Deakin University

David McCooey

Peripheral hearing: 'collaborative audio literature' and the uncanny

Abstract:

This (self-exegetical) essay concerns 'collaborative audio literature', a form of asynchronous collaborative practice that brings together music, sound design, and literary texts. As a form of literary audio 'content', such a genre is peripheral to the mainstream audio literary genres of audio books and podcasts. Collaborative audio literature exists at the periphery of performance, literature, sound design, and music, as an experimental, interdisciplinary form.

After a discussion of the relationship between music and sounded poetry, this essay discusses 'Three Sisters' (from my album *The Double*, 2017), an audio work based in part on Maria Takolander's short story of that name (2013). In 'Three Sisters', I undertake an innovative form of adaptation that employs sampling and text-to-speech synthesis to place the newly produced text in a complex sonic field of music and sound design. The 'un-performability' of this piece (and others from *The Double*) is central to the work's aesthetic, in which literature and music occupy virtual, peripheral spaces. The use of voices (synthetic and real) at the threshold of hearing also produces an aesthetic of ambiguity with regard to the usual predominance of words. 'Three Sisters', then, works with ambiguous, threshold spaces that test the limits of perception, authorship, genre, and the categories of literature and music themselves. The essay analyses my creative practice via the trope of the periphery-as-uncanny, a virtual space that evokes the disquieting interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Biographical note:

David McCooey is a professor of writing and literature, and a prize-winning poet, critic, and editor. His latest book of poems, *Star Struck*, was published by UWA Publishing in 2016. McCooey is the deputy general editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Allen & Unwin, 2009) and the co-editor (with Maria Takolander) of *The Limits of Life Writing* (Routledge, 2018). His scholarly research focuses on poetry and life writing (especially in Australia). His monograph on modern Australian autobiography, *Artful Histories* (1996), was published by Cambridge University Press and won a NSW Premier's Literary Award. His scholarly work has appeared in numerous books and journals, including *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry* (2017), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009),

and *Criticism*. McCooey is also a musician and composer. His latest album, in collaboration with Paul Hetherington, is *The Apartment* (2018).

1. Introduction

A key trope of modern art is that the practitioner is characteristically concerned with, and/or works from within, marginal spaces.[1] As avant-gardiste practices such as Fluxus 'happenings' suggest, there is often a paradoxical element to such visions of, and from, the periphery, since those visions are often placed in conspicuously public spaces. Similarly, the rhetoric of the manifesto—a mode of address still strongly associated with avant-gardiste artistic practices—is simultaneously one that speaks from, and indeed valorises, the margins while demanding attention from a putative 'centre'. In occupying and attending to the centre and margin simultaneously, such peripheral visions, then, evoke the paradoxical, if not uncanny, status of the art object, as a thing both central to, and marginal to, everyday life, mainstream spaces, and public discourse.

Unsettling conventional wisdom, crossing borders, and speaking from (or of) the margins is doubly fraught since it has come, in turn, to be routinised (merely gestural in its iteration) and incorporated (shorn of its radical potential via co-option into capitalist market ideology). One way to avoid such routinisation might be to accept this paradoxical, if not uncanny, condition of being an arts practitioner who must produce new work through repetition, where repetition can be seen to be a condition of the most foundational features of artistic production: form, genre, style, 'tradition', and even language itself. A further response to the repetitive nature of artistic production is to embrace the link between repetition and routinisation.

The so-called 'uncreative writing' of Kenneth Goldsmith, and other practitioners of contemporary large-scale found writing, effectively re-conceptualises routinisation as a form of proceduralism. Goldsmith's best-known works of conceptual writing are radically transcriptive, eschewing conventional ideas of originality. For instance, *Day* (2003) transcribes one issue—in its entirety—of the *New York Times* (September 1st 2000), while *The Weather* (2005) comprises of a year of transcribed weather reports. But this kind of intense proceduralism is not the only way to respond to the repetitive condition of artistic production. A simultaneously repetitive and original form of 'artistic vision' can be produced through other means, such as collaboration, sampling, and employing hybrid and intermedial forms. Such practices and forms are found in my own writing and sound art, and I will discuss them in more detail in this essay, a work of self-exegesis that will focus on an audio piece entitled 'Three Sisters', from my album *The Double* (2017), an adaptation of sorts of Maria Takolander's short-story collection *The Double* (2013).

I will discuss this piece as working in the generically peripheral space of what I term 'collaborative audio literature'. As such, this essay will consider what effects can be produced by working at those generic and formal peripheries that are the sites of emergent hybrid (audio) forms; works that are neither one thing nor the other (that is, neither literature nor music), and that explicitly seek to engage with ambiguous or liminal spaces associated with collaboration and the uncanny. The evocation of the uncanny is not arbitrary. By engaging in self-exegesis, I will consider how collaboration, digital technologies, and the use of hybrid and intermedial forms relate to the concept of the uncanny, that aesthetic category that brings about the disquieting interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the unhomely – dyadic

concepts that relate to the periphery/centre dyad. The uncanny is an especially powerful mode (or mood) to evoke here, given the way in which it so readily confuses the human and the non-human. The use of a cybernetic voice, through voice synthesis, in my collaborative adaptation of 'Three Sisters', along with the (musical and textual) thematisation of the peripheral, tells us something about how such a creative practice can test the limits of authorship and genre, not to mention literature and music themselves.

2. From the 'poetry soundtrack' to 'collaborative audio literature'

In 2013, I released *Outside Broadcast*, an album of what I called 'poetry soundtracks': digital audio works that bring together original poetry, music, and sound design. This album was entirely *non*-collaborative: I wrote the poetry, composed the music, and produced, mixed, and mastered the audio recordings.

In my essay, 'Fear of Music: Sounded Poetry and the Poetry Soundtrack', I wrote that:

> The poetry soundtrack occupies a surprisingly ignored sonic space between the avant-garde sound poem and documentary recordings of a poet's unaccompanied voice. The poetry soundtrack adapts and extends the possibilities of the typographic poem. It also illustrates the important connections between typographic and recorded poetry: the ghostliness of poetic voices; the musicality inherent in lyric poetry; the simultaneous mimetic and non-mimetic rendering of speech; and the ways in which voice is 'staged' through techniques of intensification.[2] (2012)

The poetry soundtrack is a hybrid form, and one that is neither sound poem, performance poem, poetry reading, nor popular song. Naturally, however, *Outside Broadcast*, as my essay outlines, had a myriad of antecedent works, ranging from The Doors' *An American Prayer* (1978) to works by Laurie Anderson and Brian Eno, especially Eno's album *Drums Between the Bells* (2011) and its companion EP *Panic of Looking* (2011).

There are a number of notable features of such spoken-word musico-poetic forms. One is the way they bring together popular and avant-gardiste practices and audiences. For instance, Laurie Anderson's 'O Superman' (released as a single in 1981 and appearing on Anderson's 1982 album *Big Science*) was a surprise hit by a hitherto little-known performance artist. The song (if song it is) makes its postmodern credentials clear not only through its use of sampling and vocoder (or voice synthesizer), but also in its pastiche of the aria 'O souverain, O juge, O père!', from Jules Massenet's opera *Le Cid* (1885).

Another notable feature of such works is the ambiguous position they appear to occupy in cultural terms, seen as neither popular song nor avant-garde sound poem. The heavy investment in the spoken word in vernacular music is easily apprehended in forms such as cowboy songs, dub reggae, and hip hop. It should be added, though, that such usage has often been associated with kitsch. Works such as William Shatner's *The Transformed Man* (1967) and Benny Hill's 'Ernie (The Fastest Milkman in the West)' (1971) (the latter itself a parody of the spoken-word cowboy songs of the 1940s and 1950s) are just two instances of such a long-standing association.

That Hill's 'Ernie' is a parody, however, illustrates the potential for the kitsch-status of such works to be complicated by a knowing, camp aesthetic. This self-ironised aspect of popular spoken-word forms can be most evidently seen in the music of Frank Zappa, which often employs spoken-word passages. Zappa's exaggeratedly parodic spoken-word style, and general sense of mockery, gleefully adverts to this link between kitsch and spoken-word popular music. At the same time, however, Zappa's conspicuously multivalent musical language (ranging from high-modernist serialism to doo-wop and disco) undermines simplistic notions of kitsch and elite forms of musical culture. In addition to Zappa, diverse musicians such as Arve Henriksen, the Books, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and David Sylvian illustrate that, when it comes to musico-poetic forms, the links between popular and 'elite' cultural categories are decidedly porous.

Meanwhile, the avant-garde practice of sound poetry has enjoyed considerable theorisation and historicisation.[3] Sound poetry is generally defined as avant-garde poetry that leaves behind semantic meaning, attending instead to the sound of words or vocalisation itself. Early literary examples of such poetry (as opposed to the sound poetry readily found in vernacular cultures) include the Russian Futurists' 'Zaum', an attempt to find a universal poetic language, and *lautgedichte* ('sound poems'), by the Dadaist Hugo Ball. These works were primarily performative, with the latter being performed at the Cabaret Voltaire (McCaffery 1997: 151). The development of the tape recorder after World War II led to an important link between sound poetry and audio recording, especially through the construction of 'unperformable' works, such as Henri Chopin's sound poems, from the use (and misuse) of tape recorders. Such techniques have continued into the contemporary era, in which poets such as Christian Bök and Amanda Stewart use digital means to produce audio works that anatomise speech and deconstruct semantic meaning.

The scholarship on sound poetry has, however, largely ignored the rise of sounded poetry in other areas, perhaps because of the association, already alluded to, between kitsch and spoken-word forms of popular music. The devaluing of the popular can be seen in the tendency among theorists of sounded poetry to ignore links between avant-garde and popular developments. Steve McCaffery, for instance, in his account of sound poetry, sees Chopin's creative use of a tape recorder in the 1950s (especially his use of defeating the erase heads to allow for multiple superimposition) as analogous to John Cage's works for multiple radio receivers (Ibid.: 161-62). A more accurate comparison would have been Les Paul's simultaneous use of the same technique – known as 'sound on sound' – on the million-selling records he recorded with his wife, Mary Ford. Perhaps such analogies have contributed to an anxiety among certain avant-garde practitioners when it comes to music. For instance, Dick Higgins, the Fluxus artist and coiner of the term 'intermedia', emphatically states in his 1983 essay on sound poetry that 'one thing that sound poetry is not is music' (51).

Despite the critical attention to both popular (broadly defined) and avant-gardiste forms of spoken-word musico-poetic forms, what I term the poetry soundtrack, in contrast, has barely even been given a name. (It goes without saying, perhaps, that my coinage has not been widely adopted by either practitioners or critics.) Even as late as 2011, Eno could present his spoken-word project as unprecedented (perhaps because the composer uses the words of a 'real' poet, in this case Rick Holland). In his 'Foreword'

to *Drums Between the Bells*, Eno hopes that the album 'will signal the beginning of a new way for poets to think about their work, and for audiences to think about poetry' (2011). Of course, this 'new way', unnamed by Eno, predates Eno's record. Even if we are to take the involvement of a professional poet as a necessary condition for the production of this new form, poets themselves have long produced works that bring together poetry, music, and (if to a lesser extent) sound design. Back issues of *Going Down Swinging* and *Cordite* (to choose two Australian examples) make this clear. The audio version of Jessica L. Wilkinson's *Marionette: A Biography of Miss Marion Davies* (2018), by Wilkinson and the composer-musician Simon Charles, is a notable Australian example of a poet and composer working collaboratively in this space, one whose work shows some family resemblance to albums by the American Language poet Susan Howe and the composer David Grubbs (who has also collaborated with Kenneth Goldsmith and the novelist Rick Moody). Emilie Zoey Baker and Sean M. Whelan show the degree to which the poetry soundtrack (my term, not theirs) is sponsored by Australian practitioners of performance poetry and the poetry slam. Radio programs, such as ABC Radio National's now-defunct 'Poetica' program, have often presented recorded poetry in musical settings (often, it must be added, employing mainstream classical and quasi-classical music in a way that suggests an appeal to a 'middle-brow' aesthetic when it comes to placing poetry in an audio setting). The poetry soundtrack, then, was not inaugurated by Eno's auspicious works. But Eno's works can be seen as unprecedented examples of the form as a mainstream genre, rather than an avant-garde, radiophonic, poetic, or kitsch one.

Practitioners of sound art and contemporary classical music have been less anxious about the pairing of text and music, but their work is also rarely thematised in terms of poetry. Indeed, in classical music circles, as seen in opera especially, it is conventional to downplay the librettist or lyricist to a considerable degree. The 'author' of an opera is the composer. This largely remains the case even in the contemporary era.

Regardless of this cultural convention, my practice in producing poetry soundtracks was partly informed by viewing that form as a form of sound art, something which contemporary classical music has also heavily invested in. In evoking the term 'sound art', I have in mind Ros Bandt's definition of sound art as that which 'involves the crossing of boundaries from music and fine art, including sculpture, installation, performance, multimedia, information technology, soundscape, environmental music, museum design, acoustic ecology' (2004: 46). Linda Ioanna Kouvaris, in her *Loading the Silence: Australian Sound Art in the Post-Digital Age* (2013), also evokes Bandt's definition, and it also discusses a number of contemporary classical works that were models for my own practice, in particular those by Andrew Ford, as discussed below. Consideration of the 'elite' sphere of classical music again shows the overlapping categories at the putative 'peripheries' of cultural fields of production. Kouvaris writes that her project is, in part, 'to appreciate sound art's challenge to traditional conceptions of authorship, intertextuality, historico-cultural positioning and how these sonic works instigate reflection on the way the self interacts sonically with the world' (2013: 14). Certainly, the terms of such a project are consistent with those discussed in this essay, especially with regard to authorship and intertextuality.

Key for me in the works discussed in *Loading the Silence* (and which also thematise issues to do with authorship and intertextuality) are the radiophonic compositions by the English-born Australian composer Andrew Ford, with their use of field recordings, live and recorded music, and sound design. *Elegy in a Country Graveyard* (2007), for instance, is a musical meditation on the graveyard in Robertson, the town in regional New South Wales where the composer lives. This musical work incorporates field recordings of the environment, extracts from interviews with local people reminiscing about the graveyard, musical quotation of Parry's hymn tune 'Aberystwyth', live readings of the Funeral Sentences from the *Book of Common Prayer* and Thomas Gray's eponymous poem (the latter whispered), and finally a setting of the Funeral Dirge from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (Ford 2007). Such a plethora of sources shows the capacity for musico-poetic forms to inhabit the peripheral in various ways. In this case, the piece evokes a literal peripheral space (a country graveyard), the peripherally musical resources of recorded interviews, and peripheral hearing (in the whispered text, as well as the cross-fading of voices and sounds).

Clearly, my short-form works, which involve very little in the way of 'live performance', diverge from, as much as they try to emulate, the large-scale works by a composer as highly regarded as Ford. Nevertheless, my practice is one that covers the composition of music, and the placing of text and the speaking voice within a musical context (albeit one that doesn't involve singing), within an audio-production environment that shares considerable features with the radiophonic mode.

In *Outside Broadcast*, I sought to produce a kind of 'musical literature' where neither text, music, nor sound took aesthetic precedence. Taking the idea of 'musical literature' further, I subsequently engaged in what I am here calling 'collaborative audio literature', an asynchronous collaborative practice that brings together music, sound design, and multi-authored literary texts. The outcome of this process was an audio album entitled *The Double* (2017). Unlike *Outside Broadcast*, in which I stage my own poetry in a sonic context, in *The Double* I use and rework a number of Maria Takolander's stories (and, in one instance, audio samples from a radio interview with her) from her 2013 short story collection, *The Double* (the repetitively uncanny title of which I will discuss below). In other respects, *The Double*, like its predecessor, is the work of one individual. The music and audio production are again solely by me. The album, then, is also a form of adaptation, and (it should be noted) in this case the collaborators are a wife-and-husband team. The work occupies a liminal space between collaboration and adaptation. Nevertheless, as creative decisions were made in concert, I have used the term 'collaborative audio literature' to indicate the inter-subjective element of production here. Perhaps not surprisingly, Takolander and I view adaptation as *already* collaborative, and as a strong, rather than weak, form of cultural production.[4] Like Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation*, we view adaptation as 'a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second but not secondary' (2013: 61). Adaptation also strongly draws attention to both intertextuality and remediation, both key features of the work under consideration in this essay. These aspects also engage with the aesthetic mode of the uncanny, with its emphasis on repetition, doubling, and representation.

As a form of literary audio 'content', collaborative audio literature is peripheral to the mainstream audio literary genres of the audiobook and the podcast. On the other hand, however, it is also not a recognisably avant-garde form, such as sound poem or installation artwork. Collaborative audio literature exists at the periphery of both mainstream and avant-garde genres and practices. As a hybrid form, it also works at the periphery of performance, literature, sound design, and music, as an interdisciplinary mode of sound art.

3. 'Three Sisters' and the uncanny

The remainder of this essay will concentrate on 'Three Sisters' (from my album *The Double*), an audio work based on Maria Takolander's short story of that name. Takolander's story concerns a roadhouse, run by the eponymous sisters (one of whom remains mysteriously invisible from the world) and frequented by a number of downbeat customers. The story is notable for its lyrical, highly stylised prose, adopting a defamiliarising first-person plural narrative point of view, and employing numerous sentence fragments. The story's opening sentences illustrate the moodful and melancholic emphasis on the natural and built environment:

> Let us take a look at this place. Marshlands. All the way to the horizon. The land drained, but nevertheless sinking. Sinking into nothing, nothing but itself. Frogs volleying noise in the grass, unseen. The hazy movement of mosquitoes low to the ground. … Running through it all is the highway: black tarmac dumped on a man-made ridge. Power poles no longer vertical. Wires sagging. (29)

Textually, my audio work adapts this story into a short prose poem (quoted below). Sonically, the piece occupies a complex field of music and sound design, employing sampling and text-to-speech synthesis. I will discuss these twin aspects of my adaptation shortly.

Like other pieces on my album *The Double*, 'Three Sisters' engages with the uncanny. As a literary mode, the uncanny is associated with two key elements relevant to 'Three Sisters': repetition (the repetition of adaptation, of titles, of words and phrases, and of voice synthesis and audio samples) and hermeneutic limits (the uncanny as mood, as that which resists interpretation). The uncanny is conventionally defined as the disquieting interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and this circular economy is played out in 'Three Sisters' through that work's thematisation of peripheries and the cybernetic. In his discussion of poetry and the uncanny, David Punter suggestively links these aspects – the margin and the cyborg – —with poetry's uncanny status, but he does so by finding something uncanny at the heart of textuality itself:

> In every story we hear, in every poem we read, we experience also a haunting, the present absence of some other story which we would more wish to hear, one that would fit the contours of our desire more precisely and thus protect us from the sense of loss we feel when we realize that the voice is not our own, that the voice is perhaps not even intelligible or translatable, that the voice, of course, is not even a human voice at all; it is the stoney voice of an inscription, and it is our privilege and our risk to breathe life into this animated corpse which is text. (2012: 262)

Punter links this uncanny aspect of textuality to the mechanical and the cyborg, as seen in 'the relentless impulse of cyber-fiction to remind us of the inextricability of the machine and the human' (263). The uncanny transformation of poetry into sound, especially via mechanical and/or cybernetic means, is a notable illustration of a recognition of a voice 'that is not our own'. The haunting quality of this voice is, in part at least, a product of what Punter describes as 'a kind of impersonal patterning, as if there is some pattern to events which is already laid down' (Ibid.).

The uncanny as the already-laid-down, as an impersonal patterning, can be seen – at the risk of repeating myself – through repetition. By returning to the source text, and the collection from which it comes, we can see repetition conspicuously at work via the title of Takolander's collection – *The Double* – and the titles of the stories in the main first section of the text, all of which 'double' canonical works of literature (such as 'Three Sisters', with its evocation of Chekhov's play of that name). The revisionary use of titles in Takolander's collection does not mean that the new stories are merely 'derivative', or programmatically driven by key elements (such as plot or character) of the 'original' stories, though one can find echoes of those things if one looks for them. Rather, the appropriated titles of Takolander's stories are suggestive, heuristic devices. Perhaps more importantly, though, thanks to their associative power, they evoke mood, something ineffable and, often-enough, uncanny. By naming the collection as a whole *The Double*, Takolander draws attention to the uncanny nature of her stories. *The Double* is a title that has a long literary history of repetition. Subsequently used as the title for my album, my album in turn doubles Takolander's short story collection, which doubles Dostoevsky's novella, and other works with the uncannily repetitive title (such as José Saramago's novel, Otto Rank's psychoanalytic study, and Richard Ayoade's film).

The evocation of the uncanny is integral to my work of collaborative audio literature, as illustrated by my version of 'Three Sisters'. This evocation is seen, in the first instance, in my prose-poem adaptation of Takolander's story. This adaptation, which transforms Takolander's 4000-word short story into a 70-word prose poem, does not just lift a discrete chunk of text from the story; and this change of scale is not simply a matter of pragmatics (though it is hard to imagine a spoken-word musical piece that could accommodate the entire text of Takolander's story). Rather, the new prose poem extracts non-contiguous pieces of Takolander's text to form a new, highly compressed, whole that transforms the source text away from the narrative mode towards the lyric mode. The adapted text works by excision – adding nothing new – and reformation, and it emphasises the moodful strangeness of the original story:

> Here come the starlings. One. Three. A dozen or more. Sweeping through the insects. Their noise shrill as panic. Their tiny hearts like ticking bombs. Look to the marshlands that open up just beyond the concrete driveway and the white roadhouse with its cottage out the back. A flock of ibises has appeared there in the swamp grass. Against the evening light. The silhouettes of their black heads like pickaxes. (McCooey 2017)

The text engages in the uncanny doubleness of defamiliarisation, in which the everyday is made strange (or, to evoke Freud's essay on the uncanny, the homely is seen to be

unhomely) (1919/2003). This is seen especially in the avian imagery: the starlings have hearts like ticking bombs; the ibises have heads like pickaxes. In both cases, not only does the imagery undo the conventional benignity of a pastoral setting, but it also confuses the human and the non-human, the biological and the technological. As Nicholas Royle writes, the uncanny is a 'crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was "part of nature"' (2003: 1).

The scene is both human and extra-human, mundane and extra-mundane, and its setting is suggestively peripheral, on the edge of things, where birds and roadhouses can be found. The scene also suggests a generic doubleness, evoking both the pastoral and the gothic modes in its evocation of both animal life and an unsettling, seemingly unpeopled, human *mise-en-scène*. But as this scene also suggests, peripheral things can paradoxically occupy the realm of the liminal – the in-between, interstitial spaces where the identity of things can become ambiguously porous. The site of 'Three Sisters'[5] is neither properly urban nor rural, but one of the scruffy nowhere (liminal) places that roadhouses are found in. And where roadhouses by definition occupy liminal spaces, marshes are liminal in their condition: neither body of water nor stable land. Indeed, everything here seems to be uncannily doubled. The poetic space is simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary; ancient and modern; peaceful and threatening. The marshland and the concrete driveway, and the swamp grass and the buildings, all might seem like contrasts, but they are also analogies of each other.

Turning to the audio piece itself, we see (or rather hear) the intensification of this prose-poem's uncanny aesthetic by sonic means. You can listen to it here:

https://open.spotify.com/track/0oHa2VxaCw0vcULKCVBwgl?si=hsIOakUwSGqLH mNMAaq_-Q

As can be heard, the piece relies heavily on the doubleness of repetition: the repetitions of sampling, editing, delay effects, and repeating musical phrases. It also enigmatically employs repeating words and phrases before the introduction of the main text. This repetition of lexical units resolves into the main text, but not before placing the listener at the periphery of semantic meaning. In addition to the adapted text, there are also a number of apparently arbitrary audio samples that evoke a sense of place (such as 'there's the sea through one of our windows'), but not one attached to any specific milieu. The tenor of some of these samples (such as 'people don't visit it very often') may seem at odds with the musical tone of the piece, and indeed a number of samples are taken from a 1960s BBC episode of *Play School*. The chopping sound heard at 1:24-1:30 is a treated version of the *Play School* clock. Subsequently repeated at 2:59-3:05, this sound could be interpreted as a sonic illustration of the starlings' 'tiny hearts like ticking bombs'. As the effect of this sound suggests, it is not necessary to know the sources of these audio samples for them to have semiotic richness in their new context.

In addition to the clearly repeated words and phrases, 'Three Sisters' includes voices speaking at nearly subaudible levels. These voices, evoking a kind of 'peripheral hearing' in the listener, produce a mysterious murmur of apparently human voices that add to the uncanny mood of the piece. Finally, in addition to the main vocal part that begins at 2:35, there is the laughter – the author's – near the start of the piece (and repeated near the conclusion), which seems to occupy a different sonic space from the

rest of the piece (thanks to the use of reverb) and which offers an enigmatic moment of levity, foreboding, or both.

Musically, the piece is notable for its emphasis on timbre as a means of suggesting environment. The use of white noise, especially prominent at the opening and closing of 'Three Sisters', is synthetic, but it implies wind and space more generally. The musical elements, as per the vocal ones, are suggestively double. While the musical elements suggest the high technology of computer music, the timbres of the synthesizers and virtual instruments employed are designed to sound 'organic' (swamp-like, perhaps, in their layered complexity), and suggestive of pre-digital technologies such as magnetic tape and analogue processing. With regard to generic associations, the use of delay on the repeating piano figure suggests the idioms of either space rock or ambient music, while the acoustic guitar arpeggios imply a more pastoral (possibly alt-country) mood.

This sonic version of 'Three Sisters' is a kind of musical ekphrasis. It sits halfway between the 'pure' ekphrasis – what Siglind Bruhn calls 'unmixed transmedialization' (2008: 9) – of works such as Schoenberg's string sextet, *Verklärte Nacht* (after a poem by Richard Dehmel), and the uncountable works of all musical registers that set literary texts to music, in particular through song. In this sense, too, then, 'Three Sisters' occupies an aesthetically liminal space that draws attention to boundaries and peripheries. Neither 'tone poem' nor song, 'Three Sisters' is a work of literary music that works at the edges of both literary and musical form.

The main voice that performs the repetitive text of 'Three Sisters' is itself an uncanny one, in that it is cybernetic, produced using text-to-voice synthesis. In other words, not only is this voice not the author's, but it is not even unambiguously human. A husband apparently 'removing' or 'silencing' his wife's voice could be reasonably considered problematic. But such a view assumes a passivity on the part of one party that might not be present. It also assumes an 'authenticity of expression' that is not valorised by either of the authors of the texts in question. Indeed, the cybernetic voice could be seen as strategically collapsing the relational – or dyadic – condition of authorship here into an impossibly singular voice. In this respect, 'the reciprocal communication' of (singular) voices that Adriana Cavarero (2005) sees as central to a politics of communication[6] metaphorically (and uncannily) transforms into a new form of impossible singularity. This is not to say, of course, that issues of gender are irrelevant, as I will briefly discuss below.

The synthetic (and chimerically singular) voice of 'Three Sisters' is uncannily both like and unlike a 'real' human voice, since it is produced through 'concatenation synthesis', or the computational stringing together of audio samples of human speech. Like Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa, this cybernetic voice contains the ghostly trace of an originary human source. Freed from this embodied source, it can be programmed to say anything in countless times and places, simultaneously (as dramatised in the 2013 film *Her*). The imperfections of the algorithmic re-permutations of these samples are a kind of 'glitch' in the sound of the voice in 'Three Sisters'. I chose text-to-voice synthesis rather than a vocoder or other types of speech synthesis such as 'formant synthesis', as heard, for instance, in the 'Speak & Spell' toy. This was because I wanted an uncanny

vocal doubleness, a liminal voice that is both human and non-human; ghostly but not merely robotic. I also chose text-to-voice synthesis because (as its name suggests) it requires the input of text, rather than a 'real' human voice. The vocoder, in contrast, requires a human voice as its input.

The apparent gender of the voice is not, of course, merely circumstantial. Works that deal with gender and psychoanalysis – such as Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) and Dominic Pettman's *Sonic Intimacy* (2017) – make this clear. Silverman's ground-breaking study of the female voice in cinema attends to the ways in which patriarchal conceptions of the voice produce sonic regimes that find the female voice a threat to masculinist boundaries, defensively reacting to 'the migratory potential of the voice', and attempting to 'restrain it within established boundaries, and so to prevent its uncontrolled circulation' (84). In 'Three Sisters', I hope for a cybernetic voice that is not merely one of servitude or envelopment (such as Siri or any number of disembodied female voices in science fiction), but the uncanny presence of a voice that is authorial, but not the author's voice.

The use of the voice as a source of the uncanny brings me back to the use of voices (sampled or synthesised) that are semi- or subaudible. These voices produce an aesthetic of ambiguity with regard to the usual predominance of words. The sounds that can be heard as voices, but not decoded as sentences, are an important sonic feature of 'Three Sisters'. That the voice, cybernetic or otherwise, can be part of an acoustic ecology, rather than a linguistic technology, places the work in uncanny sonic territory. Once again, the tension between the organic and the technological makes itself felt, in this instance drawing attention to the relationship between an uncanny aesthetic and the posthuman. The source of the cybernetic voice is simultaneously electronic and human, and is paradigmatically uncanny in sounding both familiar and unfamiliar.

What, then, does the babble of voices signify in this particular context? It fulfils various aesthetic functions, but primary among them is this evocation of mood. As with the 'lead vocal' part, I was attracted to the essential timbre of the sounds, and to the abstraction of 'the voice' in which words can be heard but only partially, if at all, decoded. In this respect, I shared the aesthetic values of Brian Eno, who throughout his career has similarly been attracted to heard, but undecodable, words (albeit usually sung words).[7] At the periphery of human hearing, the words become abstracted into a kind of sound poetry within the more conventional prose poetry that features in the piece. One might say that the rational (if uncanny) prose poem comes out of the swampy sonic soup of the backing track. Indeed, this is literally the case, since many of the subaudible voices are, in spectral fashion, repeating the text of the main vocal part.

When Michel Chion talks about 'vococentrism' in *The Voice in Cinema* (1982/1999), he is referring to the 'privilege accorded to the voice over all other sonic elements, in the same way that the human face is not just an image like the others. Speech, shouts, sighs or whispers, the voice hierarchizes (sic) everything around it' (6). What I have tried to undertake in 'Three Sisters' (and elsewhere in *The Double*) through the use of the cybernetic voice, subaudible voices, sound design, and musical composition, is the de-hierarchizing of the voice. The voice here is at the periphery of meaning, deconstructing human vococentric presence. The real and virtual voices become part of

an uncanny and moodful virtual acoustic ecology that engages our 'peripheral hearing'; that is, our ability to hear things but not fully process them. *The Double*, then, works with ambiguous and uncanny threshold spaces – both sonic and textual – that test the limits of perception, authorship, genre, and the categories of literature and music themselves. In doing so, it speaks to the peripheral force of all creative acts and artworks generally, as discussed at the beginning of this essay.[8]

Endnotes

1. At least since the Romantic era, artists have often figured their positions, regardless of their actual social status, as somehow 'marginal' to the mainstream. The importance of marginality as an artistic trope can also be seen in the deep concern of modernist writers (who could be characterised as post-Romantic) with the theme of alienation. Marginality occupies a perhaps ironically central position in contemporary literary-theoretical thinking, which has emphasised, if not valorised, marginal textual meanings and minoritarian writers and thinkers. As the entry on 'Marginality' in Peter Brooker's *A Glossary of Literary and Cultural Theory* (2016) points out, 'While to be "on the margins" can suggest a negative experience of alienation, the term is used in academic debate and activist politics to suggest a position of advantage from which the dominant society can be critiqued and disrupted' (170). Notably, there is an entry on marginality which makes similar points to those made by Brooker, in Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Concise Glossary of Literary Theory* (1994).

2. This current essay re-uses and adapts some material from my earlier essay in the course of contextualising the creative practice under discussion.

3. See, for instance, Perloff & Dworkin (2009).

4. See Hutcheon (29) on cultural commentators who view adaptations of literary works as inherently culturally inferior.

5. From this point, all references to 'Three Sisters' are to the sonic version of the work.

6. 'Every act of speaking is thus from the start the relation of unique beings that address themselves to one another. They reciprocally expose themselves to one another, in proximity; they invoke one another and communicate themselves to one another. Or, better, they do not only communicate something, some content, some intention, some knowledge, or even less, a language. Rather they simply communicate, in the act of speaking, the radical proximity of their reciprocal communication. This reciprocal communication in Saying (sic), which is anterior to every organized form of speech, is precisely the condition of every communication' (29).

7. See for instance his albums *Here Come the Warm Jets* (1974), *Another Green World* (1975), and (with David Byrne) *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981).

8. My thanks are offered to the anonymous reviewers of this essay. Their suggestions and advice were gratefully acted upon.

List of works cited

Bandt, Ros 2004 'Sound art reconsidered' *Sounds Australian* 64, 46-48

Brooker, Peter 2016 *A glossary of literary and cultural theory* New York: Routledge

Bruhn, Siglind (ed) 2008 *Sonic transformations of literary texts: from program music to musical ekphrasis* Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon

Cavarero, Adriana 2005 trans PA Kottman *For more than one voice: toward a philosophy of vocal expression* Stanford: Stanford University Press

Chion, Michel 1999 [1982] trans. C Gorbman *The voice in cinema* New York: Columbia University Press

Eno, Brian 2011 'Foreword' *Drums between the bells* audio CD, London: Warp Records

Ford, Andrew 2007 'Program note: *elegy in a country graveyard* (2007) for mixed choir, instruments and pre-recorded sounds and voices', at https://www.andrewford.net.au/composition/elegy-in-a-country-graveyard/ (accessed March, 2019)

Freud, Sigmund 2003 [1919] trans. D McLintock 'The uncanny' *The uncanny* Harmondsworth: Penguin

Hawthorn, Jeremy 1994 *A concise glossary of literary theory* London: Edward Arnold

Higgins, Dick 1984 [1983] 'Points toward a taxonomy of sound poetry' *Horizons: the poetics and theory of the intermedia* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press

Hutcheon, Linda with Siobhan O'Flynn 2013 *A theory of adaptation* 2nd ed New York: Routledge

Kouvaris, Linda Ioanna 2013 *Loading the silence: Australian sound art in the post-digital age* Farnham: Ashgate

McCaffery, Steve 1997 'From phonic to sonic: the emergence of the audio-poem' in A Morris (ed) *Sound states: innovative poetics and acoustical technologies* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 149-68

McCooey, David 2012 'Fear of music: sounded poetry and the "poetry soundtrack"' *Axon* 2, at https://axonjournal.com.au/issue-2/fear-music-sounded-poetry-and-%E2%80%98poetry-soundtrack%E2%80%99 (accessed March, 2019)

— 2017 'Three sisters' *The double*, audio digital download

Perloff, Marjorie & Craig Dworkin (eds) 2009 *The sound of poetry, the poetry of sound* Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Punter, David 2012 'Shape and shadow: on poetry and the uncanny' in D. Punter (ed) *A new companion to the gothic* Oxford: Blackwell, 252-64

Royle, Nicholas 2003 *The uncanny* New York: Routledge

Silverman, Kaja 1988 *The acoustic mirror: the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Takolander, Maria 2013 *The double (and other stories)* Melbourne: Text