



Figure 40 'The Broadcasting Experiment in Mass-Telepathy' (in 'Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research' Vol. XXXVIII) (1929) by V. J. Woolley. Scanned in 2013 by Daniel Wilson.

Ragaireacht (Irish)

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Ragaireacht – *to revel in the night, listening in solitude. (pronounced: rag er recked)*

Introduction

This article will explore and discuss how at night, our sonic perception shifts dramatically. It will ask what traditions and rituals we have developed for this unique experience and, more precisely, how in Irish Gaelic we have a unique word for a person who loves the solitude of such a nocturnal listening experience – *Ragaireacht*

Gaeilge is a Celtic language, believed to have originated as Indo-European. However, English has been widely spoken throughout Ireland for many centuries. As of 2020, only 5 per cent of the population speak Irish fluently and on a daily basis. There are three main

Irish Gaelic dialects, which originate within three distinct geographic locations: Munster, Connacht and Ulster. The main difference between the three is pronunciation. We have several words for sound, each with a slightly different meaning and appropriate usage. Some have the diacritic mark called a *fada* or great accent. It indicates that the vowel is to be pronounced 'long'.

1. Fuaim – (Feminine) sound: pronunciation – foo am
2. Torann – (masculine) noise: pronunciation – thur in
3. Fothram – (masculine) din: pronunciation – fuh ram
4. Glór – (masculine) sound voice: pronunciation – gloore
5. Callán – (masculine) noise: pronunciation – cal awwn
6. Gleo – (masculine) sound clamour:

pronunciation – glow

7. Trup – (masculine) sound disturbance:
pronunciation – trup

Ragaireacht

Ragaireacht is an Irish term that does not have a precise English translation; literally, it means to enjoy the early hours through the night. *Airneánach* (could be considered the opposite of *Ragaireacht*), also another distinctive Gaeilge term, is a person who enjoys visiting at night; essentially being with people, celebrating. My focus here is within the sonic domain of the *raqaire*.

It is well known that there are many perceptual differences in our experience of day and night; obviously, vision is limited due to lack of light, but our awareness of sound is often enhanced specifically because of the lack of visual cues. However, phenomenologically sound changes its characteristics due to environmental and physical effects. I will discuss how within the Irish language *Ragaireacht* is a concise word used to describe a person who revels in the night precisely because of these phenomenological changes that can enhance our sonic perception.

Aesthetic of night

Music and night have always had a close association; the lullaby, for example, is written exactly for this nocturnal world to help children sleep. Many Western composers have celebrated ‘night music’ but perhaps most notably was Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* 1787 (Abert, 2007). There is also Mahler’s *Nachtstücke* in his *Seventh Symphony* 1905 (Fischer, 2011). There is also the form of *vigil* celebrated in Rachmaninov’s *All Night Vigil* (1915).

Traditional music within Ireland is also usually played at night particularly the Sean-nós (old style), which is a highly ornamented unaccompanied form of traditional Irish singing based around lamentation (Canainn, 2005).

Writers too apparently seek the mystery of night. Henry Thoreau posited ‘night is certainly more novel and less profane than day, I shall be a benefactor if I conquer some realms of the night’ (1863: 579). Shelley wrote the haunting line, night makes ‘a sound of its own stillness’. Virginia Woolf (1816) claimed that there was a personal psychological change within the individual at night and suggested that ‘the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow, we are no longer ourselves’ (1927: 177).

What is it about walking alone at night that seems to conjure up images of the insomniac, the homeless, the deviant, as Bryan Palmer suggests ‘the night has always been the time for daylight’s dispossessed’ (2000: 16). There seems to be a sense of the deviant and vagrant about nightwalking or wandering; it has had suspicious social and moral connotations for years. The individual who takes these nocturnal strolls is consciously rejecting diurnal logic in favour of the poetic character of night. Situationist Guy Debord considered that our sense of comfort and relationship with space is undermined when walking at night (Debord, 2009).

Physical changes of sound – Temperature inversion

A temperature inversion occurs at night or during periods of dense cloud cover; the air temperature increases with elevation, and sound waves are refracted back down to the ground. The reason why sounds can be heard much more clearly over longer distances at night than during the day is temperature inversion (Hannah, 2006). Another phenomenon that is experienced at night is that there will be less ambient masking and there is also less atmospheric attenuation and so sound is perceptually amplified. Listening at night can dramatically increase the auditive domain. Our ears also have a type of variable gain that adapts to the levels of sound. Our internal gain increases as the base sound level

of the external environment reduces, so our ears can then perceive much more nuanced and softer sounds from further away.

Nocturnal listening

At night everything acquires a subtly different form, particularly that of sound, which seems to be magnified and brought all the more closer to us. We find that nocturnal sound has auditory information distinct from that acquired in the cold light of day. As Stephen Feld noted 'darkness intensifies sound in space' (Feld, 2012: 180). Listening at night is soaked in a sort of fragile spatial tension. Night soundscapes are dense, complex and layered. They have no source; they arrive from a delicate type of unstructured background hum, an underscore. To borrow from Christoph Cox (2018), sound is more of a 'sonic flux' – a material flow that carries us on and within it. Is this the *ecological silence* that John Cage referred to, we the listener organizing the sonic stream into an aesthetic experience. The microsonic details provide the ontological framework from which this non-teleological *nightscore* originates. It comes, endures for some time and recedes, gone, never the same, complex.

Distant sounds come alive but are shapeless; they emerge unexpectedly from the blackness, ephemeral and fragmented, and we accept them mutely and move on. There is something *otherly* about the enveloping night; it feels heavy within our ears, and it has mass and its own sense of history, primordial. It brings us into an unspoken embodied dialogue that activates our surroundings with acoustic and spatial dimensionality that outlines the dark contours of the barely seen. The *ragaire* seeks this universal deep quiet-solitude and seclusion that is associated with the night. The nocturnal realm is perceived differently. There needs to be a sensory adjustment whereby vision becomes subordinate to hearing; aural sensation is heightened to enjoy what R. Murray Shafer defined as 'macrocosmic musical composition' (1977: 30).

There is outer complexity with the soundscape. The sounds have both aesthetic value and social meaning. If we attend to these sounds as a musician or composer would and let them *perform* we become composer-spectator listening to our personnel orchestrated *Nacht Musik*. Chance and indeterminacy are at play in this ever-emerging ethnographic real-time event. As Robert Morris considered, there could indeed be an art made of 'mutable stuff which need not be finalized with respect to either time or space' (Morris, 1993: 68).

When situated rurally we hear distant trains and traffic, animals and the odd singing reveller. They puncture the base night-tone of internal tinnitus and the external sound of night crickets. This fleeting, 'site-specific' work unfolds continuously, simultaneously arriving and receding, but always in the present. The urban nightscape is a little different in its orchestration: harder, reverberant, threatening, unique and unrepeatable. Disembodied voices reflected off concrete surfaces instantaneously relational and symbolic come and go, as if part of a scripted narrative, with us as the main protagonist. Both urban and rural soundscapes ask the listener or 'sonic-tourist' to open their ears to the inherent environment with no preconceptions. The nocturnal durational sonic collage requires participation, agency and above all acceptance. The aesthetics of soundwalking, listening and place are well documented (Westerkamp, n.d.; Truax, 2008; Suzuki, 2005; Oliveros, 2005; Neuhaus, 2000; Lefebvre, 1974), but there is scant literature on 'night-listening' as a practice within the broader sound studies domain, could we then define this practice of night-listening as *Ragaireacht*? It could be said that the *raguire* accepts the nocturnal sonic landscape above the diurnal for its symbolic and phenomenological qualities. The subjective private moment of focused listening articulates an ever-changing sonic sensibility that swings from the mundane to the transcendental.

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Conclusion

The uniqueness of any language is in its ability to describe a multitude of actions in a singular or succinct expression or word. Irish Gaeilge is no different, an ancient language that is beginning to grow again within the island of Ireland. The Irish language because of its lyrical and musical quality has been associated with beauty and romanticism. There can be multiple interpretations of a single word and it may be used to define simultaneous but separate events. The linguistic and philosophical aspects are also deeply rooted within its representational and symbolic qualities. As with many other ancient languages, Gaeilge has the ability to provide a wide range of interpretations and meanings within a single word. *Ragaireacht* a unique Irish word has many meanings and connotations depending on its application and intention. I believe it nicely articulates a practice of enjoying the night and particularly that of the nocturnal soundscape.

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