



On Auditory Narratology in *The Ivory Acrobat*

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Abstract: *The Ivory Acrobat* is one of the novellas of Don DeLillo (1936-), which is collected in his short-story collection called *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*. And the story depicts an American girl Kyle, who has experienced myriads of earthquakes in Athens, Greece. This paper will survey from the perspective of auditory narratology, by analyzing four different tones, such as main tone, signal sounds, sound marks, and silence to observe functions of listening in the aspects of propelling fiction narrations, and of reflecting people's fears and terrors in front of natural disasters. The analysis of listening functions also reflect the optimistic attitudes of people when they are facing natural disasters. And it might provide some useful references for people to mitigate their anxiety in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: auditory narratology, main tone, signal sound, sound mark, silence

1. Introduction

Don DeLillo (1936-) is one of the most famous postmodern writers in America, and *The Ivory Acrobat* is a novella of his, was written in 1988. Then this novella was collected in his collection called *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*. The story depicts an American girl Kyle who has experienced a series of earthquakes in Athens, Greece. But later she was enlightened by the spirit of a bull leaper figurine reproduction sent by a friend, and it helped to convert her fears and terrors to bravery and confidence. There are two research papers, one book review abroad focusing on this story, and they survey this novella from the angles of site, terror and the relationship between terror and art. One paper discusses the connection between site and self-consciousness, and it emphasizes the significance of place in the aspects of self-realization, culture comprehension and communication (Jacqueline A. Zubeck, 2017:90). The other paper starts from the perspective of the time-space relationship, and it pays more attention to the connection between body and self-ness, and it believes the body is the home of self-ness (Westmoreland, Trevor, 2020:114). The book review is written by Martin Amis, the famous postmodern writer in Britain. He analyzes Don DeLillo's short stories from the aspect of terror, and deems that the terror in this story is raised by natural disasters (Amis, Martin 2011). In China, there are few papers concerning this short story, and the researching perspectives are limited to the following four aspects: neo-historicism, structuralism, ethicism, and human nature. Professor Renjing, Yang analyzes this story from the angle of neo-historicism and argues that the story demonstrates the optimistic attitudes of Greek people when facing natural disasters (Renjing, Yang, 2003.). Professor Jun song, Chen discusses the loneliness of modern people from the aspects of 'terror' and 'danger' (Junsong Chen, 2014.). Wenyu, he holds the view that self-realization is essential in modern society. And she points out people can rely on themselves only if they know who they are (Wenyu, He, 2017.). Previous studies pay more attention to the status quo, writing skills, and spiritual depth of human beings in postmodern society; but pay little attention to the implications of various sounds in this story. So, this research will focus on the auditory descriptions in the novella, and study the relationship between a series of sounds and the given phenomena in the story. And the sound study will bring four significant effects: firstly, the plot of the story would be vividly embodied. Secondly, it plays a crucial role in propelling narration of the story, and then, it shows the theme of the story. Finally, it brings some indications to the current world.

Soundscape, or sound view, is studied firstly by R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer in his book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, published in 1977 (Yanxiu, Fu, 2021: 144.). In Schafer's book, he broke the limitation between music and sound, and systematically illustrated the the formation, morphology, category and evolution of soundscape. According to Schafer, soundscape could be divided into three parts: The first part was keynote sounds, which had decided the tone of the soundscape. In other words, it vividly depicted the outline of the soundscape. The second part was signal sound. It was noticed by its unique features. The third part was sound marks, and it symbolized the distinctive sound of a locality. There are various sounds in *The Ivory Acrobat*, such as the squeezing sounds of an apartment, the horns of cars on the streets, and the shouting and yelling of panicked people. All these sounds interwinding to demonstrate the devastating effects of earthquakes. Therefore, studying the sounds that appeared in this short story could shorten the distance between readers and the work, and make the novella dynamic and

vivid. Furthermore, the discussion of sounds in this fiction may have some real values in this pandemic world.

2. Keynote sounds: an anchor of sound screen

Keynote is a music term; it is the note that identifies the key or totality of a particular composition. It is the anchor or fundamental tone, and keynote sounds do not have to be listened to consciously. The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests and so on (R. Murray Schafer, 1977: 10). The blowing wind in this novel is the keynote sounds. The wind is full of energy, but it blows arbitrarily. The wind sounds demonstrated the features of wind and the weather conditions when earthquakes happen. In addition, they also imply the behavior and the mood of a listener under given circumstances.

There are depicting the sound of wind for four times, and they are expressed by using different onomatopoeias. These onomatopoeias have two functions, in one part, these onomatopoeias vividly convey the sound of wind when it blows off objects, which indicate the emotions and psychological activities of the listener; in the other part, they also indicate perilousness of the world by depicting the shape of objects when they are blowing off by the wind. And the combination of the two functions of these onomatopoeias would help readers to know the destructiveness of earthquakes, and the heroine's terror and anxiety in the natural disaster.

When the author depicts the sound of shutters, he uses 'swing and bangs'. These onomatopoeias describe the shape of the shutters when the wind blows it, but it also depicts the form of shutters when they are blown by the wind. The depiction of shutters' sound happens after an aftershock ends, Kyle is scared by the aftershocks, and for her, the room is not a safe place to hide, and the sound of shutters intensifies her terror to aftershocks. The author applies 'an atomic child' in the last part to describe Kyle's extreme state. Then, in the following paragraph, the author depicts the sound of terrace canopies. He writes: 'The terrace canopies humped out in the wind, snapping hard.' The word 'snapping' implies the weather conditions in the earthquakes. Prior to this description, Kyle chooses to go the outside world, and thinks that it might be a better place to avoid aftershocks, but except for the scaring death doll, she does not find any safe location. So, she chooses to go home, although she deems her apartment to be an unsafe place. The terrace in the middle of the outside world and the inside world, and the 'snapping' of terrace canopies also indicates the danger is everywhere, and there is no safe place to hide in earthquakes. It is easy to see that Kyle's life is full of fear, anxiety and terror. She cannot be aware of her limitations and the importance of her mentality.

After Edmund sent Kyle the reproduction of the ivory figurine and talked to her about the implied meaning of this figurine, Kyle became braver than before. When the author describes the wind for the third time, it depicts: 'The wind knocked loose objects off the back balconies.' (Don DeLillo, 67) Kyle does not care what kind of object is blown off by the wind, which indicates the change of her mind. She is braver than before, although the terror still surrounds her, escape is no longer her first choice anymore.

The rustling sound appeared when she knows Edmund to travel with his friends. The earthquake destroys her inner wall. At this time, even though the sound is quite near, but she does not fear. She chooses other ways to overcome her terror, such as reading books. Compared with the previous descriptions of wind, it is reasonable to say that Kyle's mood changes dramatically, from anxiety to calmness. She does not care what on earth makes the sound, and no longer to go to the outside world to hide, but to try to solve this problem by reading books.

In the last two places, the author does not use onomatopoeias to depict the wind, which implies the transformation of Kyle's attitude towards wind, and the relaxation of her mind. So, the onomatopoeias and mentality of the heroine are connecting with each other.

Moreover, there is a close relationship between onomatopoeias and terror. These onomatopoeias transfer these meaningless sounds to meaningful sounds, and express Karl's terror and anxiety. After her mood is smoothed, the wind sound seems to be less shrill. So, the wind sound has a close relationship with Karl's mentality, and it reflects the psychological fluctuation of the heroin's inner heart. The continuous earthquakes and their aftershocks propel the narrative process. The wind sound accompanies the earthquakes, and the description of it not only does reflect the devastating effects of earthquakes and the fluctuation of mood in Karl, but it also changes the novella's tone, ranging from nervousness and depression at the very beginning point to relief and relaxation in the end.

Keynote sound happens the entire novella, and it determines the change of tone of the whole story, ranging from negative to positive in the end.

3. Signal sounds

Signals are foreground sounds and they are listened to consciously. Sound signals may often be organized into quite

elaborate codes permitting messages of considerable complexity to be transmitted to those who can interpret them, such as train and ship whistle (R. Murray Schafer, 1977: 10). The signal sounds in the fiction consist of the car's horns, the sounds of Edmund's motorbike, and the bus's sounds when it rolled past. In different phrases, these pieces of sound convey extra information. The horns of cars usually sound in the process of an earthquake, it represents the chaos and the bewilderment of people when earthquakes are happening, and it also indicates the fluctuation of people's inner hearts. But the surge of Edmund's motorbike occurred when aftershocks happened, which reflects the transformation of some people's attitude towards earthquakes. They begin to take earthquakes as everyday things, and start to live normal lives. The roll of the bus indicates the normality of the whole world, and the change of Kyle's mentality.

At the very beginning of this novel, Kyle stood on the street and heard 'the first distant blurt of car horns on the avenue.' (Don DeLillo, 2011:55) The sound of car horns implies the temporary rest of the world after the earthquake, the life order is going to recover, and people would be able to live a normal life. At the same time, it also testifies the existence of Kyle. 'Existence' means to live, to linger and to sustain' from the perspective of etymology, and Heidegger also believes that it indicates 'integrity' and 'importance' (Martin Heidegger, 1997:55). Kyle survives in the earthquakes, and she isn't physically injured and is able to distinguish the sounds from faraway places. The physical soundness of Kyle lays a foundation for her to listen to the voice of her inner heart in the following paragraphs step by step. Then, Kyle heard more car horns, and the author adopts 'drift through' to describe the myriads of cars on the streets. On the one hand, the car horns imply the panic of the world after the earthquakes, people are in the unrested states, and they do not know how to do in the face of a natural disaster. On the other hand, it indicates the transport is out of control, and people are eager to find safe places to hide, fearing the subsequent happening of the earthquake. Kyle was there, and she also felt unrested as other people did, and she also had no way out of this situation. Then, the author uses 'sporadic' to depict the car horns. The 'sporadic' of car horns mean the quietness of people. After driving and worrying the whole night, people are tired, and need to rest. And it also indicates that Kyle lingers on the street the whole night, time and space are ambiguous, and survival is the fundamental thing. When describing the implied meaning of car horns, the author also depicts the contradictory mind of Kyle. On the one hand, she hates the earthquakes and hates the panic they brought to human life. On the other hand, she also hates normal life. In the context, it writes: 'She hated to think that people might easily resume the knockabout routine of frazzled Athens' (Don DeLillo, 2011:57). It is reasonable to say that Kyle totally loses herself. Kyle identity is unclear, and she has no purpose in life. The narration of her current state would fuel the waking of her awareness in the following parts.

The sound of Edmund's motorbike happens in the middle of this novella, after he sent a reproduction of an ivory acrobat. Although the earthquakes are not ending, he persuades Kyle to live positively and optimistically. However, Kyle has no mood to meditate on what Edmund had told her, and she is harassed by the earthquakes and terrors it brought. In the novella, it says: 'the tremors entered her bloodstream.' (Don DeLillo, 2011:60) No matter in her room or outdoors, she is engulfed by death and terror. But Edmund is totally different from her. He takes earthquakes as the regular part of his life, and travels with his friends to visit monasteries. And the surge of the motorcycle indicates the enthusiastic attitude Edmund towards life. It is worth noticing that the sound the motorbike may not be heard by Kyle. It might come from her imagination. The isolation and loneliness of Kyle lead her to focus on the inner part of her life. At this moment, after Edmund and her had a long conversation, and after Edmund sent her a replica of an ivory figurine, she begins to compare her life with Edmund's subconsciously. Although Edmund's life is full of frustration and obstacles, Edmund is more favorable than her in the face of life. To some degree, she is affected by the upbeat mood of Edmund, and feel much better with Edmund, So, she begins to care about Edmund's life, and to concern Edmund's life is the threshold for Kyle to connect with the outside world. She starts to pay attention to the outside world in an optimistic viewpoint. Because the surge of motorbikes per se is dynamic, and it symbolizes a sort of vitality and vigor. So, compared with the previous loathing for the normality of life, it is a significant advance, and it also suggests that her inner self begins to awake. The function of auditory combined with other senses would accelerate the awareness of one's identity.

The roll of the bus comes at the end of the novel. The appearance of public transport means the recovery of normal life. And the bus also symbolizes the orderliness of the traffic. Kyle heard the bus roll after her studied the replication of ivory figurine, and she was deeply touched by the spirit of the female acrobat. Prior to the study of this figurine, Kyle was lived in panic, and could not live as generally as other people did. But after Kyle understood the inner meaning of the figurine, she began to touch the world by heart. Not only did she hear the roll of the bus, but she also smelt the diesel fumes. This is the first time to mention olfactory in this novel, and the experience of smell is profound, which would be engraved in people's hearts. The sense of smell is a symbol of self-consciousness and the commencement of new life. The combination of olfactory and auditory, on the one hand, demonstrates the acceptance of self-identity of Kyle. On the other hand, it also illustrates Kyle's adaptation to daily life.

4. Sound marks

Sound marks mean the unique sounds of a group of people. In this novella, Kyle and Edmond are foreigners who stay in Greece, and both of them speak English. Their language is different from the language of locals. So, English becomes the sound mark of the whole novel. There is scarce dialogue across the entire fiction, but Kyle and Edmond have three long passages of conversations. These conversations not only outline the status quos of the two characters, their diverse attitudes towards earthquakes, but they also play an essential role in propelling the novel to its climax. Thanks to the dialogues between Kyle and Edmond, therefore, Kyle overcomes terror and anxiety, and begins to re-scrutinize the replica of the ivory figurine so as to meet with difficulties in life. Meanwhile, the three dialogues also catalyze the core incident's happening, endowing energy and vividness with characters and events, in order to deepen the narrative development of the novella.

Kyle and Edmund's dialogues developed progressively, and with the extension of dialogues, readers could identify their conditions and their attitudes towards life, respectively.

In the first round of conversation, although both of them meet difficulties in life, Kyle and Edmond have different attitudes towards these obstacles. For Edmond, he had divorced, apparently arthritic, and couldn't 'afford a hair cut at regular intervals' (Don DeLillo, 2011:59). But he still lives optimistically, and he would encourage Kyle to live bravely by sending her the reproduction of ivory acrobat and by staying with Kyle for talking. In the final part of the novella, Edmond goes to the north of Athens, to visit monasteries with friends. For Kyle, her situation is totally different. She 'sleep in a secondhand sofa, and cannot afford the extra shampoo' (Don DeLillo, 2011:64). When Kyle meets with obstacles, she reaction is quite different from Edmund's. She is full of pessimistic moods. Either would she wander around the street, or she stays at home, avoiding any practice to approach problems. Bakhtin once said: "in discourse, human beings begin to show her/him true self" (Bakhtin,1988:343). When Edmund knew that Kyle slept on a secondhand sofa, he asked Kyle why she did not choose to leave Greece. Kyle told him that she had been stranded, 'but in a more or less willing way' (Don DeLillo,2011: 65). This round of conversation indicates that Kyle has an ambiguous identity, she does not know who she is, and she does not know her life purpose either. In this context, Kyle uses 'barnacle hull' to describe the sofa she has slept in, and barnacles are a sort of parasitic crustaceans which usually live in rocks, in the bodies of other marine animals, or in the hull of ships. So, barnacles indicate the sojourn of Kyle. She is in an awkward situation. On the one hand, she cannot go somewhere because of financial problems; on the other hand, she is unwilling to go because the aimlessness of her life. Finally, Kyle becomes a floated signifier, living agitated in earthquakes.

To earthquakes, Edmund has a different mentality, and he does not worry about it at all. When he and Kyle talked about the epicenter and the death toll, Edmund just wanted to know the latest news of the earthquake, but Kyle's reaction was the opposite. She even invited Edmund to live with her to relieve her fear and nervousness.

In the second round of conversation, Kyle still speaks about the adverse effects of earthquakes, but Edmund does not want to talk about it any longer, so he asked to change topics during their conversation two times. According to Kyle, the danger is everywhere, and death is lingering around, and she lives in terror and anxiety all the time. There are two reasons for Kyle worrying about earthquakes and aftershocks. First and foremost, Kyle feels quite alone in Greece. The loneliness of life occupies her soul, and she lacks a sense of security. Kyle has no social intercourse with local residents, and it is hard for her to form a sense of belonging in Greece. To some extent, she is self-isolated. Based on observation, people who are isolated tend to deny themselves and take an opposing viewpoint to see the world (Fay Bound Alberti, 173). Kyle's reaction to the earthquakes and the aftershocks reflects her pessimistic perspective of the world, and her fear of death. Secondly, Kyle tends to trust in media, such as newspapers, to obtain information, and then takes these pieces of information as sources for panic. Kyle relies heavily on print technology and loses her own capacity of evaluation and judgment, so when Kyle hears the news about earthquakes, she accepts them unconditionally and strengthens her anxiety. So, the two reasons are closely intertwined together, grievously enhancing her fear for the natural disaster. But to Edmund, the case is the opposite. He sees earthquakes and the accompanied aftershocks as an essential part of daily life. Besides, he is not as isolated as Kyle does. He would travel with his friends, purchasing replication of ivory acrobat for Kyle and staying with her in Kyle's challenging times. Unlike Kyle, Edmund knows who he is, and he has a sense of belonging, and is aware of his identity. So, there is no reason for Edmund to fear natural disasters.

In their third round of talk, Edmund gives a replication of ivory acrobat to Kyle, and tells her the similarities between the female acrobat and Kyle. Edmund applies the words 'definitely', and 'must' to encourage Kyle to overcome her terror of death, and of natural disaster. Kyle is touched by Edmund's interpretation of the female acrobat, and she laughs. In this round of talk, Kyle laughs two times, and laughing indicated the relaxation and relief in her heart.

So, discourse is not only is a way of revealing the realistic statement of a character, but it also is a method for people to resist terror and to examine their inner hearts. Don DeLillo attaches great importance to the redemption of language, a critic

says Don DeLillo: 'He also keeps his eye-or rather his excellent ear-on language and its redemptive vitality.' (David Cowart, 2008: 154.) To some extent, the discourse between Edmund and Kyle saves Kyle, and she is not as agitated as before. When Edmund comforts her by taking out *The Ivory Acrobat*, and likens Kyle to the brave acrobat, Kyle, for the first time, falls well asleep at night. Sleeping is the best reflection of people's mental state. Although earthquakes are happening all the time, inner peace is the best way to resilient the noisy world.

5. Silence

Silence is an essential part of the soundscape, and it is also a kind of 'Da xi zhi yin' in China's classical book *Tao Te Ching*, which means 'loud is its sound, but never word it said'(Laozi,63), according to *Tao Te Ching* in China. Silence is the loudest sound, and to combine its description with other sensory feelings, such as visuality, tactile sensation and olfactory sensation, which would not only arise people's imagination, and form a sort of tension with sound, but it also could purify the listener's spirit and demonstrate the themes of the given novella. Through the description of silent ivory sculpture, Kyle finally gives up the obsession with terror, and bravely faces reality.

The Ivory Acrobat is silent, but it is also sublime. It raises the imagination of Kyle, and helps her to imagine the noisy surroundings when the acrobat is ready to leap the bull. The noisy world in the imagination and the realistic silence together forming a kind of tension, which fuels Kyle to listen to her inner heart and finally she is aware of a sphere of living. According to Wordsworth and Coleridge, the poets in the romantic age in Britain, imagination is a rush of consciousness power that transcends pure visualisation (Yingying, Li&Shilian, Shan,2020:56). The elegance and confidence of the female acrobat intensively arise Kyle's imagination, and makes her speculate the value and meaning of one's existence and see her periphery from a new angle. According to Hegel's Aesthetics, the sculpture is the combination of spirit and body, and the body sculptured reflects the characteristics of nature. (Hegel, 2018:770). The replica arouses Kyle's imagination, and makes her imagine the crucial moment of leaping bull. Finally, she opens her heart and establishes her own identity.

It is easy to see that the female acrobat is quite confident in the leaping the bull. In the part of her dress, it is easy to see that the female acrobat is satisfied and calm. She 'in loincloth and wristbands, double necklaced' (Don DeLillo,2011:61). Initially, the dress and the jewelry are not fit for a girl who is ready to leap the bull because the jewelry would interfere with the display of the heroin's leaping. But the female acrobat still dresses up when she is ready to hopping, so it is reasonable to say that she is pretty confident of her jumping. In the part of her action, she shows her calmness. 'Her body deftly extended with tapered feet nearing the topmost point of a somersaulting curve.' (Don DeLillo,2011:65) At that moment, there was no one to rely on, the female acrobat had to depend on herself to overcome difficulties, so she grasped the bull's horn agilely and was prepared to leap. When Kyle observed the figurine carefully, she formed a sort of common sense with the reproduction of ivory figurine. Both of them have experienced danger and terror, but the female acrobat was braver than Kyle, she was ready to leap the bull without any hesitation. However, Kyle hesitated in the course of earthquakes, and Kyle began to understand the significance of this reproduction under the guidance of watching and listening. There is no sound coming out from the ivory figurine, it communicates with Kyle by silence, and in silence the meaning of the ivory figurine gradually emerged. Jacques Derrida said in his *Speech and Phenomena*: 'as for expression itself, it is unnecessary to speak out loudly.' (Jacques Derrida, 2011: 34) The significant meaning of words could be acquainted by heart, not by speaking it out. The reproduction of this ivory figurine uses silence to express her story, and it also helps the listener to keep quiet and listen to her inner heart. At last, Kyle begins to realize that difficulties and obstacles are common in the world, and how to face up with these challenges is more critical for human beings. The mentality and viewpoints are two main factors for people dealing with difficulties and challenges. Under the influence of this female acrobat, Kyle realizes that earthquakes are just a kind of terrible existence, but it will pass away. Then she begins to see earthquakes from the perspective of a bystander, not from the angle of a participant. So, she feels no more sorrow, anger, and terror. The silent replica means openness and closeness to Kyle, and when she closes her fist around the figurine, 'she could feel it beat against her skin'(Don DeLillo,2011:72) The word 'beat' implies the release and relaxation of Kyle's mind, the pressure brought by earthquakes are distracted and decomposed, and the ivory figurine becomes the lighthouse in Kyle's life, which direct her future road. Thus in the end of this novella, it depicts 'her self-awareness ended where the acrobat began'(Don DeLillo,2011:72). The figurine helps Kyle to jump out of her barriers in mind and encourages her to live bravely in the future.

So, it is clear to see that silence is a sound of sounds, it uses few words to express loud voice so as to help listeners to comprehend the charm and conception of this figurine, and it also makes listeners to know who she is and find out her own identity.

6. Conclusion

Hearing is one function of human body, and it coordinates with people's flesh. So, people have to pay more attention to the fundamental function of hearing, and to acoustic sense it with other sensory systems, such as visuality and tactility. The significance of life for a human being is to communicate with other people, and express one's ideas. Kyle has experienced myriads of sounds in numerous earthquakes, and her mind have also undergone multiple tests and trials. After that, she has opened her heart and has embraced real life. Various sounds play a crucial role in Kyle's life, and they encourage her to face difficulties gallantly in order to fight against the terror of death. Meanwhile, the cooperation among visuality, tactility, and auditory would fuel the heroine in the novella to know her identity. Furthermore, this fiction depicts the harm and hurt the earthquakes bring to ordinary people and the psychological activities of the heroine from four perspectives: main tone, signal sounds, sound marks and silence. These sounds broaden the narrative space of auditory narration, reveal the mysterious relationship between sounds and events as well as the optimistic attitudes of people when they are suffering from natural disasters.

This kind of optimistic attitude is fundamental in current life. Nowadays, with the spread of different variants of COVID-19, and different natural disasters, such as floods, drought, hurricanes, the whole world is in the state of panic. So, it is necessary to have reasonable mentality, and to take crisis as an essential part of daily life. Only in this way, people would jump out of their self-centered minds, and would be in other people's shoes. So, they could hear other people's voice, and begin to take care of others. Meanwhile, to actively establish a community of shared future for mankind is a good means for people to find out redemption in crisis in this upheaval era.

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