The Sound of Nonsense
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Draft version of the Introduction.

Introduction
‘Watch the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves’; so says the Duchess in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.¹ But can we be so sure of this? The Duchess, like her creator Lewis Carroll, seems to put more emphasis on the sound of words than their sense. This aspect of her character that has been much remarked upon, not least by those interested in the role that sound plays in creating meaning and nonsense.² As some of Carroll’s readers would have known, he himself was playing with sound when he placed these words in the Duchess’s mouth; her ‘moral’ is based on the English proverb ‘take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves’. It is only one of many instances in Carroll’s work where the work of nonsense – what Marnie Parsons has called ‘nonsense strategies’ – relies on sound to do its business.³ This book responds to that reliance by highlighting the importance of sound in understanding the nonsense of writers such as Carroll and Edward Lear, as well as James Joyce, before connecting this noisy writing to works which engage more directly with sound, including sound poetry, experimental music and pop. By emphasising sonic factors, I try to amplify the connections between a wide range of artistic examples and to build a case for the importance of sound in creating, maintaining and disrupting meaning.

Nonsense literature, particularly that associated with the English tradition made famous by Carroll and Lear, has generated a rich and varied body of study in a variety of disciplines, including literature, linguistics, art history, philosophy
and psychology. Much of this exegesis has focussed on questions of meaning and the ‘logic of sense’ or on questions of normality and abnormality. Invariably focussed on words and sentences as they appear on the page, few studies of nonsense take sound as their primary analytical perspective. I take this gap as my starting point and, while engaging with many of the other things that have been said about my chosen examples, I hinge my study on the sonic dimensions of nonsense. The first chapter offers an overview of some of the ways in which nonsense has been approached, noting the difficulties in defining terms and agreeing on boundaries. By way of my own definitions I suggest types of nonsense that bind the diverse examples to be found through the rest of the book. I also start to offer observations on the role of sound in creating, maintaining and disrupting sense. The second chapter is focussed on the resonance of the page and, in addition to nonsense literature, includes discussion of modernist literature. More work has been done in recent years on the role of sound in modernist writing – particularly James Joyce – and my aim here is to highlight sounds which are pertinent to a discussion of nonsense and to set up connections with music, for example by considering how the work of writers such as Carroll and Joyce has been auralised or musicalised. Having established the importance of sound on the written page, the book moves to work that more directly challenged the written dimension of literature by engaging with sound as a primary text; examples include artists and theorists associated with a variety of European art ‘movements’ (futurism, Dada, surrealism), sound poets such as Hugo Ball, Henri Chopin and Bob Cobbing, and the audiovisual cut-up experiments of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs. Here I’m interested in sonic challenges, be they chopped audio or sonic palimpsests, and the efforts required to get at meaning.

One of the aims of the book is to show connections between modernist, avant-garde or experimental artists and those more associated with popular culture, so,
in keeping with a starting point of Carroll and Lear, the project also investigates the importance of nonsense sounds in popular music. Chapter 4 – the longest – is devoted to popular music and the importance of nonsense in popular song, taking in scat singing, vocalese, doo wop, early rock ‘n’ roll, yodelling, hip hop, singer-songwriters and artists who have created their own languages in which to sing. The relationships between words, sense and music are important here. One suggestion is that the shift from words to music is – from a linguistic perspective – often accompanied by a shift to nonsense, but that this linguistic nonsense becomes subject to another kind of musicalised sense-making. The process can also be witnessed in reverse; vocal sounds used to emulate musical instruments (e.g. in scat, doo wop or other mouth music) can be heard as proto-words and the point at which they are heard as such is what I call the *nonsense moment*. Nonsense functions in these instances as the overlapping territory between non-semantic vocables and clearly understood, meaningful words.

In tracing this trajectory, I am interested in how written, spoken and sung linguistic elements – predominantly words, parts of words and elements of phrases – create nonsense moments that rely on sound in one form or another. To make the kind of connections I am making between written and sonic texts requires an acceptance of the interrelationships between what Don Ihde calls ‘the word as soundful’ and ‘sounds as meaningful’:

> The philosopher, concerned with comprehensiveness, must eventually call for attention to the *word as soundful*. On the other side, the sciences that attend to the soundful, from phonetics to acoustics, do so as if the sound were bare and empty of significance in a physics of the soundful. And the philosopher, concerned with the roots of reflection in human experience, must eventually also listen to the *sounds as meaningful*.⁴
Like Ihde, I am interested in sound as it is experienced phenomenologically, although I mix this approach with awareness of intertextuality and intermediality. For me, the knowledge of a text’s precursors – and this includes one’s lack of, or partial, knowledge of them – are part of the phenomena available to the perceiving subject. This awareness, which I see as a grasping after meaning by a sometimes bewildered subject, is also what makes up the nonsense moment. This is the moment in perception when one is beyond, between or ahead of the moment of ascertaining sense. It is a glitch moment, a temporary period of blurring, the point in the process of code-switching where the codes are muddled.

Hopefully, the examples provided throughout the book will help clarify what I mean by this. I flag it up here, however, to anticipate some potential issues that readers may have regarding my definitions of nonsense, the ambitious scope of this short book, and the connections I am making between my various examples. I approach the issue of definitions and typologies of nonsense more fully in the next chapter. For now, it’s important to note that this is a book about nonsense, not solely about nonsense literature, though nonsense literature is a recurring presence. When it comes to nonsense and music, some may well take exception to scat, doo-wop or vocalese being referred to as nonsense because these vocal techniques have been categorised for musicology as musical, not verbal practices. My response here is to challenge such absolutist definitions of these musical processes and to ask instead why so many other people before me have made similar connections to mine. Were such listeners ‘wrong’ to do so? There is no hard and fast boundary between nonsense syllables used for musical effect and those same syllables used as words in a lyric. When Gene Vincent sings ‘Be-bop-a-lula, she’s my baby’, or when The Edsels sing ‘I got a girl named Rama Lama, Rama Lama Ding Dong’, how can we know if they are
imitating instruments or referring to nicknames? The syntax of such utterances hangs in the balance.

Having given several spoken presentations on this project, I have been heartened by not only my audiences’ willingness to recognise many of the connections I am trying to make, but also the enthusiasm with which further examples have been offered. Given that I have had to severely edit the mass of examples I had already collected, it has been difficult to make space for many of these additions, but their existence reassures me that the concepts with which I’m dealing have resonance for others. If my selection of nonsense writers, sound poets and pop musicians is necessarily restricted to particular eras and genres, I trust that the points I am making can be applied by readers to other examples. I hope too that, just because there are many other examples from the history of literature and music that could be defined as nonsense according to my usage, my omission of them does not weaken my arguments.

When considering the scope of my project and the wide net I am casting, I have attempted to stay true to the objectives of the series in which it appears. One of these is to use a single concept to illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of sound studies. In my case, that single concept is nonsense but the perspectives and examples through which I approach the concept are designed to encourage interdisciplinarity. Another way of putting this is to say that I have attempted to make the book short but provocative, not seeking to answer all the questions it poses nor to lock down discussion of any of the areas it touches on. This is not a license to vagueness or lack of rigour, but rather a recognition that this book series sets out to offer something different to longer, specialist monographs.

I have wanted to respond to the vitality of nonsense and to revel in connections. Again, this may suggest a potential lack of historical or other contextual
specificity to the examples cited. It may be felt, for example, that I enjoy listening for similarities at the expense of adequately exploring differences. I must admit to an enjoyment of staging my own Mad Hatters party, perhaps sitting Edward Lear next to Little Richard, Hugo Ball next to David Byrne, and Lewis Carroll next to Bob Cobbing and Ivor Cutler. But while I wish to at least imply a levelling process regarding the cultural provenance of my examples, I am never suggesting outright equivalency. As with many comparative methods, it is more about asking what light can be cast – what sound can be projected – by placing together the products of seemingly disparate cultural worlds. The artist Christian Marclay, responding to a question about the equivalence of objects placed together in some of his projects even when those objects have little relation to each other, makes the following observation:

But the reason they are together is to offer a third reading, totally disconnected from their initial usage. They tell a beautiful story together. Like if you’re writing poetry, you put together two words that rhyme or off-rhyme, and even though they may be unrelated, that rhyme is going to give the phrase a different weight. It kind of forces them together.  

Similar notions have been expressed through some of the other artistic processes I discuss in this book, such as the cut-ups of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs, the plunderphonics of John Oswald, and the ‘rhyming’ of doo-wop, country music and sound poetry undertaken by Paul Dutton. The idea is there, too, in the practices carried out by a whole host of DJs and other composers whose mixings, matchings and mismatchings provide the ideal soundtrack to mad tea parties.
Notes


2 Mladen Dolar notes that the Duchess’s words seem to be inverted, for her pronouncements, like many proverbs, ‘make more sound than sense’; Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 147. Marnie Parsons begins her exploration of ‘nonsense and sound’ by quoting the Duchess and suggesting she ‘was wrong, or partly wrong’; Marnie Parsons, *Touch Monkeys: Nonsense Strategies for Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 120.

3 Parsons, *Touch Monkeys*.
