– A Rude Awakening to Sounds –

A Study of the Soundscape in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

This study examines the significance of sounds and silence in Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The importance of visual effects has repeatedly been analyzed and therefore, it is high time to explore the text from an auditory perspective. By comparing and contrasting Victorian city sounds to sounds in the wilderness, I show that the urban and rural worlds have a great deal in common. Furthermore, by deconstructing the seemingly stable binary opposition of sound and silence as well as that of civilization and wilderness, it becomes evident that they are related and depend on one another. This paper also examines noise and how it is used as a means of power. Moreover, it deals with Thomas Edison’s invention, the phonograph, as an implicit discursive device in the text. In conclusion, it is argued that the sonic environment is of high significance and should therefore not be ignored and readers must try to close their eyes in order to hear what is said.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, soundscape, sonic environment, auditory setting, sounds, silence, noise
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Introduction

“Still the noise in the mind: that is the first task – then
everything else will follow in time.”

– R. Murray Schafer

In the opening of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, published as a novella in 1902, the narrator and protagonist Marlow and his fellow companions are aboard the Nellie on the river Thames. As Marlow observes the river, he is reminded of what he experienced in Africa. He begins telling his companions about his dramatic adventures, as captain of a river steamboat, travelling deep into the wilderness in search of Mr. Kurtz who runs a station in the heart of the continent but is thought to be very ill. Marlow’s listeners, and the readers, become a passive audience to a horrifying tale about brutal imperialistic methods and a harsh treatment of natives.

Through Marlow’s story the cruelty that Conrad himself witnessed in the Congo as a young seaman is revealed. He spent six months there and what he experienced affected and shocked him to such an extent that it urged him to write about it. Conrad asserted that the civilization of the area “had cast the region not into light but into darkness” (Butcher xii). The self-proclaimed aim of the colonizers to bring “light” to the presumably savage people was overshadowed by the cruel and horrendous methods that the colonizers used. In the pursuit of ivory, the colonizers also turned different tribes into enemies and an immense number of Africans were made slaves. In Conrad’s text, the madman Kurtz stands as a representative of all ruthless oppressors and by giving a voice to the quieted and oppressed, the text conveys the dark truth about colonialism.
Heart of Darkness has been praised by many for raising an awareness about colonialism as well as issues about gender and race. Consequently, the novella should be read, studied and taught in order to gain an understanding of history. However, many critics have condemned it and called for it to be taken off the shelves as it only consolidates common stereotypes and sanctions discrimination. Still, there are as many interpretations of the novella as there are readers:

Some critics view it as deeply racist, while others see it as an attack on the racism of colonialism; some critics view the book as largely psychological, while others believe it to be mostly historical; some believe it is a critique of the corrupting power of wilderness, while others believe it a parable of humanity’s weakness no matter what its setting. (Butcher ix)

The 2006 Norton Critical edition of Heart of Darkness is an anthology of literary criticism and critics such as Albert Guerard, Chinua Achebe and Edward W. Said are represented. In “The Journey Within,” Guerard claims that Marlow’s journey into the wilderness is, in fact, Conrad’s own journey into the self. He argues that although Kurtz is important, one has to understand that in reality he represents “the fallen self” (329) and that he is Marlow’s double and his own nightmare. Guerard also draws attention to the dreamlike qualities in Marlow’s story-telling. Marlow states that he is trying to convey a dream and the journey that he makes into the wilderness appears unreal. His many references to darkness and black shadows are indications of Conrad’s depressive state of mind, according to Guerard. This in turn conveys the sense of the dreadful horrors that he witnessed when participating in the Belgian colonization of the Congo.

A great many scholars consider Heart of Darkness to be racist and there is still an ongoing debate concerning the vision of darkness and whether Conrad himself was a racist. In “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness,” Chinua Achebe claims that the
novella “parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities” (346) and he argues that Conrad was indeed a true racist. Achebe acknowledges that Conrad is a good story-teller but refuses to see the novella as “a great work of art” (344). There exists, he claims, a Western desire to compare and contrast Africa to Europe and to see Africa as a remote, savage and uncivilized continent.

Although Conrad hides behind multiple narrators, he does not manage to veil his opinions, which, on the other hand, is not really his intention, according to Achebe. He argues that Conrad did, in fact, not consider Africans and Europeans as equals and he points out that Marlow never calls the Africans “brothers” in the novella. Marlow goes as far as detecting a “distant kinship” (Achebe 343) and thus Marlow distances himself from all black people. Admittedly, Conrad cannot be accused of having created this image of Africa but he dehumanizes the African continent and its people, thereby nurturing prevailing racist attitudes towards Africa and Africans. Despite the fact that Heart of Darkness condemns imperialism, Achebe does not want readers to celebrate the novella but read it with critical eyes and see it as a racially prejudiced text.

Said accuses Conrad of being Eurocentric although he believes him to be criticizing imperialism as well. In “The Visions of Heart of Darkness,” he writes that “Conrad’s tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that ‘natives’ could lead lives free from European domination” (428). According to Said, the power of the white man was inevitable and manifest and it was taken for granted that the uncivilized needed to be controlled. Independence was not for everyone; it was a privilege of the white man who considered himself the natural master. Conrad is therefore limited by the values of his time and this is displayed in his novella (Said 425).
Moreover, in “Should We Read ‘Heart of Darkness’?,” J. Hillis Miller argues that the novella can be interpreted in many different ways but that we should see it as a “literary work” (465), which not only reveals capitalist imperialism but also hides something else yet to be disclosed. He therefore concludes his essay by demanding that we read it in order to unveil the secret. Every reader acts as a witness of his or her own interpretation of the novella and although Miller criticizes Achebe and Said, among others, for their judgments, he still urges each and every one not only to read the novella but to “perform a reading in the strong sense, an active responsible response that renders justice” (Miller 463). Miller focuses mainly on the visual dimension. He argues that all that is visible in the tale functions to make something else visible and he wishes for the readers to see “the unseen, perhaps even the unseeable” (470). However, the truth may be that the secret that Miller wants us to seek may not be possible to find at all as it is sometimes impossible to trace the origin or the source of the reflected light.

The visual illustrations and the importance of visual similes and visual effects as well as the contrast between light and dark have frequently been analyzed. The effect of the sonic setting, however, has received less attention and therefore it deserves to be considered. The text needs to be studied, or listened to, from an auditory perspective as this approach may contribute a whole new level of understanding of the story. Naturally, I am just another witness who bears witness and probably I will only succeed in unveiling something else yet to be unveiled. Still, I believe it is essential to use our sense of hearing and listen in on what is hidden in Conrad’s novella. Sometimes it is necessary to close one’s eyes to truly see and I suggest that one does so. It may also help us to hear what cannot instantly be heard. However, by engaging in a close examination of the text from a postcolonial perspective and by using R. Murray Schafer’s concept of soundscape, I will study the sonic environment of *Heart of Darkness* and the meaning of the world of sounds. Moreover, I will show that the silence that
is presented to the reader is anything but quiet. Just as sounds highlight, complement, enforce and contradict images the absence of them has great significance. Noise, the seeming opposite of silence, is also of great importance as it represents an unexpected and unwanted disturbance in the wilderness.

Deconstructionist theorist Jacques Derrida claims that although oppositions are contradictory, they rely and depend on one another for existence. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan explain that as contradictions shape each other, the hierarchy between them becomes unstable (261). Postcolonialist critic Homi Bhabha discusses the notions of hybridity and mimicry and he relies on Derrida’s thoughts of an unstable hierarchy between oppositions. In “Signs Taken for Wonders,” hybridity is explained by Bhabha as having double identities, or rather, having half identities. Silence ought to function as a contrast to sounds but these oppositions are deconstructed in the novella as the silent wilderness becomes noisy and a threat to Marlow.

In my discussion I will compare and contrast the sound of the city with natural sounds in order to gain an insight into how they interact and fuse to create the sonic environment in the story. In the first section this will be done by discussing the importance of hearing and in the second section by looking into the role that sounds play but also by looking at sound versus silence. The next section will deal with noise and study how it is used as a means of power. Moreover, I will discuss how the use of new technology is incorporated into the story. In this context, Thomas Edison’s new invention, the phonograph, which was said to be able to conserve a person’s life by the recording of his or her voice, needs to be taken into account.

The term soundscape, coined by R. Murray Schafer, refers to all sounds that combine and make up an acoustic environment. It includes natural sounds as well as mechanical sounds and sounds made by the human voice. In The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World, Schafer writes that the various sonic studies made in several
places in the world, including his own, deal with “the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change” (3-4). The study looks at how the human brain interprets and deals with all the new sounds that it is subjected to. Furthermore, Schafer discusses both silence and noise and he states that what someone considers to be a disturbing noise might be quite pleasant to another person (183). He wants to show that the way we perceive sounds, and noise in particular, is affected by our cultural ideals. What Schafer implies is what becomes evident in Conrad’s novella, which I hereafter will refer to as HD.
Hearing and Listening

Conrad’s text delivers a message about the horror of colonialism but it does not require its audience to just read the story; instead it requires us to listen to it in order to understand the context. In “A Deconstructive Perspective – *Heart of Darkness* Revisited,” J. Hillis Miller argues that Conrad’s story is in part not a tale, but a parable. He explains that a parable is based on truth but the narrator also “unveils that which has never been seen or known before” (107). When Miller discusses the importance of seeing, he means by that an understanding of the truth and refers to the Bible explaining why Jesus spoke in parables. Jesus said that he did so because otherwise those seeing would not be able to see and those hearing would not be able to hear. Still, Miller focuses on the visual effects at the expense of the auditory. However, since the text contains so many references to different sounds, it requires its audience not only to see and to hear but to perform a conscious act of listening. It requires us to be more than passive listeners and to listen actively and try to grasp what lies behind the story. To truly hear is to see.

Today vision is the one sense that we rely the most on and we constantly interpret the world around us through what we see, judging each other and what we say by our appearance. In *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Michael Bull and Les Back argue that “understanding is identified with *seeing*” and in “the hierarchy of the senses, the epistemological status of hearing has come a poor second to that of vision” (1). Moreover, they state that “we look more, [but] we hear less” (6). We trust our vision but we are less knowledgeable about the way our auditory surrounding affects us. We also communicate with each other using sounds. Still, ever since printing was invented, people have paid less attention to oral stories. Throughout the imperial era, the degree of literacy was one means of measuring civilization and colonizers set out to civilize, educate and teach native tribes how to read and write.

Conrad, though, came to realize the horror of colonialism and expressed his skepticism as to
whether civilization really brought enlightenment to the natives. His use of multiple voices may therefore be seen as a way to resurrect oral traditions by pointing to the importance of oral story-telling. Still, his story seems to imply that an embodied voice is necessary in order to be fully able to comprehend a story and reveal its message. Furthermore, the text emphasizes the importance of hearing when Marlow longs for Kurtz’s voice. Marlow does not have a desire to meet, see or shake hands with the agent but instead he wishes to hear him:

Talking with … I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to – a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn’t say to myself, ‘Now I will never see him,’ or ‘Now I will not shake him by the hand,’ but, ‘Now I will never hear him.’ (HD 66)

Marlow realizes that only by truly listening to someone can we understand the reason and comprehend the motifs. Conrad’s novella makes the listeners understand the darkness of colonialism but Marlow is in reality only an observer. He sees, hears and registers but does not truly understand. By keeping Kurtz’s last words from the Intended, he actually steals his story. Marlow has no desire to spread the story realizing that the words will not make any sense since Kurtz himself is not present. Neither is Marlow capable of comprehending everything that he has witnessed. It is therefore up to Marlow’s listeners to understand. However, one can also interpret the reason for why Marlow steals Kurtz’s last words from the Intended as a way to conceal the truth. Supposedly, Conrad wished for his readers to understand the horror of colonialism. However, the horror was so dreadful that he, at the same time, might have feared that it would come out into the open.

Moreover, the men aboard the Nellie silently accept Marlow’s story. However, for a while, the narrator in the frame story performs a conscious act of listening:
[Marlow] had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative. (HD 37-38)

The narrator is awake; he is alert willing to comprehend although he does not fully see Marlow. The text requires the readers, or the listeners, to understand as well. As Butcher argues, Conrad wants the novella to “hang in the air and dwell on the ear” (xi). He does not say that he wishes it to be read or viewed but instead he demands us to listen. Consequently, he stresses the importance to be active and listen to all the sounds and the silence truly trying to understand what they mean.

**Sound versus Silence**

What is sound and what is it made up of? According to Schafer, the first sound man heard was the sound of water (3). Natural sounds such as that of the wind and the rain are sounds we always have been used to. In addition, we have also always encountered sudden, unknown sounds that often stir emotions of fear within us. A sudden scream, a roar or even the sound of thunder has the capacity to startle and frighten us. Anything that suddenly interrupts the silence can be perceived as threatening. Silence is supposed to be the opposite of sound but I argue that it is impossible to place silence and sound as binary opposites. What do we mean by silence? Is it a sense or a feeling with a total absence of sounds? The term is very subjective. When one person perceives his or her surrounding as quiet, someone else might detect sounds within the silence. Similarly, according to some, silence may contain low chattering, murmuring sounds or natural sounds generally. It can be peaceful and pleasant but it may also be perceived as frightening and threatening. The stillness of silence was once
considered “a precious article in an unwritten code of human rights” (Schafer 254) and although people actually need to withdraw from all kinds of sounds to heal their psyche and gain mental strength, it may be terrifying and negative when imposed and may actually create a sense of distress. Although sounds are referred to as waves travelling through a medium, they carry with them not only an audible perception but also a deeper meaning beyond what the ear is able to register.

However, as human life has developed, the sonic environment has been modified as well and man has tried to adapt. Looking at the Victorian city soundscape one may state that during the nineteenth century, London had become quite a noisy city. In Victorian Soundscape, John M. Picker writes that “[c]langing bells, cracking whips, clattering carriages, clamoring hawkers and cabmen, roaring crowds, barking dogs” (42) were sounds that frequently confronted Londoners at the time. Street musicians were another source of sonic nuisance to many people. The upper class as well as members of the new growing middle class objected and openly protested against what they considered to be a too noisy atmosphere. As a consequence, the government tried to ban street musicians. The urban historian H. J. Dyos claims that “silence had become a commodity of precious value” (qtd in Picker 42). It was difficult to escape the noise in the crowded city and many people felt the need for peace and quiet. Thus, it may be argued that the new soundscape became associated with a power structure.

The technological development at the end of the nineteenth century changed the soundscape and to such a large extent that it caused many people to complain about the new mechanical sounds in the factories, which were noisy. Moreover, motor-cycles and automobiles began to replace horse carriages in the streets and further contributed to a changed soundscape. In “The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age,” Karin Bijsterveld points out that the soundscape in the industrialized cities included unwanted
sounds due to the new technology. Complaints about loud sounds and noise have been made throughout human history. However, what was new at the turn of the last century was that criticism came from intellectuals who complained that the noise was “a brute assault on their mental refinement” (166). This proves that the moral norm of the time was stillness and silence.

Such an approach is reflected in the opening of *Heart of Darkness*. London is presented as still and calm although it must have been quite noisy at the time, a fact which is carefully concealed. Conrad writes that “the wind was nearly calm” and that the “air … seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (HD 3). Although London is visually presented as dark and gloomy, nothing is mentioned about the noise the city must have produced. It seems to be dark but, at the same time, silent and calm. The noise is not acknowledged. It is the narrator Marlow who breaks the silence by making a remark about the city. However, his fellow companions accept his comment in silence and thus the text implies that well-educated and civilized men do not chatter and babble but associate with each other in silence. Moreover, there is a long silence aboard the yawl before Marlow begins to tell his tale to the men and Marlow even excuses himself for bothering them by disturbing the silence. It is not only the city of London that is presented as still and calm; so is the city in Belgium where the Company has its office and where Marlow is sent to sign certain papers. The reader perceives this as a silent place although it must have been vibrant with sounds. In the streets Marlow finds “a dead silence” (HD 12). However, the reader may detect an ambivalence; even though silence is preferred, the whole atmosphere in the city and in the company office is actually quite ominous to Marlow. This suggests that he is afraid that the peace and quiet is just the calm before the storm. He both yearns for and fears the sound of the wilderness.
When Marlow receives his appointment as captain of a steam-boat and arrives in Africa, he is overwhelmed by all the sounds that he encounters and the distinction is made between silent, civilized Europe and noisy, wild Africa. Marlow has been transported from civilization to an uncivilized land where he becomes subjected to various sounds that he finds appalling. However, all the sounds from the wilderness are not upsetting; some of them he perceives as quite pleasant. This implies that the soundscape in *Heart of Darkness* is ambivalent. Bull and Back argue that how sensitive we are to noise often depends on our cultural values. They state that “the production of noise is often perceived as ‘uncivilized’ within a bourgeois ethic” (9) thus supporting Picker’s and Bijsterveld’s ideas that silence was considered the ideal and noise was primarily made by the working class. Marlow, who we know to be a seaman, does not belong to the upper class. He actually has to use his aunt as an agent for contacting people of importance to reach his goals and receive his appointment. He has to work for his living but as a captain, he still represents the “bourgeois ethic” in comparison to the supposedly barbarian people he meets on the African continent. He therefore becomes a floating signifier without a clear identity. As a consequence, it is not evident who or what he represents. He belongs neither to the working class nor to the aristocracy. Consequently, Marlow himself shows signs of hybridity and while trying to mimic the values of the upper class, he loses himself in the cultural values of sound. It becomes important to him to emphasize the silent ideal of civilized men, which may be why he tells his fellow companions about the “quiet chat” (HD 15) he has with his aunt before leaving for Africa.

Marlow encounters many sudden and unexpected sounds in the wilderness and thereby conveys the sense of the wild. However, the soundscape of the wilderness is also described as a great silence. The natural sounds that Marlow hears sometimes give him a sense of comfort but there are also sudden sounds from nature that he perceives as noise. As mentioned earlier, the sound of the surf and the buzzing of flies ease him whereas the sound of the rapids, for
example, has the opposite effect. The noise does not frighten him although Marlow describes the wilderness as peaceful, silently surrounding and patiently waiting for all the noise and all the commotion to pass (HD 31). What really causes the noise is the invasion of white men trying to civilize the land. The colonizers represent the unwanted and unwelcome noise in the previously so peaceful soundscape. By contrast, on another occasion, Marlow finds the landscape and the silent wilderness terrifying. He describes the trees and the trunks as “a great wall of vegetation” and considers it “a rioting invasion of soundless life” (HD 41). The silence of the wilderness sometimes instills in him a sense of safety but, at other times, it nearly strangles him. Moreover, Marlow tells his listeners about a “noisy dream” (HD 47) that he has as he is travelling further into the heart of the land. The noise that he experiences is in reality the threatening silence of the wilderness:

[T]he overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. (HD 47)

The so-called silence that he encounters is powerful and Marlow actually finds the quiet landscape anything but silent. In fact, he perceives it as noisy. Furthermore, when the steamer is attacked on its way towards Kurtz, it becomes apparent that “excessive silence” (HD 55) might be perceived just as horrifying as an unexpected loud sound of cries and excessive shrieking. Schafer argues that the “[e]mpty space that doesn’t talk back is as evocative as the hush that falls over the crowd, the telephone that doesn’t ring, the dog that doesn’t bark” (308). Marlow hears nothing, not even a whisper and the extreme silence from the wilderness that he encounters makes him petrified. What is more, Conrad’s own terrifying experience in Africa most likely upset him to such extent that it created a sense of distress within him, which is similar to a loud noise that one cannot escape from. However, what might have
shocked and upset him the most could have been the passive acceptance of the people raising no objections loud enough to stop the brutality used by the colonizers. Silence gives consent and Conrad may have perceived this silence and lack of resistance more horrifying than his own experience which also suggests that silence may be perceived as unbearably loud at times.

Throughout the novella the word “silence” is used 27 times in total but only 20 times when Marlow is actually out in the wilderness. The other seven times the word demonstrates that he and his listeners experience tranquility aboard the yacht on the Thames. Moreover, it is also used three times by Kurtz’s fiancé who states that she has mourned her beloved in silence. Eight out of twenty times the word “silence” is used to mark the absence of human voice or human intrusion but twelve times the silence creates in Marlow a sense of discomfort, sometimes even fear. He feels the mystique from the wilderness, which scares and alienates him. Interestingly, the word thus suggests that silence can be even more appalling than noise.

The word “noise” is used only nine times. On the first two occasions, the word is mentioned in relation to the noise of the rapids, which is a natural noise. The next time the word is used is when Marlow listens to the noise of his men who interrupt the silence by marching in the wilderness. The fourth time “noise” appears in the text, it is actually the first time it is used as a way of indicating to the reader that Marlow senses fear as natives have gathered and come out of the woods in order to scare the intruders away. The fifth time it is used, Marlow only refers to the same noise again but on this occasion, he is not worried as they leave the noise behind them. This suggests that noise is only perceived as threatening when we do not know where it comes from. The next instance of noise is a worrying sound from the steamer, which does not at all startle Marlow as he has suspected that the boat is in a bad condition. However, the seventh example is a noise that terrifies him. He hears the cries
of fierce people and he actually fears for his life. The last two times the word “noise” is used is to state that the pilot-house is noisy with people screaming and also when he tells the reader that he cannot kill Kurtz although he acts mad. This is because Marlow wants to avoid noise. In conclusion, it may be argued that noise only terrifies Marlow twice whereas silence more often instills in him a sense of discomfort. The undermining of the binary opposite silence/noise serves to illustrate that the words are intimately interwoven with one another. Noise, which normally refers to unwanted, sudden and frightening sounds, can be perceived as quite calming while silence, which normally suggests tranquility, can be experienced as threatening.

Listening to Marlow’s story, the reader is given an impression of the binary opposition silence/noise and civilized/uncivilized. These oppositions, in fact, construct the plot. However, the story opens up for a contradictory interpretation as the apparent fixed relation between the oppositions is overturned and new notions are presented, which contributes to a new level of understanding. Thus, it may be argued that Conrad’s novella actually deconstructs itself because of the ambivalent and contradictory meanings contributed to the sounds. The text illustrates that no truth holds and that no one can claim to comprehend the horror without having faced it. In “A Deconstructive Perspective,” Miller writes that the irony of the tale lies within “the seemingly firm oppositions that always ultimately break down” and he argues that Conrad’s novella “belongs to the genre of the parabolic apocalypse … [as the] revelation is always future” (217). The whole story relies on accounts by witnesses and although the reader might come somewhat closer to unveiling the secret, he or she will never be able to do so completely. There will always be something else yet to be revealed. Marlow says that “the inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily” (HD 50) and Miller points out that although we might try to unveil what is behind the veil, we are not capable of doing so. If we could comprehend the true meaning of the horror, we would no longer be able to bear witness.
“The horror” is, according to Miller, the same as death and he writes that “[n]o man can confront that truth face to face and survive” (“A Deconstructive Perspective” 214). What becomes visible is only a reflection and this reflection can be interpreted in many different ways. The text may seem to promise comfort but without actually doing so. The darkness or the horror that Kurtz experiences on his death bed will always be undetectable for any witnesses as Kurtz is no longer present to bear witness and in order to reveal a secret one has to experience it oneself.

Derrida’s theory of deconstruction is based on Friedrich Nietzsche’s and Martin Heidegger’s discussion of difference. To Derrida “the presence of an object of conscious perception or of a thought in the mind is shaped by its difference from other objects or thoughts” (Rivkin and Ryan 258). Whenever we study or notice anything, we inevitably refer it to something that it differs from. As a consequence, all oppositions resemble one another and therefore Derrida’s philosophy of “différance” is based on the concept that “no presence or substance … is complete in itself,” but it “requires supplementation by something else to which it refers or relates and from which it differs” (259).

Moreover, in “Différance,” Derrida argues that the contradiction between the oppositions is unstable and in need of each other for existence (Rivkin and Ryan 285). In *Heart of Darkness*, the contradictions rely on one another and are not as fixed as one may first assume. Already at the outset, the reader is exposed to the norms of Victorian society where silence was a virtue. The story may be taken to suggest that silence is in opposition to noise since Marlow represents civilized, silent Western society while the African continent represents the noisy and untamed wilderness. Throughout the story silence and noise seemingly contrast one another. In *Heterology*, George Bataille argues that the homogeneity in a society reflects itself in its opposite and that the contrast is often regarded as odd. Bataille discusses the two counterparts “excretion and appropriation” (273). He writes that the
“process of appropriation is characterized by a homogeneity … whereas excretion presents itself as the result of heterogeneity” (273). A way for the upper class to remain in power was to share values and expel others that did not belong. In Victorian England silence was the moral norm and, as mentioned earlier, street musicians and other forms of unwanted noise were a nuisance in the daily life of the well-educated. The homogeneity of the intellectuals was built on this moral idea and by being repelled by the sounds from the working class in the street, they could preserve their sameness.

Conrad’s novella illustrates the surface contrast between silent, civilized London and the voices of the native carriers when they speak to each other. Marlow tells his fellow companions about the “silent chat” he has with his aunt whereas he perceives the carriers’ voices as “a violent babble of uncouth sounds” (HD 25). However, the reader notices a shift in the hierarchy as the silent London surroundings and the civilized man are perceived as noisy while the natives and the wilderness are often presented as quite silent. The binary oppositions silence and noise switch places, which, consequently, unsettles the hierarchy between civilization and the wilderness as well. The reader identifies a conflict but this only proves how oppositions are intertwined; he/she soon notices that what at first seemed quite evident hides an additional meaning.

In Identity and Difference, Martin Heidegger writes that when we form our views, we instinctively refer them to something that is diverse in order to make them meaningful (271). The two binary oppositions silence and noise as well as civilization and wilderness are in need of each other to exist. The homogeneity of the intellectuals could be preserved only by expelling the ones that were considered noisy and the homogeneity of civilization was built on the rejection of the wild and untamed. Still, the discussion about what was actually considered noise was quite loud. However, the intellectuals themselves were responsible for the definition of noise.
Marlow experiences that civilized men actually behave like barbarians and that civilized London is quite noisy whereas the wilderness is tranquil and calm at times and that the natives are, in fact, quite civilized. He breaks down the oppositions by showing how civilized men change and become noisy barbarians when having stayed too long among the natives. The natives represent the uncivilized from a Western perspective. On arriving in Africa, Marlow learns that his predecessor, the Dane Fresleven, “had been killed in a scuffle with the natives” (HD 11). Later, when Marlow tries to find the remains of him, he is told that there had been a misunderstanding between the Dane and a chief of one of the villages. Fresleven is described as “the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs” (HD 11). However, due to the misunderstanding, he starts hitting the chief with a stick until the poor man yells and, consequently, the Dane is killed by the chief’s son. The reason why this “quiet creature” suddenly breaks the silence and turns into a barbarian by becoming involved in a quarrel is explained by the fact that he had been in Africa for a couple of years. According to Marlow, the years on the wild continent had contributed to transforming the civilized man and turned him into a brutal savage whereas an analysis of the incident suggests that one opposition resembles the other. Moreover, Marlow claims that the wilderness has changed Kurtz as well and turned him into a barbarian:

The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. (HD 68)

This is yet another proof of how contradictions shape one another and that the hierarchy is overturned. Kurtz, who on his arrival at his station was considered civilized, changes and
becomes more savage than any native. The wilderness might have changed him. However, the text implies that white men are not civilized deep down.

An additional sign that the binary system is undermined in the text is that the natural sounds that Marlow experiences on the new continent not only belong to the wild and unknown. He perceives them as pleasant and, at times, compares them to the sounds of civilization. To Marlow the “voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning” (HD 17-18). The sound instills a sense of comfort and well-being and the sound of water is “the fundamental of the original soundscape and the sound which above all gives us the most delight” (Schafer 15-16). This sound of the surf fills Marlow with happiness and he feels safe. On another occasion, Marlow listens to the “flies buzz[ing] … in a great peace” (HD 25) and this sound is not unpleasant to him either, which is interesting because often the sounds of insects are perceived as annoying to modern man (Schafer 34). Schafer argues that insect sounds “[m]ore than any other sound in nature … give an impression of being steady-state or flat-line” (36) and he points out that, apart from the sound made by insects, this sound is seldom found in nature. He also adds that man did not come across this sound again before the Industrial Revolution. This may explain why Marlow feels at ease when he hears the buzzing of flies. He is reminded of the monotonous sound from the industries and the factories in London. This also suggests that the seemingly pleasant buzzing from flies, which could, in fact, be interpreted as contradicting mechanical noise instead resembles it. Consequently, binary oppositions again undermine each other in the novella.

Towards the end of the story, Marlow has become aware of the similarity between the wild and noisy African continent and civilized London. He understands that the wilderness is still but contains a great deal of noise and he realizes that London is not at all as quiet and still as he imagines and wishes it to be. However, it is not until Kurtz dies that Marlow really
changes his outlook. Anita Matthew claims that Kurtz’s death enlightens Marlow. After having heard Kurtz’s last cry, he acknowledges to himself that evil does not lie within the African continent and within the native people but within the civilized man (319). He understands that noise, which he thought belonged to the wilderness, is an integral part of civilization. At the end Marlow sits very still and silent. He is aware that what lies before him is the city of London and that it is the noisiest place on earth.

**Noise as a Means of Power**

*Heart of Darkness* uses noise, or loud sounds, as a means of control and to induce fear. The novella demonstrates that noise creates horror in both the colonized people and the colonizers. Postcolonial criticism looks at the power-relation between the Western world and the world suppressed by it and focuses on the issue of identity in particular. The oppressed are often portrayed as having been deprived of their own voice. According to Rivkin and Ryan, Great Britain was “at the center of a global empire” during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the English language “soon became a very powerful global cultural institution” (1071). That Conrad, who was of Polish ancestry, decided to write his novel in English is therefore not surprising at all. Most likely, he had realized the power of the English language and probably he assumed that if he wrote in English, he would be listened to. He created “noise” in English and it seems that he understood the effect it would have on people. By criticizing the European settlements on the African continent, he caused a disturbance.

As has been mentioned earlier, there are critics who see *Heart of Darkness* as a racist novella. One may, however, also consider it as a means of giving a voice to the colonized land by silencing the natives and their land and by not giving the oppressed natives names. On a great many occasions, the silence represents the African continent and the wilderness. What
breaks the silence is the marching sound of stamping feet of the intruding colonizers. Schafer writes that throughout history man has tried to scare away his foes by creating loud sounds (28). The colonizers stamp their feet to make as much noise as possible to demonstrate their greatness and their power. The steamboat itself represents the powerful imperialistic nations that out of greed wanted to conquer new land in search of new goods. However, the natives also use noise in order to scare the intruders. They stamp their feet, clap their hands and yell loudly (HD 49). As the steamboat moves into the wilderness, Marlow uses the boat whistle and “jerk[s] out screech after screech” (HD 65) only to show his power and scare the poor natives away. The noisy whistle halts the “warlike yells” (HD 65) from the natives for a short time. However, the great silent wilderness soon swallows the noise from the whistle and responds with a desperate moaning, which is a sound just as powerful.

The text may be taken to suggest that the natives are trying to copy the white men by making noise so that they can scare the intruders away leaving them alone. Consequently, they are seemingly engaged in the activity of “mimicry.” The concept is based on dissimilarities, in this case, between the colonizer and the colonized. This enables the colonizers to govern. Huddart writes that “colonial discourse wants the colonized to be extremely like the colonizers, but by all means not identical.” If there were an absolute equivalence between the two, the ideologies justifying colonial rule would be unable to operate (41). However, since mimicry is never exact, Bhabha claims that it serves to undermine the colonialist discourse.

Furthermore, the sound of the drums sounds very ominous to Marlow and his followers and, on one occasion, he thinks that the wild drums might hold “as profound a meaning as the bells in a Christian county” (HD 27). Schafer states in his soundscape analysis that the “most salient noise in the Christian community is the church bell” (54). The church bells served to define a community and to create a social sense. It was also meant to show that man was close
to God and that it was he who summoned his disciples. Moreover, Schafer suggests that the sound of the church bell served to chase away evil spirits (54). Surprisingly, the sound of the wild drums has the same effect as Christian church bells. However, Marlow hears the drums and wonders about them for a while but does not fully comprehend their meaning. Although he detects a kinship to Christian church bells, he does not fully realize that the savage men and the colonizers share means of expression and that they are alike deep down.

Schafer argues that the “association of Noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist” (76) and he discusses the noisy factories in the big cities in the 1800s. The sound from the machines affected everyday life of the workers and it was the men in charge who controlled the new sound and dominated the workers. However, as has been mentioned earlier, the upper and middle classes blamed the working class for creating such immense noise although the goods that were produced in the noisy factories were intended for the rich to consume (“The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age” 183). This serves to prove how ill-founded their complaints were. However, in Heart of Darkness, the natives are not trying to copy the colonizers although their behavior of mimicry might seem to suggest so. The civilized man has a great deal in common with the savage man and the two oppositions relate to one another.

In conclusion, it becomes evident that Marlow senses the similarity between the white man and the natives but he refuses to deal with his thoughts during his journey up the river. He represents oppressive Western society that uses brutal methods in order to bring civilization to their new colonies. The colonizers use loud noise to show their power to dominate the natives. However, as a Westerner, Marlow considers his own kind supreme and is unable to comprehend everything he encounters on the new continent.
The Sound of New Technology

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a great many inventions were made that changed the life of ordinary men. These inventions created new possibilities but were met by skepticism as well. In “A Voice without a Body: The Phonographic Logic of Heart of Darkness,” Ivan Kreilkamp writes about Thomas Edison’s new invention, the phonograph, in relation to Conrad’s novel. The phonograph, which was invented in 1877, was considered quite a strange machine. The first sounds it produced were of a scratching kind and many categorized these as unpleasant noise. However, Edison talked and wrote in positive terms about his invention and the possibility to record and store human voices. He argued that the phonograph was a much better device than the camera and that it would save the words of great men. He even suggested that it provided a means to resist the finality of death (Kreilkamp 216). However, after voices had been recorded, the words and the sounds that were re-played were often felt to be alienated from their source and therefore many people were skeptical.

This skepticism is reflected in Heart of Darkness since the characters are reduced to voices without bodies. Conrad’s ambivalence may be traced to the great importance he attaches to hearing as a vital sense and to the value of listening. Although Marlow looks forward to hearing Kurtz’s voice and listening to him, he is disappointed when he finally arrives at the inner station. Marlow finds Kurtz to be no more than a voice and he recalls other voices he has listened to and realizes that only a voice cannot reveal the truth and therefore it becomes insignificant:

Oh, yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard – him – it – this voice – other voices – all of them were so little more than voices – and the memory of that time itself lingers
around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. (HD 67)

The text suggests that what Marlow hears are voices that are rendered meaningless since they are detached from the original source. Miller writes that to “see the man who has had the experience is to have an avenue to the experience for which the man speaks, to which he bears witness” (“A Deconstructive Perspective” 214). Consequently, as readers of the tale having had no personal contact with any of the witnesses, we can never claim to have fully understood the text. Understanding can only be gained through experience and reading can never be considered the same as having an immediate experience (215).

Moreover, the language of the natives is described by Marlow as distant voices without any significance. He hears voices carrying sounds but they are devoid of meaning as there is no bodily presence. Thus, he ignores them. He only hears sounds and without a body present, he is neither able to read facial expressions nor detect other signs, which is the reason why he ignores the voices. This is another indication of the necessity to trace sounds back to an original source. It may be that this illustrates a rejection against the new technology and that the whole life of man could be stored just by recording his voice. In order to be able to really listen, one has to be open to more than what the phonograph could record. The monotonous, detached and technologically reproduced voice could record neither human sentence intonation nor word stress. The mechanical sound that came out of the phonograph was a scratching noise and often the voice as such could not even be recognized. Kreilkamp writes that “[b]y offering the Intended a comforting deathbed scene that conjures human presence, Marlow distances himself from the workings of a mechanical universe and its authorless, inhuman language” (236). This is the reason Marlow lies to the Intended when she asks about Kurtz’s last words. Marlow realizes that the last words uttered by Kurtz will never sum up the whole life of such an important man. Neither will the Intended be able to comprehend it all.
Marlow lies and tells her, or plays to her, what she wants to hear. Kurtz’s voice is nothingness because the bodiless sound cannot explain the horror that Kurtz experienced nor can it deliver the secret that lies hidden in Marlow’s story.

Moreover, Conrad’s resistance towards new technology may be reflected through Marlow’s talk about “a persistent whisper all around us … that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind” (HD 109). Although Conrad does not seem to approve of the phonograph, he most likely saw that this invention was just the beginning of a new era and thus only a prelude of what the future would have in store. The technological advancements had set in motion a progress that could not be stopped. However, Kreilkamp argues that Marlow’s voice and the voice of Kurtz are “the only two memorable voices in Heart of Darkness” (230). This depends, though, on how one interprets their voices. As Kurtz is reduced to just a voice, one may consider him being no more than a sound coming out of a recorder. What Marlow has is only a recording of Kurtz’s voice and that is why it means so little to him.

Like Kurtz, Marlow is presented as no more than a voice. In fact, it may be argued that he is also only a recorded voice that is played to his friends and to us, the listeners of the tale. Miller calls for a witness to the story when he states that “Marlow’s narrative does not seem to be spoken by a living incarnate witness” (“A Deconstructive Perspective” 226). The indefinite speaker is hard to trace and Miller argues that as the “voice is spoken by no one to no one” (226), it loses its authority. Only a voice connected to its source can be perceived as powerful. We have to experience in order to be affected. Moreover, Marlow’s friends aboard the Nellie hardly see him since it is dark and one of the friends also states that “[f]or a long time already he … had been no more to us than a voice” (HD 37). Marlow’s story is therefore only an oral narration and he himself nothing more than a recorder of it. There is barely any communication between Marlow and his audience aboard the Nellie and he never actually
talks to Kurtz. He listens to him, that is, he records his words and then the recording is played. He also acts as an observer without giving away his feelings. In “The Acoustic of Narrative Involvement: Modernism, Subjectivity, Voice,” Julie Beth Napoli argues that “there is hearing … yet no seeing” and she also claims that Marlow “unwillingly registers an acoustic exterior of the colonial project and his own journey” (78). This supports the idea that Marlow records but does not at all understand. Kurtz’s and Marlow’s voices are therefore neither memorable nor reliable. However, it is the reader of Heart of Darkness that is forced to hear and to comprehend the horror of colonialism and the story as a whole since Marlow himself is unable to do so (80). The recorder demands the listeners to understand. The question is, however, whether we can trust the bodiless sounds from a machine and if bodiless voices ever can provide us with any true answers and make the invisible visible.

It is difficult for the reader to establish who, in reality, the narrator of Conrad’s story is and therefore the whole story becomes a matter of distrust. Miller argues that the story “lingers in the mind or memory chiefly as a cacophony of dissonant voices” (“A Deconstructive Perspective” 226). If Marlow is no more than a recorder that has recorded Kurtz’s voice without actually experiencing anything, how trustworthy is then the story? The recorded voice is played to his listeners and to us but by whom? It is difficult for the reader to trace the narrative voice of the story. Is the story only a voice without a body? Is it Conrad himself who is the ultimate narrator or is it the first narrator or Marlow or is it Kurtz? These are questions that we, as listeners, struggle with. As there are no clear answers to the questions, the story becomes inconclusive and a nuisance to its audience. The soundscape of the whole story becomes quite elusive, complicated and inaudible. Subsequently, since the story we have listened to cannot be claimed to be silent, it might instead be interpreted as noise.
Conclusion

*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad exposes the truth about ruthless colonialism and gives a voice to the colonized land by silencing it. However, the story itself broke the silence causing many different reactions and throughout the years it has been subjected to scrutinized reading, analysis and debate. It addresses and speaks out to a large audience since it raises an awareness of a vast variety of issues such as colonialism, racism and gender. Some consider the novella a masterpiece whereas others are highly skeptical of its value. However, it may be due to the many possible interpretations and understandings of the text that it is still read and studied today.

In critical reviews of the text, visual aspects have been foregrounded at the expense of its auditory significance. However, the text itself invites its audience to perform a conscious act and truly listen to it. If we do, it reveals the truth about brutal colonialism. At the same time, though, we become aware that the secret that lies between the lines is impossible to comprehend. Nonetheless, the extensive use of sounds in the novella suggests that they are significant. Vision is the sense we mostly rely on today and we seem to forget that hearing is a vital sense as well. Our auditory surrounding affects us to a large extent and in order to fully comprehend the world around us, we must try to listen to all the sounds in our environment. Examining the setting of Conrad’s novella from an acoustic perspective and looking at the role sound and silence play, contributes a new level of understanding of the story.

Noise is often referred to as a sudden and unwanted sound. However, it is actually quite a subjective term. What one person perceives as noise another person might find quite pleasant. How we define noise is also affected by our cultural ideals. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow faces a whole new world of sounds when transported to Africa. London is presented as calm and silent and when Marlow arrives in Africa he realizes that there is an abundance of unexpected sounds. However, what is most surprising to him is that the wilderness, which he
thought to be silent, is anything but quiet. The noise that the silence produces becomes such a nuisance to him that it shocks him. Interestingly, though, the wilderness actually has a great deal in common with London too as is revealed throughout the story. The text, however, shows that sound and silence are dependent on one another and that silence can be perceived as a threatening noise. Silence often creates a sense of fear within Marlow whereas the noise that he encounters is experienced as quite comforting and calming at times.

In the text it becomes noticeable that civilization and wilderness also rely on one another. Marlow is affected by the Victorian ideal but when trying to escape from the sounds into the silent wilderness, he instead perceives silence as noisy and thus, in the end, he is defeated rather than saved by it. Throughout the story contradictions depend and rely on one another. By comparing sound and silence, civilization and wilderness, it becomes obvious that the binary oppositions collapse and therefore the hierarchy between them becomes unstable.

Marlow, who is born and raised in the Western world, is influenced by the moral norms of his time and of the Victorian society which considered silence a virtue. In the opening of his tale, he does not acknowledge the noise from the loud Western cities and he does everything in his power to conceal the fact that his society is far from quiet. He hides the fact that industries as well as city streets are noisy.

The seeming mimic behavior of the natives is another feature in the story. The noise made by white men is used as a means of power to scare the natives away but Marlow realizes that the natives too use noise in order to scare the colonizers away. The noise upsets him. However, the natives are not engaged in the act of mimicry and are not trying to copy the white men although it may seem as they are doing so. Marlow senses that there is a kinship between the civilized man and the savage man and their means of expression. He is, though, a man of his time and considers himself and his own kind superior. His mission is to enlighten less civilized people and to rule over them and therefore he closes his eyes and refuses to
acknowledge their resemblance. He is also frightened by the fact that he does not know how to relate to silence and noise. He is unable to identify which came out of which and what truly is most intimidating. Marlow becomes lost between two worlds and turns into a floating signifier without a stable identity.

Moreover, the text implies that Kurtz and Marlow are nothing but voices. It may be claimed that Edison’s promise that death could be almost conquered and that the life and adventures of great men could be grasped by the recording of their last voices does not come true. The text implies that a voice is nothing without a body and that words that came out of machines were meaningless. In fact, an interpretation of the text may suggest that words that cannot be traced to its original source cannot be trusted. Without experience it is impossible to comprehend anything. The readers of the tale are just witnesses of a witness that bears witness and therefore no one can claim to understand the secret that lies between the lines. The text reveals that Kurtz has come to understand the horror, or the truth. However, Marlow is unable to understand it since he has not experienced it himself. In turn, his fellow companions aboard the Nelly also have difficulties understanding the meaning and to us as readers of the text the answers will be forever out of our reach.

As I have shown in my essay, combining deconstructionist theory with the sonic environment has proved fruitful. As binary oppositions deconstruct themselves throughout the text, it becomes apparent that no truth holds. Consequently, no reader will ever be able to claim that he or she fully understands the secret that the novella conceals. When we as readers try to seek a meaning in the story, we realize that it is all hollowness. The text does not provide its readers with any answers but with numerous questions. As the voices presented to us in the tale are only voices with no trace of the original source, the whole story becomes inconclusive and can be considered to be nothing but unidentifiable noise. What I have done in my essay is to apply Hillis Miller’s line of reasoning when he discusses reflected light. I
have transposed that to an auditory environment and shown that, just as there is no source of light that we can see, there is no source of the auditory environment. Since we cannot trace the sound and the voices, they cannot be trusted. The truth lies beyond what we are able to perceive. It is impossible to claim that one truth holds whereas another does not as we cannot trace the origin. We have different versions and different interpretations but no one can claim to have the right one. In conclusion, since *Heart of Darkness* contains such a vast number of sounds and because the silence is never truly silent but instead raucous, the text presents itself as quite noisy. The novella can be considered just another unwanted, yet powerful, tale or sound as it neither provides answers nor delivers relief. The words and the tale mean nothing to its readers. Also the fact that today, more than a hundred years after it was published, it still “hang[s] in the air and dwell[s] on the ear” (Butcher ix) just as Conrad hoped it would offers evidence that it is actually one of the noisiest texts ever written.
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Primary Source


Secondary Sources


