

# Acoustic Narrative Study and Its Development in China and Abroad

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**Abstract** During the past several decades, acoustic narrative study has attracted more and more scholars' attention. Intellectual community both in China and abroad has put forward lots of inspiring ideas and conceptual terms, making continuous efforts to sharpen the critical edge and expand the boundary of the theory. The fruitful theoretical discussion and empirical criticism practice among Chinese scholars represented by Fu Xiuyan and western scholars represented by R. Murray Schafer and Melba Cuddy-Keane undoubtedly laid solid theoretical foundation and set practical norms for the future study of acoustic narrative. This paper will evaluate the significance of the rise of audionarratology by tracing the history, commenting on the recent developments and depicting a vision for its prospect.

**Key words** acoustic narrative; audionarratology; development; contributions

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## Introduction

Many important literary works have not been “heard” by readers carefully, because important auditory information in them are still in an undisclosed state. To discover auditory information in literary works, more and more scholars in recent years, have turned their attention to acoustic narrative. Acoustic narrative belongs to the

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category of auditory culture. It pays attention to the connection between auditory sense and narrative, the relationship between sound ontology and meaning, the interpretation of the content of soundscape in literary texts. It aims to reproduce the hazy image of the soundscape and demonstrates the artistic value of auditory sense (Fu, "A Theoretical Construction of Narrative Acoustic Narrative" 77).

During the past decades, acoustic narrative study has attracted more and more scholars' attention. Scholars both in China and abroad have put forward lots of inspiring ideas and conceptual terms, making great efforts to sharpen the critical edge and expand the boundary of the theory. The fruitful theoretical discussion and empirical criticism practice both in China and abroad undoubtedly established basic academic norms and laid solid theoretical foundation for the future study of acoustic narrative. This paper will evaluate the significance of the rise of audionarratology by tracing the history, commenting on the recent developments and depicting a vision for its prospect.

### **The History and Development of Acoustic Narrative Abroad**

The study of acoustic narrative was initiated in the 1950s by British scholar Carothers. He believed that Westerners mainly live in a relatively indifferent visual world while the African people live in a hearing world which is warm and highly aesthetic (307). In the 1960s, Canadian scholar McLuhan sharply criticized the phenomena of audiovisual imbalances of Western culture in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, pointing out that the root cause lays in the perceptual habits of reading and writing of letters. He held that it is necessary to establish an "acoustic space" concept to be differentiated from the "visual space" experience in order to treat this "visually isolated blindness" (367).

Professor Schafer, Canadian theorist, is the pioneer in auditory cultural studies. He promoted the famous "World Soundscape Project" at Simon Fraser University in the 1970s, which lays the solid theoretical foundation for the study of acoustic narrative. Schafer's work *Our Sonic Environment and The Soundscape: The Tuning of the World* is the pioneering work and classics of soundscape research. This work opens up many prospective fields of soundscape research, systematically explains the composition, perception, classification and evolution of soundscape, creating an era of soundscape studies.

Schafer was dedicated to creating new terms and consolidating the fundamentals of audionarratology. He put forward that soundscape is the sonic environment, which is short for the landscape of sounds, or the background of sounds. The term refers to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions

and tape montages, particularly when being considered as an environment (274). According to Schafer, the soundscape in the acoustic sense includes three levels. One is the keynote sound, which determines the tone of the entire sound scene, to put it simply, it supports or depicts the basic outline of the acoustic background. Keynote sound is that which is heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived. Examples might be the sound of the sea for a maritime community or the sound of the internal combustion engine in the modern city (Schafer 272). The second is signal sound, which is particularly easy to attract attention in the whole soundscape due to its distinctive feature, such as the sound of whistle, siren and ringtone (Schafer 275). The third is the soundmark, which marks the sound characteristics of a place. This concept is deduced from the word landmark, referring to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community (Schafer 274), and it is the iconic sound that constitutes the soundscape. The keynote sound, signal sound and soundmark do not attract the same attention. Shaffer borrows the term “figure” and “ground” from visual psychology to illustrate that soundscape is the same as a landscape painting. He asserted that some sounds stand out in the foreground and some are hidden deep in the background, but the relationship between them is not static because any sound can be consciously heard, all sounds can become pictures or signal sounds (9). Schafer also gave a detailed definition to other important terms: hi-fi and lo-fi sounds of soundscape, etc.. Hi-fi is abbreviation for high fidelity, that is, a favorable signal-to-noise ratio. The most general use of the term is in electroacoustics. A hi-fi environment applied to soundscape studies is one in which sounds may be heard clearly without crowding or masking (Schafer 272). Lo-fi is abbreviation for low fidelity, that is, an unfavorable signal-to-noise ratio, in which signals are overcrowded, resulting in masking or lack of clarity (Schafer 272). These terms are crucial important in carrying out today’s acoustic narrative study.

Shortly after Schafer, Professor Melba Cuddy-Keane from University of Toronto, published his “Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear: An Approach to Narrative Through Auditory Perception” in 2005, introducing the concept of acoustic narrative into the field of academic literary theory. In addition to adopting terms such as sound mark and soundscape corresponding to landmark and landscape to analyse novels, Keane also constructed a set of terms and methods for exploring the acoustic narrative study, among which “auscultation” is the most important one. Auscultation, meaning “inspection of sounds”, is a medical term in English. Keane elaborated that for the insufficiency of terms used to describe

hearing, comparing “auscultation” with “observation” is not without grounds. Keane proposed that the new sound technology, the sound of modern cities, and the interest in auditory perception together constitute the background of the new narrative description of the subject of hearing. But to understand the new acoustic narrative, we need a proper analytical language. The term “auscultation” is suitable for describing the text-oriented analysis of sounds. It refers to the reader’s reading activities, especially when they pay attention to the thinking of the textual functions of the sounds, such as how sounds promote the character creation, plot development and space-time construction etc. The ultimate goal of auscultation is to fully perceive the information in the literary works. Keane (22) insisted that auscultation shows more inclusiveness and integration than observation. Since sounds can rush from all directions to the ears of the listener, the acoustic narrative shows the reader a dynamic world that constantly emits sounds. Compared with the world created by visual narrative, this world seems more perceptual and three-dimensional, more continuous and authentic (Keane 22). Keane’s analysis tells us “Non-semantic reading” can find a new way to understand the meaning of narrative. She believed that studies of auscultation and auditory scene analysis might prove that hearing plays a considerably more crucial role in narrative than has been considered. And there may well be more for us to learn from narrative about the knowledge of the intelligent ear (396).

As well as Melba Cuddy-Keane, some other western theorists like Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinze, Sarah Key and Francois Noudelmann, Julie Beth Napolin, also realized the importance of sounds in literary works and began to consolidate the acoustic narrative theories. Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinze wrote several articles related to acoustic narrative study. Especially in their “Audionarratology: Prolegomena to a Research Paradigm Exploring Sound and Narrative,” they discussed the preliminary thoughts and theoretical considerations of sound and narrative, music and storytelling, sound art as well as aural ways of world-making. They asserted that Schafer’s writings still constitute key texts within sound studies (4). What’s more, they held that as far as narratology is concerned, sound in many art forms and medial contexts seems to have been relegated, and an “acoustic turn” may therefore be what is needed in narratology, too (3). Except that, they pointed out that audionarratology is an umbrella term for narrative approaches that take into account forms and functions of sound and their relation to narrative structure and it analyzes how sound contributes to the creation of real and imagined narrative spaces and worlds. They concluded at least three axes or trajectories that this new sub-discipline of narratology operates along: from audio-visual to purely auditory

media; from literary (artistic) to more pragmatic, everyday genres; and from verbal to non-verbal forms of expression (63). Sarah Key and François Noudelmann also mentioned in their article “Introduction: Soundings and Soundscapes” that Schafer’s concept of soundscape has opened up new ways of listening, and of theorizing about listening (5). They asserted that we live in a world of sounds and our ways of listening have implications for the ecology of all our thoughts, discourses and disciplinary practices (9).

The value of the newly-rising acoustic narrative study lies not principally as a codified doctrine but as a body of practice that encourages scholars to engage in a primary relationship with literary texts. Recent years also saw many western scholars carrying out criticism practice in this new field. Melba Cuddy-Keane’s “Modernist Soundscapes and the Intelligent Ear: An Approach to Narrative Through Auditory Perception” analyzed the acoustic narrative in Virginia Woolf’s novels and founded a new reference point for future scholars’ in-depth research. Her analysis revealed Woolf’s breadth of innovation and importance of applying soundscape in the creation of her novels. In addition, Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinze analyzed Philip Roth’s Novel *Indignation* and its German Radio Play Adaptation *Empörung* from an audionarratological perspective and showed how both the book and the radio play offer potential for multisensory experiences on the part of readers and radio audiences (307). In another article “Narrating Sounds: Introduction to the Forum,” they went on to illustrate that the difference between “audio art” and sound presentations in written literary texts is that the former affords real sounds, voices, music, while readers of literary texts have to imagine them in order to be able to form an idea of a storyworld’s “soundscape,” which, they hinted, is worth investigating further in literary studies and narratology (63). What’s more, Julie Beth Napolin submitted her doctor dissertation about the acoustics of modernist narrative works backed by two case studies, the work of Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner. She held that these writers proposed a way of listening to the modernist novel and to the neglected importance of sounds and voices within it (1). She deemed that the acoustics of narrative involves modernism, subjectivity, voice, and argued that the overly visual account of modernism misses a crucial opportunity to “hear” modernist narrative and composition (2). In recent years, more and more scholars and students embark on studies in this promising field.

### **The History and Development of Acoustic Narrative in China**

Acoustic narrative study has also gained more and more attention in China these years and has achieved the currency value as an important narrative theory and

critical methodology in literature studies. Chinese scholars embraced the new theory with enthusiasm and enriched it with the critical insight of Chinese culture.

Fu Xiuyan (the leading professor of acoustic narrative study in China and a chief expert of Narrative Research Center of Jiangxi Normal University), Wang Dun (associate professor of Renmin University of China), Zhou Zhigao (professor of School of Foreign Languages of Jiujiang University and researcher of Narrative Research Center of Jiangxi Normal University), Fu Xiaoling (associate professor of Foreign Language Teaching Center of Sun Yat-sen University) are distinguished Chinese scholars committed to introducing, testing and developing the theories of acoustic narrative. On one hand, they have put forward significant research methods and strategies concerning acoustic narrative study and deepened the acoustic narrative related theories. On the other hand, they and their research teams apply the methodological terms to the close reading of many western and eastern canonical texts.

As a leading figure in the field of narratology studies in China, Fu Xiuyan introduced the whole set of audionarratology to the Chinese intellectual community. He agreed with Canadian scholar Schafer and Melba Cuddy-Keane's idea of using the auditory terms like soundscape and auscultation to analyse the acoustic meaning of literary texts rather than the semantic meaning. Fu admitted it is a new way to understand the narrative meaning of literature. In his "On Soundscape," he made a clear explanation about the levels and classifications of soundscape proposed by Canadian acoustic scholar Schafer. Fu highlighted that the concept of soundscape is very important and it is helpful to remind people that sounds have their own unique scenery. In his opinion, introducing the concept of soundscape in the field of acoustics into narrative research is not to make the ears overwhelm the eyes, but to correct the visual hegemony and restore the unity and balance of audiovisual perception (60). In his "On Auscultation," he discussed the importance of the term "auscultation" proposed by Keane, and affirmed that rereading literary and artistic works from the perspective of "hearing" helps to reverse the perception imbalance caused by visual hegemony (26). What's more, he modified and enriched some theories. For example, as to the "soundscape" put forward by Schafer, Fu elucidated that it is not only made up of sounds, but also of silence, for absolute silence is impossible as long as the subject of "hearing" is a person. Of course, one can get relatively silent for a period of time by keeping silent, but this silence as sound pause, is also an indispensable component of a soundscape. Therefore, Fu puts forward that the relative alternation of sound and silence has become a means of artistic expression among musician as well as in some novelists (61). As to auscultation, a term put forward by Melba

Cuddy-Keane to better appreciate the reading efficacy of narrative texts, Fu held that literary works, like old buildings, need to have a careful auscultation on their soundscape (31) and it is especially necessary to conduct the “perception training” in the context of media change in this era (26).

More importantly, Fu contributed a lot to the study of uncertain auditory perception in Narration. He combed and analyzed three types of uncertain auditory perception in Chinese and foreign narrative classics in his article “Auditory Hallucination, Weird Hearing and Overhearing—On Three Types of Uncertain Auditory Perception in Narration.” He pointed out that the three types of uncertain auditory perception in narrative works are auditory hallucination, weird hearing and overhearing which are on the opposite side of authenticity, possibility, and completeness: the untruthfulness of auditory hallucination lies in the falseness of the information content; the impossibility of weird hearing stems from its bizarre channel of information exchange; the uncertainty of overhearing results from fragmentation of information. According to Professor Fu, auditory hallucination is just unreal perception that generally occurs in the auditory organs and the most prominent symptom of it is the uncertainty of auditory perception which may be closely related with mental illness (e.g. schizophrenia) of hearers, so it always serves as an effective narrative strategy in character depiction and plot design (100). Weird hearing refers to the enhancement of hearing under the influence of some subjective and objective factors with listeners usually having extraordinary hearing because of their talents, circumstances or diseases. The uncertainty of auditory perception is also quite prominent in weird hearing (Fu 103). Overhearing means listeners hearing something intentionally or unintentionally, inadvertently receiving auditory messages that they are interested in. Therefore, it is also a sudden act of being involved with listeners who do not initially have the subjective will to obtain the relevant information, and there is no doubt that it is impossible to make any preparations for this in advance (Fu 106). Thus, these uncertain auditory perceptions will inevitably lead to uncertainty in expression, and obscure auditory events can often make the content of texts more colorful, providing readers with more space to imagine. Not only that, these kinds of uncertain auditory perceptions can also provide motivation for the initiation, unfolding and turning of the story, and contribute to the creation of the characters and the expression of the themes (Fu 99). Therefore, a systematic analysis of the auditory hallucination, weird hearing and overhearing, is helpful for readers to have a deeper understanding of the richness and subtlety of the art of storytelling (Fu 99).

Wang Dun found another way approaching audionarratology. He attributed

audionarratology to the field of cultural studies and enriched it with cultural studies' vision. In the article "Soundscape: A New Vision in Cultural Studies Abroad", he discussed some questions in terms of auditory sense, Shaffer's soundscape and "auditory ecology" in cultural studies. He held that the trend of western acoustic narrative study has gradually entered the mainstream of cultural research (81). Such a trend has also enriched itself in modern aesthetic and cultural studies. What's more, in his "Auditory Problem in Urban Cultural Space," he explored the discourse and paradigm of auditory research, the modern transformation of auditory problems in modern urban cultural space, and the new features of auditory urban cultural space. He asserted that culture would become more complex with the development of society, and the auditory cultural experience and auditory civilization forms would also become diversified with the changing of new media technologies and social mechanisms, so our audionarratology research should embrace the complexity in this era (Wang 147).

Zhou Zhigao also cast a new light on audionarratology. He introduced to China French film artist Michel Chion's proposal of three listening modes in terms of how to auscultate the meaning of narrative works: causal listening, semantic listening and simplified listening in his article "Distinguishing the Meanings of Sounds in Fictional Narrative." Regarding the classification of sounds, he agreed with Shaffer as to "keynote sound, signal sound and soundmark." He emphasized that whether it is related to important events or not, sounds do have special meaning in the fictional narrative, and play a supporting role in constructing the soundscape in the fictional narrative, which can reveal important information behind the visual world (111). He affirmed the necessity of carrying out acoustic narrative in narratology in the current state of audio-visual imbalance, elaborated that only by integrating the audiovisual senses to feel and experience the fictional world, and auscultating the sounds in the fictional narrative, could we better perceive and understand the aesthetic value, social features, and historical culture of literary texts, and only through "intelligent listening," the auditory soundscape corresponding to the visually constructed landscape could be shaped, and a multi-dimensional fictional world could be totally constructed (117).

Professor Fu Xiaoling introduced and reviewed the theoretical basis of auditory studies, the necessary conditions and the feasible strategies of acoustic narrative study in her article "A Theoretical Construction of Acoustic Narrative." She pointed out that acoustic narrative is a branch of irrational narrative and belongs to the category of auditory culture. She emphasized that when we do acoustic narrative studies we should first think about the generation, circulation and consumption

of soundscape, and then explore how to auscultate these sounds (105). She also compared and differentiated the auditory effects of English words and Chinese characters in hope to benefit English (Chinese) translation of literary texts.

Furthermore, there are many Chinese scholars like Zhou Zhigao, Zhang Chuchu, Qiu Zongzhen, Fang Chen, Yang Zhiping and Yu Kangni etc, who have provided interpretations of Chinese and western literary works from the perspective of acoustic narrative.

Professor Zhou Zhigao, a key member of the Narrative Research Center of Jiangxi Normal University, conducted an acoustic narrative study on Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* from the aspects of simulation and imagination of sound events in the story from the audio-visual angle. He pointed out that in order to achieve the realistic effect of sound, the first-person narrative of *The Tell-Tale Heart* uses a spoken narrative method, including a large number of oral narratives such as the use of short sentences and dashes, and also including many sounds and sound images to imitate the original sounds (69). At the same time, he believed that the superiority of Allan Poe's narrative skills is to expand the auditory space of the old man's room, to connect the individual with the society, and to construct auditory space transformed from "single listening" to "common listening" (72). Qiu Zongzhen, a member from Fu Xiuxian's research team, conducted an acoustic narrative study of the French writer Roman Rowland's *Jean-Christophe*. Starting with the acoustic imagery in the text, she analyzed how the acoustic imagery represented by bells, sounds of music, and the hustle and bustle constructs the narrative space and propels the development of the story. she focused on the auditory imagery of Christophe's listening and analyzed Roman Rowland's character shaping strategies (1). Fang Cheng discussed Charles Dickens' Novels from the perspective of audionarratology in his paper "A Research on Acoustic Narrative of Charles Dicken's Novels". He used "auscultation" and "soundscape" as important research items to capture the sound symbols in Charles Dickens' Novels. Through "auscultation," he revived the auditory space corresponding to the visual space and the soundscape corresponding to the landscape in Charles Dicken's Novels. He grouped the sound description in Dickens's novels into three categories: hustle, noise, and silence, explored the richness of auditory narrative objects in Dickens's novels, and analyzed the unique textual effect of acoustic narrative such as creating a space of imagination, promoting the development of the plot, and highlighting the character of the novels (3).

Many others turned to Chinese literature interpretation. Yang Zhiping, a member of the Narrative Research Center of Jiangxi Normal University, studied acoustic narrative in Chinese classic novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. He elaborated

acoustic narrative wildly used in this great novel and studied how it enhances the artistic value and highlights the novel's multi-significance (180). Yu Kangni, another member from Fu Xiuxian's research team, categorized the representative sound events in the four great classical works of Ming Dynasty in China including *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *The Golden Lotus*, and *Journey to the West*. She analyzed the role of the acoustic narrative in the four novels' character portrayal, plot development, scene paintings and atmosphere creation (51). Dr. Zhang Chuchu of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, started from the aspects of the symbolic meaning of sounds, situation construction, auditory psychological features, and acoustic narrative characteristics to analyse Chinese modern writer Lu Xun's novels. She maintained that except for a large number of visual narratives in Lu Xun's novels, the flexible use of acoustic narrative is also worthy of attention. The use of acoustic narrative not only expands the ideographic space of the work, but also reflects the thinking mode and writing attitude of the writer himself. In addition, the acoustic narrative in Lu Xun's novels has shown extremely important significance in conveying their symbolic meaning, the typical situation, and psychological description (Zhang 82).

Recent years witnessed more and more Chinese scholars engaging in criticism practice in acoustic narrative studies. They apply the methodological terms to the interpretation of the western and eastern, canonical or non-canonical texts, testing acoustic narrative theories on literary texts, especially on novels, short stories, poetries, even films. They pay special attention to Russian writer Lev Tolstoy, French writer Marcel Proust, American modern writer Fitzgerald, Japanese contemporary writer Murakami Haruki's novels and stories, and they also adopt the theories to the interpretation of domestic writers' works, such as Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi's poems, Chinese modern writer Lin Yutang's novels, contemporary writer Yu Hua's novels etc.

### **Conclusion and Prospect**

In summary, the fruitful theoretical discussions and empirical studies among Chinese scholars represented by Fu Xiuyan and western scholars represented by R. Murray Schafer and Melba Cuddy-Keane undoubtedly laid solid theoretical foundation and set practical norms for the future study of acoustic narrative. Carrying out acoustic narrative related research is of great significance, for it is not only a theoretical reflection on the current state of audio-visual imbalance, but also a logical necessity of the "auditory turn" in the narratology field for enhancing our understanding about the auditory properties of narrative texts.

However, in order to maintain its distinctive characteristics and make it stay as an innovative and efficient method to facilitate our interpretation of literary texts, audionarratology needs to keep its fundamental principles and open up for new possibilities and diversity of literature interpretation.

Firstly, as audionarratology rose in criticizing the phenomena of audiovisual imbalances of our culture, it should avoid looming so large as to grab the job of the traditional visual narratology in interpreting narrative texts. Human narratives are closely related to human's perception of the world and our perceptive information comes from eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touching, all these channels equally important, so, for better interpreting narrative texts full of landscape, soundscape, smell scape, gustation scape etc., acoustic narrative study methodology and other narrative methodologies are not conflicting but complementary, supplementing each other.

Secondly, audionarratology cannot satisfy itself with identifying and analyzing the auditory substance of literary works. Staying at this level would necessarily lead to the oversimplification. There is no doubt that audionarratology should also be affiliated with Feminism, postcolonialism, cultural studies and other modern or post-modern theories. Only embracing these equally important interpreting tools when necessary, can we illustrate the content intricacy and aesthetic complexity characterizing great narrative works. Only by doing so can audionarratology avoid being accused of summarizing the message of a literary work in a neat formula as some classical narratology theories being accused of.

Lastly, besides extending the research field to auditory media, everyday literature genres, even non-verbal forms of expression (Mildorf and Kinzel 63), audionarratology may also form fruitful alliances with cognitive science. Humans are cognitive and emotional animals. When our body and mind are dominated or controlled by certain emotions, the nerve center of the brain quietly adjusts the distribution of attention, giving our nerve a special sensitivity to certain types of outside information, making it more sensitively cognizing specific signals. In this regard, auditory perception is both physiological and psychological behavior, and the perception of sounds is indispensable from our whole cognitive system. Thus, the attempt of interdisciplinary research, approaching and consolidating audionarratology by cognition study is also highly recommended.

In short, to develop into a well-established theory, audionarratology needs to let in new factors in building up its evolutionary picture.

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