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Soundscapes in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Short Stories

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Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal E, byggnad Humanisthuset, fredagen den 11 juni, kl. 10:00. Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på engelska.

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Organization

Umeå University
Department of Language Studies

Document type

Doctoral thesis

Date of publication

21 May 2021

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Title

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Abstract

In the eerie world of Gothic literature, sound represents a source of fear, anxiety, and discomfort, and it mostly affects its listeners through the invisible character of the experience. Sound is integral to nineteenth-century Gothic short stories with their panoply of liminal and polyphonic oppositions, as well as a claustrophobic feel of spaces, fearful listeners, and the return of the repressed. The meaning of sound in the perceived environment entangles discussions about the way Gothic literature represents and registers sound in its connection with space and listener. This thesis examines literary soundscapes, or a combination of sounds and sound patterns, in Gothic short stories of nineteenth-century writers Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Warren, Matthew Phipps Shiel, Edith Nesbit, Phoebe Yates Pember, William Mudford, William Maginn, John Galt, and Charles Lever. Through close reading of the material, my study explores how sound engages with space and listener in four settings: houses, bedrooms, torture chambers, and burial grounds. By linking the auditory dimension and the spatial features, it is argued that soundscapes establish a system of communication that is essential for the formation and reconstruction of the listener's sense of identity through empowering or disempowering acoustic trials. The four types of Gothic settings structure the dissertation, where each chapter has a story by Edgar Allan Poe as its nucleus. First I analyze the acoustic landscape of a *house* in its representation and influence on the listener. The acoustic diversity and multi-dimensionality of Gothic houses transgress into the imaginary acoustic landscapes and endanger the listeners. Next, I examine the private audible space of a (*bed*)*room*. The stories feature the uncanny sound of a heartbeat that becomes a destabilizing force and communicates the return of the repressed. I proceed to the interrelationship of sound, torture, and the victim in the (in)voluntary *torture chambers*. Finally, I focus on *the burial grounds* through the perspective of the protagonist confined in the limitations of the body and the surroundings. In its plurality of forms, sound becomes a key to self-image and self-assertion through the transformative acoustic experience. Gothic houses, rooms, and torture chambers represent a mutable and controlling power with an agency of living, breathing, and tormenting animated entity. The study reveals the forms of listening aggravated with physical or mental affliction that both engage with and destabilize medical frameworks. I expose temporality in Gothic soundscapes and underscore liminality as endemic both to the facets of Gothic soundscapes and the interconnection between the visual and the aural. In the coda, I highlight the reinvention of Gothic soundscapes in animated adaptations that intertwine aesthetic enjoyment and interpretative judgement.

Keywords

soundscape, the Gothic, short story, auscultator, acousmatic sound, liminality, the uncanny

Language

English

ISBN

print: 978-91-7855-550-5
PDF: 978-91-7855-551-2

ISSN

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Number of pages

252