Ann Quin on Tape: *Three*'s Auralities

Abstract:

This article attends to the aural dimensions of Ann Quin's *Three* (1966). It argues that just as high modernist texts developed symbiotically with the emergent sound technologies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, so might Quin's novel be read for its engagement with the tape recorder which rose to commercial prominence after 1945. Aiming to contextualize Quin's writing on tape, the article considers the history and prehistory of the medium, as well as its appropriation by Quin's contemporaries in music, film, and the visual arts. Through the figure of tape, *Three* finds ways of valuing ambience and materiality, while resisting transactional and suspicious forms of knowledge.

Keywords:

Ann Quin: aurality; aesthetics; materiality

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Lounging in the bourgeois domestic setting that provides the background to much of *Three* (1966), one of Ann Quin's protagonists, Leonard, is shown to have 'shuffled a few shells, pebbles, covered his ears with two', stating that he used 'to wonder whether it was really the sound of the sea'. The response of his wife, Ruth, is to state that 'I knew it never could be'. Then, sentences later, we see that Ruth too 'picked a shell up, turned it, held up until the light shone through' (Quin 2001: 1–2). In these two uses for a seashell, Quin flags up a subtle distinction that sets a pattern for the rest of her novel, distinguishing as she does between the aural and the visual as two distinct kinds of knowing. Leonard's experience of sound is immediate but deceptive, with the auditory illusion of the sea providing both a strong initial resonance and a longer duration of wonder and speculation. Ruth's experience of vision is gradual – it takes time for her to get the light to shine through the shell – but conclusive, and with a clear source. In this article, I contend that Leonard's use of the seashell is the more evocative figure of Quin's designs in *Three*. *Three* is not just characterised by its attention to sound, but by the fact that sound forms the epistemological foundation for Quin's explorations with form in the text. I emphasise Quin's use of tape and the tape-recorder in *Three*, since a series of tapes are the most prominent of the remains left with Ruth and Leonard after the disappearance of their lodger, S, and are therefore reproduced in the text of the novel.

The stakes of my approach are paradoxically recuperative. Quin is a writer who, over at least the last thirty years has been subject to regular events of critical and commercial retrieval. From Grafton's paperback *Berg* of 1989, reissued to coincide with Michael Austin's film adaptation *Killing Dad*, to Dalkey Archive Press's editions of the early 2000s of Quin's novels, to the advocacy of Stewart Home and Lee Rourke in that same decade, and up to Jennifer Hodgson's recent and widely-discussed edition of unpublished material, *The Unmapped Country* (2018), Quin is usually presented as a neglected and forgotten writer newly unearthed for a given historical moment. Such an approach to Quin relies on a depth model of literary history, where certain monuments remain above ground, while others must be dug up or lost to posterity. The greatest irony of Quin's recuperation on these terms is that her own writing challenges the very preconditions of such acts of recovery. In Rita Felski's prominent recent telling, depth hermeneutics are allied to the hermeneutics of suspicion: for

Felski, the predominance in academic scholarship of both has obscured the fact that '[w]hile suspicion spurs interpretation, not all interpretation is suspicious' and '[w]hile the retrieval of hidden truths is one kind of hermeneutics, not all hermeneutics require a belief in depth or foundations' (Felski 2015: 33–4). Though Felski is speaking about approaches to individual texts, the same applies to literary history. I suggest in this article that Quin shares Felski's diagnosis of depth and suspicious hermeneutics, and that it is through her focus on aurality that she articulates this diagnosis.

This all said, recent scholarly work by, among others, Julia Jordan (2020) and Nonia Williams (2020), has sidestepped tropes of recovery as Quin's sole claim to critical attention. In line with such scholarship, my main aim in this article is to further contextualize Quin's writing, finding new avenues for thinking about her work. If this approach still constitutes an attempt at recovery, then at the least I attempt to do so by reading Quin with the grain, using critical models that fall outside the purview of depth or suspicious hermeneutics. As noted already, my specific interest in this article concerns the place of tape in *Three*, a novel characterized by its attention to aurality. My reading proceeds from the example of recent critical drives to propose alternatives to the kinds of critical methods highlighted by Felski. I aim here then, through a descriptive method, to give a full account of *Three*'s auralities, both by attending to Quin's text and to the contexts the text points towards. To conclude, I show how *Three* portrays tape as a uniquely errant medium with a distinct materiality – preoccupations that show common cause with examples from literature, music, and the visual arts of Quin's time. In moving from more specific contextualization towards these broader links and connections, I take my cues from one of Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's definitions of 'surface reading', in which, rejecting the hermeneutic depths and suspicions of symptomatic reading, the surface reader instead 'locate[s] narrative structures and abstract patterns on the surface, as aggregates of what is manifest in multiple texts as cognitively latent but semantically continuous with an individual text's presented meaning' (Best and Marcus 2009: 11). Going beyond textual and media-historical connections and using an approach that takes in other artforms too, I hope to situate Quin's writing in a space that will reverberate beyond this article alone.

Ambiences

In *Three*, aurality is more than just a privileged figure for Quin – the novel sets out instead a particular understanding of sound. In *Three*, sound is primarily ambient, heard unselectively rather than listened to. Aurality is not, for Quin, primarily an intentional phenomenon in which objects are separated out, attended to, and noticed for their distinctiveness; her characters enter the auditory field rather than apprehending it in parts. As a consequence, Ruth and Leonard's house often becomes a container for this kind of aural experience, with a bath running, for example, heard from another room not directly but as a '[s]ound of water [that] filled the whole place, gushed around, met water from other pipes, swirled, hummed above, below' (43). Music, so often presented in literary texts as an aesthetic object and a focus of attention, instead in *Three* 'rose and fell, harboured by the walls' (48), 'drifted over them' (49), 'floated out' (129), 'moves nearer' (132). Other sounds too, produce similar effects: 'laughter rises up below the garden' (132); 'Nights are filled with odd sounds' (139).

The dominance of hearing over listening in *Three* – of ambient over intentional sound – is emphasised as its protagonists try to move across the boundary from the former to the latter. 'Murmurs next door', S writes in her journal, 'When going to the bathroom I can hear what is said' (60). Seemingly, privacy is fragile or negligible in the house in which *Three* is set. But at the same time, the novel does not relay what S hears. Ruth too is shown in similar situations, listening around Leonard: 'She drew the curtains, opened the door, listened outside Leonard's room' (76); 'She listened to him move about in his room, slam cupboards, drawers, doors' (117). In these instances of liminal listening, the novel deprives us of listening's objects and objectives: words and other sounds heard from other rooms are not reported, or if they are reported they are so inconsequential as to be only reconcilable to an ambient soundscape. During the latter stages of *Three*, Ruth seems to reconcile herself to a situation where the only possible form of intentional listening is a kind of attunement:

> Turned the radio down listened to her own breathing, the cat's, sound of a piano played faintly from another flat. In the corridor she listened, opened the door as the lift gates were pushed aside, but quickly closed the door, as a couple, laughing, emerged (119).

At the point at which her listening might gain a direct object – perhaps in the form of a conversation with the couple – Ruth shrinks away. Her ambient listening prevails.

Quin, like Jean-Luc Nancy after her, knows that the 'listening subject' is 'not a phenomenological subject', and is 'perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance,

of its infinite tension and rebound' (Nancy 2007: 22). Nancy's formulation is informative not only as an additional language that can conceptualise *Three*'s ambient aesthetic, but also as a means of demonstrating how Quin uses aurality to decouple the form of the novel from its primary associations with a dominant realist mode. Nancy contrasts the visual, which 'is tendentially mimetic', with the 'the sonorous', which is 'tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing, or contagion)' (Nancy 2007: 10). In this sense, in the face of a traditional realist novel that is primarily mimetic – visual and referential, based on the depiction of self-present subjects, and geared towards closure and knowledge – Quin chooses instead a methexic form that foregrounds aurality, interrupting and remediating its codes of reference, distributing its focus across the precarious collectivity of its three characters, and ending only with indeterminacy.

Against this general background, *Three* consistently includes only one kind of direct listening – that of Ruth and Leonard listening to S's tapes. Though S's tapes are mostly presented uninterrupted in their own distinct sections of the text, they are always framed in a scene of listening. The first tape, for example, is preceded by Ruth and Leonard encountering S's tape recorder, with Leonard commenting that 'We'll have to play those tapes when we get back Ruth. A life there perhaps we'll find. . . .' (16). After more than twenty pages of transcribed material, a new section begins and Leonard is shown placing 'the spools carefully in the box' (40). The fact that the only sustained and successful form of direct listening in *Three* relates to S's tapes foregrounds their importance to the novel: sound in the novel is mostly either ambient, or technologically mediated.

This dichotomy in Quin's novel brings to the fore *Three*'s status as a late expression of what Jonathan Sterne calls the 'Ensoniment' that took place as a corollary to the Enlightenment and its attendant regime of the visual:

> Between about 1750 and 1925, sound itself became an object and a domain of thought and practice, where it had previously been conceptualized in terms of particular idealized instances like voice or music. […] In the modern age, sound and hearing were reconceptualized, objectified, imitated, transformed, reproduced, commodified, mass-produced, and industrialized. (Sterne 2003: 2)

Central to the process that Sterne describes was the advent of the sound technologies of the second half of the nineteenth century – particularly the telephone and the phonograph – and later the development and proliferation of the radio. In recent years, research from sound and

media studies has become increasingly influential in modernist literary studies, as scholars highlight modernist writing's preoccupation with the situation described by Sterne, where a reconfigured notion of sound is constitutive of the experience of modernity. The technological dimension indexed by the new sound technologies is key to such scholarly work, and provides a point of connection to Quin's work.

Paul K. Saint-Amour suggests that modernist scholars have shown an interest in the phonograph in particular because 'in a number of celebrated modernist works […] we find prominent phonographs wired tightly into the texts' formal self-conceptions' (Saint-Amour 2015: 16). Saint-Amour gives James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952) as his examples. For Saint-Amour, scholarship has tended towards two broader accounts of the entanglement of modern sound technologies and modernist form. Firstly, with particular reference to Jacques Derrida's 1984 essay, 'Ulysses Gramophone', Saint-Amour notes that 'scholars of literary phonography participate in a Derridean critique of phonocentrism, reading in the gramophone an extreme case of the voice's detachability from speaker, body, and presence' (Saint-Amour 2015: 16; see also Derrida 1992). Secondly, following from the work of the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler – especially his influential book of 1986 *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* – Saint-Amour sees scholars seeking to 'use a text's phonographic hardware to entrain literature into a Kittlerian discourse network' (Saint-Amour 2015: 16; see also Kittler 1999).

Saint-Amour's idea that a sound technology is more than an emblematically modern object of representation for a novel, and instead generative of a particular aesthetic is indicative of the transformations enabled by (to use Sterne's term again) a broader 'Ensoniment'. Further, Saint-Amour's idea holds as much for *Three*'s tape-recorder as it does for the phonographs of the earlier works he notes. As an illustrative example, one of Quin's most important devices in the novel is the way that the words of S's tapes are laid out on the page:

> On the terrace
> warmer nights. Dinner. Music drifts through open doors.
> Stars
> fall
> away.

> And the sea sometimes heard. But hardly seen. He leans against the wall. Sighs with after dinner satisfaction.
> Sometimes quotes a poem. In German. Italian. She fetches her knitting. But hands idle
> she stares
> into the garden. Shivers. And goes inside. The light from her bedroom slants down on the terrace walls.
>
> (107–8)

No consistent formal principle determines the presentation of S's words: some phrases are grammatical while others are not; sentences start both at the beginning and in the middle of lines; some sentences run on, some are broken up by lineation, and others fall completely within single lines, making the text as a whole appear at some points like prose and at others like poetry. The only consistency, then, lies in the fact that Quin establishes these sections of the novel as transcriptions of tape-recordings. As such, the sound technology of the tape recorder is, in Saint-Amour's sense, wired into *Three*'s formal self-conception, and the readerly understandings that might arise therefrom. In my own reading of the text – which I will return to later – the individual lines represent individual 'cuts' in the sound collage S is creating by stopping and starting her recording, with full stops by contrast representing longer temporal gaps not necessarily generated by a cut.

S's tape recordings not only align *Three* with earlier modernist uses of earlier sound technologies – they also point to a continuity between those very technologies. Quin's presentation of S's recordings indicates a specific use of their medium: they function, when S is no longer physically present, as a storage and playback device for her words; both the words of other people and non-linguistic sounds are excluded. Here, it is worth noting that S uses the tape recorder in the way originally imagined upon the advent of sound-recording technologies. Thomas Edison conceived the phonograph at its inception as a dictation machine – albeit with a particular utility for office settings. In discussing these origins, Lisa Gitelman notes the subsequent 'widespread misapprehension that magnetic tape was the first medium for amateur recording', when in fact Edison's phonograph and other similar technologies 'could all record sound until electrical recording became the norm around 1920' (Gitelman 2006: 161). As such, Quin's absent central character is not the imaginary emergent home-recorder of the tape age, but a user who draws on certain long-established affordances

for sound technologies – affordances that predate *Three*'s historical moment and the specific technology to which it refers.

In the sense that it is indicative of a broader 'Ensoniment' and representative of a continuity rather than a break with the phonograph, Quin's tape recorder might provide a means for placing *Three* under the rubric of late modernism. But given the fact that, as Julia Jordan puts it, late modernism 'has recently been emerging less as a periodizing hypothesis and instead as a distinctive set of aesthetic and philosophical concerns of its own' (Jordan 2020: 4), then it is still important to consider the local elements of *Three*, and its engagements with tape. Rather than replaying the novel as a node in a Kittlerian discourse network or as a Derridean meditation on the voice, rather than hearing S's tape as a phonograph *manqué*, my emphasis in what follows will fall on how Quin attends to aspects of tape that are not fully reducible to its associations with other modern sound technologies. In so doing, I argue, *Three* draws particular attention to questions of knowledge. Jordan's account of the late modernism of Quin and her contemporaries stresses how it is 'suffused with anxiety about its own adequacy in the light of its status as necessarily imitative and derivative, and therefore able to attend to the forms of not-knowing and uncertainty' (Jordan 2020: 6). *Three* can certainly be parsed on such terms, but in centring the medium of tape, not-knowing and uncertainty are harnessed by Quin as critical charges against existing forms of knowledge, in the process carving out the potential for new ways of knowing.

Suspicions

Tape's origins can be traced to the same nineteenth-century media ecology that produced the phonograph, the telephone, and the cinema. Alexander Graham Bell's Volta Laboratories patented a tape recorder that used wax-coated paper strips in 1886 (see Newville 1959: 75–6), while the medium's parallels to early film technologies are evident as well. The earliest demonstrable use of a magnetized medium as a recording and playback device took place in 1898, with the telegraphone of the Danish inventor Valdemar Poulsen, which used a wire rather than tape (see Clark and Nielsen, 1995). In many ways, however, these details represent a prehistory. Tape only truly became a technical and commercial reality in 1928, when the Austrian inventor Fritz Pfleumer repurposed his cigarette paper manufacturing process to create a magnetizable medium that was practical to produce and to use. In spite of competition from comparable technologies such as the Textophon and the Stahlton-

Bandmaschine, with investment and support from the German electronics company AEG (who developed the manufacture of tape recorders) and the chemicals company I. G. Farben (who took on the manufacture of tape itself), by the mid-1930s, Pfleumer had distinguished his Magnetophon as the dominant tape technology in Germany (see Engel 1999: 48–9, 54, 57).[1]

The historical and national background to Pfleumer's innovations with tape had a determining influence on the success of his technology, and on its earliest uses. The Nazi state was one of the most generous and consistent sponsors of various forms of early tape technology, using tape as a cornerstone of its espionage, military, and propaganda operations. In Friedrich K. Engel's account, the 1938 Magnetophon K4, AEG's 'first commercially successful tape recorder', quickly became for the Nazi state a source of 'eavesdropping recorders to monitor domestic and diplomatic telephone calls' (Engel 1999: 60, 62). In wartime, Engel notes, specific tape technologies were developed as 'a way to compress or expand speech, or to encode and decode telegraphic messages' (Engel 1999: 62). And for propaganda purposes, as Carolyn Birdsall discusses, it was often tape that formed the basis of the Nazi state's 'use of radio to manipulate listening attention, interrupt usual radio routines and stage a mediated experience of national celebration' (Birdsall 2012: 103). Birdsall shows how German radio stations started using tape from around 1939 – for example, though the broadcast of surprise special announcements (*Sondermeldungen*) traded in the 'rhetorics of liveness', the drum rolls and victory hymns that preceded the spoken voice were in fact, as Birdsall says, 'most likely a recorded playback' (Birdsall 2012: 194, 202). Some of tape's remoter associations in this particular environment are more disturbing: Peter McMurray points out that, alongside manufacturing tape, I. G. Farben also made Zyklon B gas, which was used in concentration camps (McMurray 2017: 32).

In keeping with its overall aesthetic, *Three* is not explicit about the ways that the medium of tape was so intricately entangled with the context of its emergence in Nazi Germany. Rather, like the spill or bleed of extraneous sounds onto a recording, or the print-through of the sound of one layer of tape onto those it is wound alongside, *Three* picks up certain resonances that, as if turning in on themselves through a series of feedback loops, come to suffuse the novel as a whole. Put another way, given tape's history, it is no wonder

[1] As with the word 'gramophone', which was Emile Berliner's brand-name for his phonograph technology, Pfleumer's Magnetophon became the proprietary eponym that denotes the tape recorder in a number of languages. This is the case in French, for example: 'magnétophone' is the term used throughout *Trio*, Lola Tranec's 1970 translation of Quin's *Three*.

that the medium serves in Quin's novel as a locus of suspicion rather than outright revelation, of insinuation rather than imputation.

Three only occasionally comes close to directly invoking its status as a postwar novel. Early on in the text, we learn that Leonard was interned during wartime – where he was interned, or during which war is not made clear. Though '[n]ights were the worst noises in other cells of other men I never saw' (7–8), Leonard also describes this experience as

> a free almost lazy time lying in the sun hearing the people from nearby villages sing dance in the street sometimes we'd see their smiling faces bright eyes over the wires – walls – we threw messages across though they never answered only the girls did in their own way through their songs. (8)

Here, as elsewhere in *Three*, aurality provides the primary point of access to knowledge – a knowledge that is indirect and ambient in contrast to the fixed certainties of the knowledge attained through visual means. Given its scale, and its hold on the European imagination in the 1960s, the Second World War is the most likely scene of Leonard's experience. An important corresponding moment in *Three* affirms this likelihood. Later on, as the novel reproduces S's journal entries, we see her noting how she 'came across' an interrogation reported in a newspaper. With its evasive 'camp adjutant' insisting that though '[i]t may sound unbelievable' – note again the aural lexicon – 'I never set foot inside the actual camp' (58), Quin is clearly evoking postwar trials of Nazi officials, with the recent trial of Adolf Eichmann perhaps a primary point of reference.

S's newspaper extract connects with other aspects of the novel in two specific ways. Firstly, Quin creates a clear echo as the camp adjutant is asked for information about his administrative role:

> 'Did you see the lists with arriving prisoners' names?'
> 'There were such lists.'
> 'Did you know that some names had a black cross put against them?'
> 'No. No.'
> 'It meant Return Undesirable.' (59)

This passage links directly to an earlier detail from the novel. Looking at Leonard's diary, Ruth asks him about the 'little black marks' she sees:

> Top secret. Oh don't be silly you don't keep secrets ever there's a black mark here there well? Can't you guess? Dentist appointments – no surely not so many? Far more personal. Oh no Leon really why in heaven's name how horrid putting things like that down. No more than your temperature chart love same thing in a way. Not at all it's rather nasty what you do besides mine's purely for medical reasons. And mine? (42)

Coming across those same diaries on her own, S's journal records seeing '[n]othing much apart from some little black crosses, which seem to be some kind of code' (65). Contrasting the camp adjutant's failure of curiosity and denial of knowledge with Leonard's ironic evocation of secrecy and S's more sincere identification of a code, Quin is attentive to misapplications of the hermeneutics of suspicion: too little applied in the case of the camp adjutant faced with his complicity in genocide; too much in the case of the protagonists of *Three* and their response to Leonard's banal records of his sex life.

Secondly, and more broadly, the camp adjutant's responses to his interrogator subtly trigger reflections on the text in which they are extracted. Repeatedly pushed on his knowledge of the goings on in the concentration camp, the adjutant excuses himself variously on the grounds of an absence total knowledge ('It did not come to my knowledge'), an absence of empirical knowledge ('I didn't see them from my window'), a failure of memory in the present ('I don't recall anything of the kind'), a lack of desire during his time working in the camp to discuss what he did know (of his knowledge of gas-chambers: 'I had no occasion to speak about them'), a moral aversion to what he knew ('Special Treatment was Murder! I was profoundly upset about it'), and finally a dizzying combination of numerous reasonings:

> I never saw any children, I was ill, wretchedly so at the time, I was helpless, if I'd reported it I would have written my own sentence. I only took note of it all from outside. It was not my concern. It was the task of the Political Section. (59–60)

Quin works here with the same 'mutually contradictory' dream logic that Sigmund Freud famously illustrates in his anecdote about the borrowed kettle that is returned broken: '[t]he defendant asserted first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed a kettle from his neighbour at all.' Quin's camp adjutant leaves us with the same conclusion as Freud: 'if only

a single one of these […] lines of defence were to be accepted as valid, the man would have to be acquitted' (Freud 1976: 201, 197). At a local level, Quin draws attention here to the mystifications and logical somersaults that go into the formation of, in Hannah Arendt's phrase, the 'banality of evil'. But more importantly for *Three* as a whole, the camp adjutant's defences model in miniature Quin's narrative technique as a whole.

Three's primary motive force is Ruth and Leonard's quest to discover what happened to S. By the end of the novel at least three different and mutually contradictory answers have been offered. Leonard's reaction to a figure on the street glimpsed from the window suggests that he at least entertains the idea that S has merely fled: 'Thought I saw her – could have sworn it was her crossing the street just now – same way – everything – but of course. . . .' (80). Meanwhile, the final words of the sections of the novel that narrate Leonard and Ruth's experience reproduce a newspaper report of the discovery of the 'unclothed body of an unidentified young woman' (131), brutally murdered; the implication, of course, is that this woman is S. But by contrast, S's final words, and the novel's last lines, read like suicidal ideation: 'The boat is ready, as planned. And all that's necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change' (143). Quin refuses to resolve these contradictory accounts of S's absence. By the end of *Three*, Quin has presented S as simultaneously alive, but removed from Ruth and Leonard's domain; as murdered; and as dead by suicide.

Consequently, as *Three*'s primary moment of self-reflexivity, the camp adjutant's interrogation is hardly a positive representation of – to repeat Saint-Amour's term again – the novel's 'self-conception'. Indirection, contradiction, and the refusal of closure are mainstays of Quin's fiction, and the work of many of her contemporaries – an identifying marker of these writers' rejection of the norms of traditional realism. But in *Three* such narrative devices are subtly associated with the wilful evasion and refusal of guilt of those functionaries who were complicit in genocide. It would follow, then, that through this association Quin affords an ethical imperative to its opposite, valorizing the search for clarification and certainty as a form of aesthetic response, and motivating the reader who seeks decisively for clues in the text about S's fate. However, this type of reader is also figured in the text in the form of Ruth and Leonard, who are presented throughout Quin's novel as louche, self-indulgent, over-privileged, seedy, and – as shown with Leonard's rape of Ruth at the end of the novel – often much worse. After Ruth and Leonard have made their way through S's tapes, they inadvertently sum up the failure of their particular hermeneutic: 'No more then? That's the lot only two reels. And not a word not a clue' (116). Not only has their search proved futile, but by reproducing the object of this search – S's tapes – Quin

highlights through juxtaposition the inadequacy of Ruth and Leonard's entire approach. The poetic complexity of S's tapes exceeds a narrow search for clues, and the closure those clues might provide; again, here, Quin raises a question about the efficacy of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Can tape resolve this contradiction in the text? Given the genealogy discussed above, we might say that the medium is a privileged and intensified domain of suspicious hermeneutics. At its point of emergence, tape was either used to discover information through eavesdropping, or to hide information through encryption. As well as operating in these circuits of suspicion and secrecy, it also became an object of suspicion and secrecy in itself, with its central place in the postwar landscape of domestic consumer technologies obscuring its more malign origins and uses. In this sense, Quin uses tape as a means of channelling her novel's preoccupation with aurality into certain forms of suspicious response. But Quin only does so in order to forestall this kind of response. This double movement – eliciting and then denying a particular hermeneutic – is flagged up by another of the novel's pointed symbols for itself. In the news discussed by Ruth and Leonard of the '[c]hap here killed his wife then committed suicide confessed on tape coroner apparently suggested he couldn't see why they shouldn't accept the recording as evidence' (78), Quin figures the question *Three* raises as a whole, of how to approach a tape when its recorded claim to uncover a hidden truth, to solve a mystery, is troubled by its potential for inadmissibility.

Materialities

The cultural iconography of tape in Quin's time reinforces the associations with the hermeneutics of suspicion that *Three* both elicits and denies. Emblematic films of the era like Sidney J. Furie's *The Ipcress File* (1965) and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) use tape as both a prop and a symbol of conspiracy-centred narratives. But Quin is not alone as a literary writer in her search for alternative auditions for the medium. Though works such as Marguerite Duras's novel/play *L'Amante anglaise* (1967) and Andy Warhol's *a, A Novel* (1968) place tape at the centre of their innovative literary practices, critical focus has inevitably fallen on Samuel Beckett – especially his play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), but also his work for radio. Emilie Morin, for example, shows how these plays 'implement and further some of the techniques pioneered in specific strands of musical composition during the post-war period', particularly the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer (Morin 2014: 1).

Meanwhile, emphasising the 'plasticity and mutability of tape', Steven Connor reads *Krapp* alongside the work of William Burroughs, showing how both writers realize the unique capacity of tape for 'embody[ing] the predicament of temporal embodiment […] keeping us in touch with what nevertheless remains out of reach, making us remain what we no longer are' (Connor 2014: 87, 101). To conclude, therefore, I aim to resist the critical monopoly that Beckett's work has gained on discussions of postwar writing on tape. Instead, I propose an alternative set of correspondences that will sharpen the resonances of Quin's writing on tape, and her search for a kind of understanding that exceeds the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Quin presents *Three*'s characters in a domestic setting as they record and consume tapes and films, listen to records and the radio, watch the television, read newspapers, and speak on the telephone. Considered this way, the novel indexes a particular aspect of postwar consumer culture, where in the West an evolved and extensive mediascape increasingly determined leisure activities and modes of communication, transforming domestic environments and people's access to information and entertainment. On top of this, to offer a further example of the sophistication of Quin's presentation of media technologies, we might turn to the recurring figure of the hearing aid in *Three*. In another of *Three*'s pointedly fruitless nodes of suspicious connection, at one point in the novel we see S recalling her father writing to her 'from a firm dealing in hearing aids' (32), followed later by Leonard's encounter on an empty street with 'an old man bent over from a sandwich board advertising a hearing aid exhibition' (82). The hearing aid also recurs more powerfully as S remembers 'the neighbour across the way. […] Who's deaf. Has a pianola. […] Turns his deaf-aid off. When creditors call' (97). The link drawn here between the hearing aid and the pianola once again illustrates Quin's awareness of the linkages and shared origins of various sound technologies. Mara Mills's work might take this point further with reference to the hearing aid, demonstrating as it does the way that sound technologies developed for deaf people often serve as an 'assistive pretext' for the development of technologies that were then 'transferred to more profitable realms' (Mills 2010: 102).

But just like the media technologies presented by Quin, *Three* itself is not a neutral, impartial, and unselective recorder of a given historical reality. Though the documentary function of the novel can easily be isolated, to do so is pointedly limited. Quin hints at this through the ways her array of media technologies are used in the novel. As with the neighbour who '[t]urns his deaf-aid off', the main characters in *Three* watch the television 'flickering' (15) and listen to a radio that is rapidly '[p]ut […] on, switched off' (82); Ruth even hugs 'the transistor which she turned low, hand sliding up the aerial' (15). Records,

meanwhile, are shown 'spinning in silence' (139), and home-made films stay on as '[t]he film slowed down. He stared at the square piece of light on the wall, in the middle flecks of black like hair. He switched off' (90). In all of these instances, any direct, transactional relation with media forms is exceeded or foreclosed.

Again, it is through tape that this aspect of *Three* comes to the fore. Here, to complement the contexts of literary representations of tape detailed by the likes of Morin and Connor, I propose another set of associations. Avant-garde music of the postwar period demonstrates a clear set of preoccupations with tape's materiality. For example, both Yoko Ono's third and fourth 'Tape Pieces', composed in autumn of 1963 and reproduced in her 1964 book of 'instructions and drawings', *Grapefruit*, tell their reader/performer, 'Do not listen to the tape'. Instead, in 'Tape Piece III', once we 'Take a tape of the sound of the snow | falling' ('Tape Piece III'), we are instructed to 'Cut it and use it as strings to tie | gifts with'. In 'Tape Piece IV', we should 'Cut it and give it out to the people | on the street. | Or you may sell it for a moderate price' (Ono 2000: n. p.). Around the same time as Ono wrote these 'Tape Pieces', she also produced *Soundtape of the Snow Falling at Dawn* (1963/5), a visual assemblage consisting of a loop of tape, a metal tape container, and a detailed line-drawing on paper of a tapehead threaded with a tape loop (see Ono 2013: 103).

As a further example, Pauline Oliveros, a pioneer of tape composition and the most famous member of the San Francisco Tape Music Center of the early 1960s, includes material about tape from a dream journal in her 1972 piece of writing on sound, 'Five Scenes'. In Oliveros's dream, she gives her electronic music class an exam, asking the class to transcribe the sound of a tape on paper: 'I continue trying to thread the tape. The supply wheel is wound very loosely. The tape spills out and tangles miserably. I yank at the tangle. The tape breaks in several places, leaving a small piece on the floor. I work at the tangle.' Sending someone off to find the broken piece of tape, they bring back instead 'a tape with a dark green leader spliced to it. The splice is poor with the end of the leader crimped instead of flat and smoothly joined to the tape. The tape is in a film can floating in French onion soup' (Oliveros 1984: 76).[2] I propose these two examples in particular because both explore the way that the materiality of the medium interferes with tape's auditory functions. In Ono's and Oliveros's rendering, tape is compromised in opposing ways. Its capaciousness leads it to get tangled and disordered, while its fragile divisibility alters it significantly or leaves it liable to get lost; it is either too much or too little. In these examples, too, we are reminded of

[2] A leader is piece of nonmagnetic medium that is attached to a tape so as to mark its beginning or end, or else a particular location on a recording.

magnetized tape's closeness to a fabric, a string, or other, non-auditory forms of tape – a material liminality that it does not share with earlier (or later) sound technologies. In all, we are reminded by Ono and Oliveros that it is not just the auditory affordances of the medium that produce uncanny effects – such as slowed-down or sped-up sequences of sound, a microphone picking up sounds inaccessible to the human ear, print-through, hiss and hum – but the very physical fact of the apparatus itself. Quin is as alert as her contemporaries in music and the visual arts to this fact.

As with Ruth's engagement with the transistor radio, in *Three* Quin stresses the strange spectacle of her characters' sensuous bodily engagement with tape. After the first playback of S's tapes in the novel, Leonard is shown to have 'fingered the spool of tape. […] He placed the spools carefully in the box, and struggled up, pressed against the table, loosened his tie' (40). A few pages later, Leonard returns to the tapes:

> He strode into the room, picked up the tape recorder, the box of spools, put them down and went to the window, pulled the curtains round himself, face pressed against the pane, he gazed up. […] His lips moved across the window, head worked up and down, finger rubbed until a high pitched sound came. (47)

In these instances, tape provides a guiding principle for Quin's descriptive processes, with a purposeless physical interaction with tape spooling out into a series of equally extraordinary and autotelic bodily engagements with other objects – a process that only eventually ends with a 'high pitched sound'. Tape provides a centre for Quin as she foregrounds embodied experience, and the pure materiality of her fictional world. This process of attentive description becomes all the more striking for working outwards from a technological medium with such a clear and specific purpose.

Quin extends this mode of description in one of *Three*'s climactic scenes. In the last narrative section of the novel, Quin juxtaposes Ruth's and Leonard's separate actions following their completion of S's second and final tape. At home, Ruth is shown listening to S's tapes and a tape recorded by Leonard. The emphasis on the body is emphasised once again: 'She lifted the tape recorder up' (118); 'Carefully lowered the machine onto the floor' (119); 'She turned the volume up, leaned over, eyes closed' (120); 'She pressed the switch of the recorder, without looking, and leaned over the table, head against her arms' (121). As with comparable examples in the text, Ruth's interactions with the physical apparatus of tape and the tape recorder are given the kind of close attention that we would expect the text to

give instead to the content of the tapes alone. This diffusion of emphasis is compounded by the fact that, when in this sequence of the novel Quin allows her reader access to the content of S's tapes, she does so only by replaying truncated and seemingly arbitrary sections of material already reproduced earlier in *Three*. If the poetically laid-out transcripts of S's tapes represent a moment of remediation that, as discussed above, amplifies *Three*'s commitments to questions of aurality and mediation, then these moments of re-remediation undo any claims to singularity or linearity that Quin's text might have.

In the text, these moments of Ruth's interactive and fragmentary relistening are denoted in two important ways. Firstly, both instances end mid-sentence, with an ellipsis separating the reproduction of S's tape from the narrative discourse: 'The hot . . . She switched off' (119). If Ruth and Leonard's sections seem to represent a centre of gravity for the novel, an orienting point that guides our reading of the tapes and journals also reproduced in *Three*, then this moment questions that assumption. Whereas previously in the text, Ruth and Leonard's sections were clearly distinguished from the sections that transcribe S's tapes, here, their superimposition undermines that distinction. The second form of denotation used here to represent this moment of re-remediation further emphasises the latter point. Though Quin reproduces material from earlier in her novel, the text is subtly different. Compare, for example, the following:

> his mask.
> In the heat. Robes clinging. As a weekend
> in a hotel
> room. Meals brought up. And not eating.
> Avoiding
> the issue
> possibility. (113; first iteration)

> his mask. In the heat. The robes clinging. As a weekend. In a hotel room. Meals brought up. And not eating.
> Avoiding
> the issue
> possibility. (118; second iteration)

As noted above, the lineation of Quin's transcribed tapes invites consideration of their signification. Therefore, the changed lineation of these two iterations of seemingly the same tape generates even further speculation. Does the second iteration reveal the first as a kind of focalized listening? Would this account for missing 'the' in the first playing ('Robes clinging' as against 'The robes clinging') – has the listener's attention lapsed, or is their volume too low to catch the definite article? Does the changed lineation denote a different speed of playback perhaps? The novel of course offers no answer to these questions. That they are elicited contributes to *Three*'s undoing of any hierarchy between its different textual levels. But by refusing to orient this undoing, refusing to fix it to a particular purpose, they once again foreclose any readerly impulses towards suspicious reading practices.

What remains? The second time Ruth listens to a section of S's tape, Quin foregrounds the signal rather than the message: 'What would it mean to her if . . . She switched off. Listened to the hum of the recorder only' (120). This hum, perhaps, has been present throughout *Three*'s remediated sections of tape. The implications of this hum link up with Ruth's – and the novel's – final instance of listening to a tape:

> But there was pleasure. Not unshared. I . . .
>
> Leonard's voice muffled, then high-pitched. Switching on the light, she looked down at the recorder, turned it off, and took up the spool. The tape broke as she tried to re-wind. Twisted as she straightened by unwinding further, until a twisting mass lay in her lap, curled about itself in her hands. (122)

Leonard himself then returns to the house to witness this scene, with Ruth holding 'the spool of twisted thin brown towards him' (123). Ultimately, *Three* reminds us that underscoring any message that a tape brings is the humming noise of mediation, which is itself an auditory trace of the sheer materiality of the medium itself – the latter conveyed through Quin's 'twisted thin brown', an almost nonsensical tangle of words.[3] Mediation and materiality are a both a condition for and a kind of supplement or excess to tape's primary function of recording, storage, and playback. With the latter function constantly frustrated throughout the novel, Quin creates the space instead to explore what conditions and exceeds it. The errancy of the medium of tape in *Three*, as well as Ruth and Leonard's bodily interactions with it become just as important for Quin as the message that the tapes in the novel deliver. Quin

[3] I have previously written about mediatory noise in relation to a high modernist text, Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (see Guy 2020).

offers ways of knowing the medium differently, and in the process provides a defence of less normative, less direct forms of knowing, with tape becoming the major site of the diffuse, ambient kinds of knowledge that provide the basis of *Three*'s aesthetic.

'Okay…?

Larry Goodell, a friend of Quin's, has an extract of a tape recording of Quin reading *Three* available for download. More re-remediation. Goodell emails from Placitas, New Mexico. The extract is the only part of sufficient quality of a longer tape. The rest of the tape might be recovered though through restoration. He might consider sharing it.

Silence. Then Quin speaks. Cut-glass accent. 'Oh this is here [?], yeah'. Definitely laughter then though barely audible. A pause next. 'Okay…?'.

Quin is reading from a manuscript it seems. Occasional moments where the words differ slightly from the published version. A long passage from near the start of the novel. Nearly six minutes. 'until the sides of the swimming-pool were closed in.' Breath. Shuffling. Rustle of pages. 'Okay…?'.

A 'yeah', further off. Then, rising in volume, what sounds like the thin low rumble of a plane.

Then the first tape section. The trace of the page the slight drag on the end of a word as it segues into the next to voice a line-break. Gets to the penultimate page of the section in my copy. 'Low voices in an ante-room.'

Then cuts.

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