

The Eldritch Voice: H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Phonography

Sounding Out! Authors

Blog post published August 6, 2015 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/5ym3s-fm858>

Abstract

Welcome to the last installment of *Sonic Shadows*, ***Sounding Out!***'s limited series pursuing the question of what it means to have a voice.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Article, Cultural Studies, History, Listening

Recommended citation

Authors, S. O. (2015, August 6). The Eldritch Voice: H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Phonography. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/5ym3s-fm858>

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Welcome to the last installment of Sonic Shadows, **Sounding Out!**'s limited series pursuing the question of what it means to have a voice. In the [most recent post](#), **Dominic Pettman** encountered several traumatized birds who acoustically and uncannily mirror the human, a feedback loop that composes what he called "the creaturely voice." This week, **James Steintrager** investigates the strange meaning of a "metallic" voice in the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, showing how early sound recording technology exposed an alien potential lingering within the human voice. This alien voice – between human and machine – was fodder for techniques of defamiliarizing the world of the reader.

I'll leave James to tell us more. Thanks for reading!

— **Guest Editor Julie Beth Napolin**

A decade after finding itself downsized to a dwarf planet, Pluto has managed to spark wonder in the summer of 2015 as pictures of its remarkable surface features and those of its moon are delivered to us by NASA's New Horizons space probe. As scientists begin to tentatively [name these features](#), they have drawn from speculative fiction for what they see on the moon Charon, giving craters names including Spock, Sulu, Uhuru, and—mixing franchises—Skywalker. From *Doctor Who* there will be a Tardis Chasma and a Gallifrey Macula. Pluto's features stretch back a bit further, where there will also be a Cthulhu Regio, named after the unspeakable interstellar monster-cum-god invented by H. P. Lovecraft.

We can imagine that Lovecraft would have been thrilled, since back when Pluto was first discovered in early 1930 and was the evocative edge of the solar system, he had turned the planet into the putative home of secretive alien visitors to Earth in his short story "[The Whisperer in Darkness](#)." First published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1931, "The Whisperer in Darkness" features various media of communication—telegraphs, telephones, photographs, and newspapers—as well as the possibilities of their manipulation and misconstruing. The phonograph, however, plays the starring role in this tale about gathering and interpreting the eerie and otherworldly—the *eldritch*, in a word—signs of possible alien presence in backwoods Vermont.

In the story, Akeley, a farmer with a degree of erudition and curiosity, captures something strange on a record. This something, when played back by the protagonist Wilmarth, a folklorist at Lovecraft's fictional Miskatonic University, goes like this:

Iä! Shub-Niggurath! The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young! (219)

The sinister resonance of a racial epithet in what appears to be a foreign or truly alien tongue notwithstanding, this story features none of the more obvious and problematic invocations of race and ethnicity—the primitive rituals in the swamps of Louisiana of “The Call of Cthulhu” or the anti-Catholic immigrant panic of “The Horror at Red Hook”—for which Lovecraft has achieved a degree of infamy. Moreover, the understandable concern with Lovecraft’s social Darwinism and bad biology in some ways tends to miss how for the author—and for us as well—power and otherness are bound up with technology.

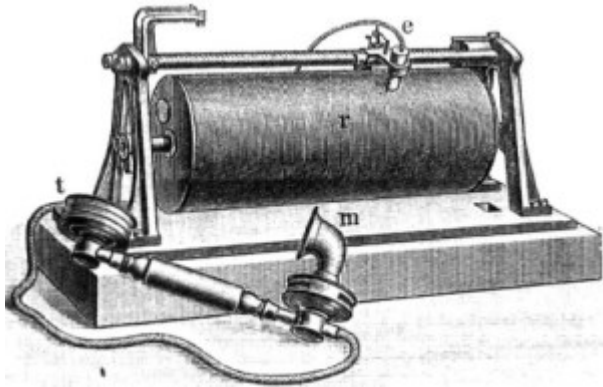


The transcription of these exclamations, recorded on a “blasphemous waxen cylinder,” is prefaced with an emphatic remark about their sonic character: “A BUZZING IMITATION OF HUMAN SPEECH” (219-220). The captured voice is further described as an “accursed *buzzing* which had no likeness to humanity despite the human words which it uttered in good English grammar and a scholarly accent” (218). It is glossed yet again as a “fiendish buzzing... like the drone of some loathsome, gigantic insect ponderously shaped into the articulate speech of an alien species” (220). If such a creature tried to utter our tongue and to do so in our manner—both of which would be alien to it—surely we might expect an indication of the difference in vocal apparatuses: a revelatory buzzing. Lovecraft’s story figures this “eldritch sound” as it is transduced through the corporeal: as the timbral indication of something *off* when the human voice is embodied in a fundamentally different sort of being. It is the sound that happens when a fungoid creature from Yuggoth—the supposedly native term for Pluto—speaks our tongue with its insectile mouthparts.

Yet, reading historically, we might understand this transduction as the sound of technical mediation itself: the brazen buzz of phonography, overlaying and, in a sense, inhabiting the human voice.

For listeners to early phonographic recordings, metallic sounds—inevitable given the materials used for styluses, tone arms, diaphragms, amplifying horns—were simply part of the experience. Far from capturing “the unimaginable real” or registering “acoustic events as such,” as media theorist [Friedrich Kittler](#) once put the case about Edison’s invention, which debuted in 1877, phonography was not only technically incapable of recording anything like an ambient soundscape but also drew attention to the very noise of itself (23).

For the first several decades of the medium's existence, patent registers and admen's pitches show that clean capture and reproduction were elusive rather than given. An account in the [Literary Digest Advertiser](#) of Valdemar Poulsen's Telegraphone, explains the problem:



The talking-machine records sound by the action of a steel point upon some yielding substance like wax, and reproduces it by practically reversing the operation. The making of the record itself is accompanied by a necessary but disagreeably mechanical noise—that dominating drone—that ‘b-r-r-r-r’ that is never in the human voice, and always in its mechanical imitations. One hears metallic sounds from a brazen throat—uncanny and inhuman. The brittle cylinder drops on the floor, breaks—and the neighbors rejoice!

The Telegraphone, which recorded sounds “upon imperishable steel through the intangible but potent force of electromagnetism” such that no “foreign or mechanical noise is heard or is possible,” of course promised to make the neighbors happy not by breaking the cylinder but rather by taking the inhuman ‘b-r-r-r-r’ out of the phonographically reproduced voice. Nonetheless, etching sound on steel, the Telegraphone was still a metal machine and unlikely to overcome the buzz entirely.

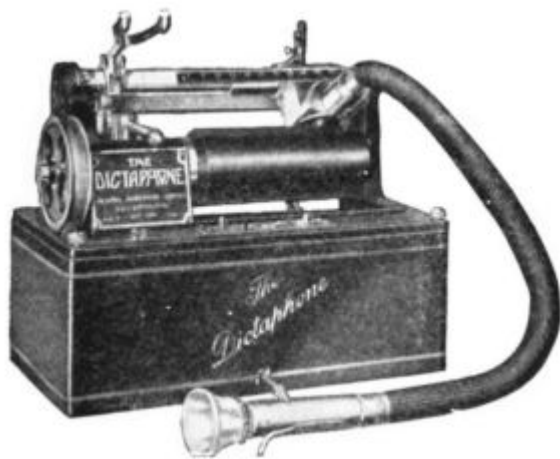
In his account of “weird stories” and why the genre suited him best, Lovecraft explained that one of his “strongest and most persistent wishes” was “to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which forever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis.” In “The Whisperer in Darkness,” Lovecraft put to work a technology that was rapidly becoming commonplace to introduce a buzz into the fabric of the everyday. This is the eldritch effect of Lovecraft’s evocation of phonography. While we might wonder whether a photograph has been tampered with, who really sent a telegram, or with whom we are actually speaking over a telephone line—all examples from Lovecraft’s tale—the central, repeated conundrums for the scholar Wilmarth remain not only *whose* voice is captured on the recorded cylinder but also *why* it sounds that way.



The phonograph transforms the human voice, engineers a cosmic transduction, suggesting that within our quotidian reality something strange might lurk. This juxtaposition and interplay of the increasingly ordinary and the eldritch is also glimpsed in an account of Charles Parson's invention the Auxetophone, which used a column of pressurized air rather than the usual metallic diaphragm. Here is an account of the voice of the Auxetophone from the "Matters Musical" column of *The Bystander Magazine* from 1905: "Long ago reconciled to the weird workings of the phonograph, we had come to regard as inevitable the metallic nature of its inhuman voice." The new invention might well upset our listening habits, for Mr. Parson's invention "bids fair to modify, if not entirely to remove," the phonograph's "somewhat unpleasant *timbre*."

What the phonograph does as a medium is to *make weird*. And what making weird means is that instead of merely reproducing the human voice—let alone rendering acoustic events as such—it transforms the latter into its own: an uncanny approximation, which fails to simulate perfectly with regard to timbre in particular. Phonography reveals that the materials of reproduction are not vocal chords, breath, labial and dental friction—not flesh and spirit, but vibrating metal.

Although we can only speculate in this regard, I would suggest that "The Whisperer in Darkness" was *weirder* for readers for whom phonographs still spoke with metallic timbre. The rasping whisper of the needle on cylinder created what the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky was formulating at almost exactly the same time as the function of the literary *tout court*: defamiliarization or, better, *estrangement*. Nonetheless, leading the reader to infer an alien presence behind this voice was equally necessary for the effect. After all, if we are to take the Auxetophone as our example—an apparatus announced in 1905, a quarter of a decade before Lovecraft composed his tale, and that joined a marketplace burgeoning with metallic-voice reducing cabinets, styluses, dampers, and other devices—phonographic listeners had long since become habituated to the inhumanity of the medium. That inhumanity had to be recalled and reactivated in the context of Lovecraft's story.



To understand fully the nature of this reactivation, moreover, we need to know precisely what Lovecraft's evocative phonograph was. When Akeley takes his phonograph into the woods, he adds that he brought "a dictaphone attachment and a wax blank" (209). Further, to play back the recording, Wilmarth must borrow the "commercial machine" from the college administration (217). The device most consistent with Lovecraft's descriptions and terms is not a record player, as we might imagine, but Columbia Gramophone Company's Dictaphone. By the time of the story's setting, Edison Phonograph's had long since switched to more durable celluloid cylinders (Blue Amberol Records; 1912-1929) in an effort to stave off competition from flat records. Only Dictaphones, aimed at businessmen rather than leisure listeners, still used wax cylinders, since recordings could be scraped off and the cylinder reused. The vinyl Dictabelt, which eventually replaced them, would not arrive until 1947.

Meanwhile, precisely when the events depicted in "The Whisperer in Darkness" are supposed to have taken place, phonography was experiencing a revolutionary transformation: electronic sound technologies developed by radio engineers were hybridizing the acoustic machines, and electro-acoustic phonographs were in fact becoming less metallic in tone. Yet circa 1930, as the buzz slipped toward silence, phonography was still the best means of figuring the sonic uncanny valley. It was a sort of return of the technologically repressed: a reminder of the original eeriness of sound reproduction—recalled from childhood or perhaps parental folklore—at the very moment that new technologies promised to hide such inhumanity from sensory perception. Crucially, in Lovecraft's tale, estrangement is not merely a literary effect. Rather, the eldritch is what happens when the printed word at a given moment of technological history calls up and calls upon other media of communication, phonography not the least.

I have remarked the apparent absence of race as a concern in "The Whisperer in Darkness," but something along the lines of class is subtly but insistently at work in the tale. The academic Wilmarth and his erudite interlocutor Akeley are set in contrast with the benighted, uncomprehending agrarians of rural Vermont. Both men also display a horrified fascination with the alien technology that will allow human brains to be fitted into hearing, seeing, and speaking machines for transportation to Yuggoth. These machines are compared to phonographs: cylinders for storing brains much like those for storing the human voice. In this regard, the fungoid creatures resemble not so much bourgeois users or consumers of technology as scientists and engineers. Moreover, they do so just as a discourse of *technocracy*—rule by a technologically savvy elite—was being articulated in the United States. Here we might see the discovery of Pluto as a

pretext for exploring anxieties closer to home: how new technologies were redistributing power, how their improvement—the fading of the telltale buzz—was making it more difficult to determine where humanity stopped and technology began, and whether acquiescence in this changes was laudable or resistance feasible. As usual with Lovecraft, these topics are handled with disconcerting ambivalence.

James A. Steintrager is a professor of English, Comparative Literature, and European Languages and Studies at the University of California, Irvine. He writes on a variety of topics, including libertinism, world cinema, and auditory cultures. His translation of and introduction to Michel Chion's *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise* will be published by Duke University Press in fall of 2015.

Featured image: Taken from “[Global Mosaic of Pluto in True Color](#)” in NASA’s [New Horizons Image Gallery](#), public domain. All other images courtesy of the author.



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