Sjödin's examination of nineteenth-century Swedish poetry reveals that "diachronic historicism" does not always follow the oft-assumed critical order from past through present to future: poetic voices can resonate *backwards*, conveying a palpable sense of return and rebirth. Such poetic voices signal not only semantic changes, but also those of *linguistic* networks, such as from Old Norse to nineteenth-century Swedish, bypassing or proceeding via Latin, French, and other European languages. In fact, in order to better capture the complex historical

dynamics between language and literature, rather than those of individual literary texts, Sjödin conceptually relates “cultural resonance” to “national literary ecology” as advocated by Alexander Beecroft in the studies of World Literature.

Using Thomas Mann’s early novellas as an exemplary corpus, Laura Alice Chapot’s article on “computational resonance” represents a unique take on Dimock’s ideas. She argues that although computational approaches to literature are generally conceived as an ocular mode of inquiry, specific methods such as topic modelling—the agenda-driven grouping of semantically related words as “topics” for analysis in a given corpus—invites aural modes of interpretation. Thus, she contextualizes the double meaning of “frequency” as both the “occurrence rate” and the “vibration wave” of words. Topic modelling radically reorganizes, reconfigures, and even reveals the meaning of the text. Such “practices of resonant interpretation” are highly interactive, malleable, performative, and at the same time, unambiguous, repeatable, and iterative.

- 404** The theoretical richness and the largely positive implication of “resonance” stand in stark contrast to the notion or metaphor of “echo chamber,” which originally referred to an enclosed space for producing reverberation of sound. In its figurative sense, “echo chamber” is especially used in news media to describe how opinions and beliefs bounce back and forth repeatedly in an enclosed platform, which results in exaggerated, distorted, and other transformed versions, often accepted as “truths.” Indeed, the effects of echo chambers are palpably felt, probably more than ever, in our current global political affairs. Mechanical repetitions, interpretative reductions, and ideological indoctrinations may well explain literary scholars’ general reluctance to engage with “echo chambers” in positive and productive ways. It is sometimes even understood as the very opposite of Rosa’s conception of resonance (Lijster and Celikates). If anything, the notion of the echo chamber can be easily thought of as reinforcing many of the stubbornly persistent, monolithic ways of thinking about language, literature, nationhood, history, culture, and identity, which the discipline of Comparative Literature, or more recently, that of World Literature, endeavours to challenge, unpick, and undo.

With these reflections in mind, this special issue ends with Flair Donglai Shi’s nuanced analysis of and around the translingual novel *Orphan of Asia* (1946), originally written in Japanese by the Taiwanese author Wu Zhuoliu. Shi makes a conscientious effort to suggest a number of conceptual differences and affinities between resonance and echo chamber, through his problematization and renegotiation of the protagonist’s multiple cultural belongings and estrangements.

In order to help readers better navigate the seemingly miscellaneous topics covered under the general theme of this special issue, I would like briefly to clarify the rationale behind the grouping of these nine essays. The first three essays—those of Linkis, Eschenbach and Richter, and Chapot—are grouped according to their shared methodological attempt to treat literary resonance as *crossmedia* echoes, expanding our conventional understanding of “reading” to the *hearing* and *modelling* of

literature and literary relations. The next two essays—those of Møller-Olsen and Calvete—examine both travel and travelling texts, and investigate how the notion of resonance entails *spatial* constructions in and through dream and nature. The following two—those of Sjödin and Nykvist—both deal with poetic sound and resonance in the Nordic context, past and present. The last two essays—those of Jansson and Shi—each focus on an individual text and broadly engage with the politics of reading, as reflected in their respective changing public perceptions and critical receptions across historical moments and geographical locations. We hope that this special issue will make a valuable contribution to the existing critical discourses of “resonance” and “echo chamber” by showcasing a diversity of literary examples from different languages, regions, cultures, and medialities, in Jørgen Bruhn’s sense (17). Many of the exciting conceptual links that our contributors make between “resonance” and other theoretical frameworks will also, hopefully, inspire future, more in-depth methodological reflections in Comparative Literature at large.

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