The Parish Review
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

Zan Cammack, 'Sonic Materiality in Brian O'Nolan's Fiction,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 1–22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.23048

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Sonic Materiality in Brian O'Nolan's Fiction

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This article argues that Brian O'Nolan's fiction consistently stages sound as a material force, one that becomes most tangible at the moment of its mediation. Drawing on theories of sonic materiality and transduction, it demonstrates how O'Nolan's novels, short stories, and columns transform gramophones, records, and radios into sites where sound's physicality collides with technological systems. He treats repetition, replay, atmospherics, and static as events of sonic excess. His works literalise the slippages between body and voice, signal and noise, machine and medium, revealing how sound is always stored, reanimated, and degraded through material infrastructures. By situating O'Nolan within the acoustic environment of early twentieth-century Ireland, this article shows how his comic absurdities make audible the unstable material conditions of modern listening.

The O'Nolan family home in Strabane was rarely loud, but it was never without sound. As Anthony Cronin writes, silence pervaded the household until it was broken by music—by the family piano or, more often, by the gramophone that stood as a constant fixture in the home.[1] 'From as far back as the boys could remember,' Cronin adds, 'there had always been a gramophone in the O'Nolan house.'[2] For the O'Nolan children, the gramophone was not a curiosity but a presence, woven into the fabric of daily life. Their father, always purchasing new records, ensured that sound was part of the domestic atmosphere.[3] Ciarán O'Nolan similarly recalled the gramophone as a part of the O'Nolans' childhood—remembering it as an alternative to outdoor play at the Gormley residence.[4] It was a kind of shared toy: discs to be selected, a crank to be wound, a needle to be balanced with care. These were not simply acts of sonic consumption but also tactile, mechanical interactions. Such routines suggest that for Brian O'Nolan, the handling of sound technology was both an experience of listening and of physical engagement. This early immersion in tactile sound technologies taught O'Nolan that sound is always material, a conviction that saturates his later fictions.[5]

These domestic rituals unfolded at a pivotal moment in the history of modern sound. O'Nolan's generation did not experience the shock of the gramophone's first appearance, nor did they live in a world saturated by the wireless yet.[6] Instead, they inherited the gramophone's routines just as radio was beginning to replace visible mechanisms with voices carried invisibly through the ether. To grow up during this transition was to be fluent in both registers: the solidity of the crank, the disc, and the needle, and the uncanny disembodiment of radio's etheric reach. The space between media and sound becomes central to the way O'Nolan writes about sound technologies.

This article argues that O'Nolan's fiction consistently stages sound as a material force—stored, transmitted, repeated, and degraded—and that his wit emerges most

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[1] Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (Grafton Books, 1989), 33.

[2] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 29.

[3] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 29.

[4] Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen*, ed. Niall O'Nolan, trans. Róisín Nì Nualláin (Lilliput Press, 1998), 33.

[5] Ciarán also recalls that their uncle, Joseph Gormley, 'trained choirs and soloists' and 'some of his songs were broadcast on Radio Éireann and a few were recorded'. In this case, the family was not only listening to transduced sound—they were part of its production and circulation. Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles Na gCopaleen*, 33.

[6] O'Nolan came of age during a broader global shift in sonic experience. Jonathan Sterne's concept of the 'Ensoniment' (1750–1925) frames this period as one in which sound 'became an object and a domain of thought and practice,' and hearing was reconceived as a mechanical, physiological process. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003), 2. Friedrich Kittler further charts this technological shift in phases: Phase I, the development of sound storage technologies such as the gramophone, and Phase II, the rise of electric transmission of sound exemplified by the radio. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford University Press, 1999), 243.

vividly at the point where sound's materiality meets its mediation. In his novels, short stories, and columns, sound is never merely background but an unruly presence that unsettles distinctions between body and voice, machine and medium, signal and noise. By examining O'Nolan's work through the lens of sonic materiality, I demonstrate how his work naturally embraces these concepts as a fundamental aspect of his lived acoustic experience, particularly during a period of profound sonic transformation. Sonic materiality, as Dugal McKinnon describes, emerges in the moments when sound is 'in/between things, including the medium in which sounding objects are found.'[7] For this article, the emphasis falls on the slippages between sound's material presence and its technological mediation—the vibrations that press against grooves, wires, or airwaves but never remain fully contained by them. And it is this in/between-ness that offers O'Nolan narrative opportunities. It is in those moments of tension between sound-as-material and sound as it moves through or acts upon matter that give us insight into how deeply O'Nolan's fiction is rooted in the material conditions of modern listening.

An exploration of sonic materiality in O'Nolan's fiction inherently builds on established work on the ways he negotiates mediality from a distinctly modernist and posthuman position.[8] For instance, Paul Fagan rightly observes that in 'O'Nolan's work, the motif of disembodiment is recurrently linked to engagements with technological mediation in which image and soundscape, body and voice, are placed out of joint.'[9] Fagan then contextualizes the common thread of (dis)embodied sound in O'Nolan's works through cartesian dualism while 'rethink[ing] the terms of this debate through representations of a form of *embodied* virtuality – a merging of soul and machine – through a curious but insistent representation of the *materiality* of the disembodied voice.'[10] While Fagan's work highlights the uncanny separations between body and sound, I argue for a shift in emphasis: O'Nolan's fiction demonstrates not just disembodiment but the assertive materiality of sound itself, sound as an autonomous presence that acts upon characters and machines alike.

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[7] Dugal McKinnon, 'Materiality: The Fabrication of Sound,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Art*, ed. Jane Grant et al. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 280.

[8] A few examples of works that engage with this topic include Paul Fagan, 'Voices Off: Brian O'Nolan, Posthumanism and Cinematic Disembodiment,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, ed. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork University Press, 2022); Yuta Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming,' in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines*, ed. Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan and John Greaney (Cork University Press, 2024); Joseph LaBine, "Information, Please': Brian O'Nolan and the Radio,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 2 (2024): 2, https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.9171; Maebh Long, 'Is It About a Typewriter? Brian O'Nolan and Technologies of Inscription,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 4, no. 2 (2020): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.2882; Zan Cammack, *Ireland's Gramophones: Material Culture, Memory, and Trauma in Irish Modernism* (Clemson University Press, 2021).

[9] Fagan, 'Voices Off,' 217.

[10] Fagan, 'Voices Off,' 217. Emphasis original.

I begin by situating O'Nolan's work within the framework of sonic materiality, showing how his early fiction and journalism reflect the transductive processes by which sound is stored, transmitted, and reanimated. I then turn to *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* to examine how gramophones render sound simultaneously present and absurd, exposing the slippages between recording and meaning. From there, I explore O'Nolan's depictions of 'sonic crimes,' where repetition and replay are treated as provocations that implicate both sound and its machines. Finally, I consider his parodies of radio and wireless broadcasting, where atmospherics and interference are elevated to the status of scheduled events. Across these examples, O'Nolan's satire consistently emerges where sound's material force collides with its mediation, transforming sonic absurdity into a critical engagement with the acoustic environment of modernist Ireland.

Sound Made Material

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the Good Fairy's persistent but bodiless voice offers an early case of how O'Nolan stages sound as a material force. Fagan describes the Good Fairy's separation of body and voice as a kind of 'mechanised and mediated simulation' of the original body.[11] Maebh Long similarly describes the 'paradoxical formlessness' that allows the Good Fairy—who does not have a body—to be 'continually referred to as sitting, pointing, holding cards and threatening to vomit.'[12] However, reframing this moment through sonic materiality (rather than dis/embodiment) demonstrates that while the Good Fairy may lack a body, their voice operates as a tangible, physical presence. The phenomenon of sound without discernible source or cause, according to Brian Kane, 'transform[s] a sound from an event into an object.'[13] The Good Fairy's voice therefore becomes a literal sonic object. What matters here is not just that the voice is present, but that it unsettles narrative categories: a character exists not as body or psyche but as sound-object. O'Nolan's fiction uses sonic materiality to blur the boundaries between character, medium, and environment, showing how a voice alone can act as an agent. This is the first step in his larger satirical project: demonstrating that sound, once materialized, defies clear distinctions between it and its source.

While O'Nolan does not expressly use the verbiage of sonic materiality in his works, he nonetheless plays with its broader concepts. He tacitly understands that sound is

[11] Fagan, 'Voices Off,' 216. Fagan also describes Joe the soul in *The Third Policeman* as another iteration of the embodied/disembodied voice in O'Nolan's works. Since Joe is only heard by the de Selby scholar, the approach would be a bit different to what's under discussion here.

[12] Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 45–46.

[13] Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

made real by the vibrations that move across and act upon matter.[14] Christoph Cox explains that 'while [material] sources generate or cause sounds, sounds are not bound to their sources as properties. Sounds, then, are distinct individuals or particulars like objects.'[15] In that same vein, Kane argues that sound that is separate from its source—acousmatic sound—still retains its own physical force.[16] In the example of the Good Fairy, the separation of sound from visible source does not diminish its physicality but rather underscores its autonomy as a material presence.

Framing acousmatic sound as an object also shifts attention to the ways we describe sound through physical metaphors. Mads Walther-Hansen explores this phenomenon, noting that a sound can be warm, heavy, rough, hollow, dark, and it can even smack us in the face. These descriptors are not arbitrary but are instead 'linguistic expressions [...] governed by the cognitive metaphor SOUNDS AS PHYSICAL OBJECTS.'[17] The descriptors point to the way we cognitively reach for physical language to express a phenomenon we cannot hold. The Good Fairy's voice, for instance, is described as 'cold,' 'sharp,' and 'thin' at different moments in the narrative.[18] Walther-Hansen then adds to the cognitive metaphor, pointing to our tendency to describe sound recordings in 'the slightly more elaborate cognitive metaphor RECORDED SOUND AS PHYSICAL OBJECTS IN A CONTAINER.'[19] This metaphor allows us to focus on how sound is contained, transmitted, or degraded through physical systems of machines, grooves, wires, and atmosphere.

The gramophone, one of the first machines of recorded sound, literalizes the metaphor. Energy from a sonic event is collected and funnelled into the machine, where the stylus etches oscillations into the disc. McKinnon describes this as the 'sound-as-event' premise, which 'accounts for the complex interactions between sound source and the medium(s) in which sound propagates and is transformed.'[20] The disc preserves a two-dimensional representation of sound vibration from the physical sonic event which remains there, waiting to be played in an act of re-activation.[21] The gramophone

[14] David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 'Introduction,' in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

[15] Christoph Cox, 'Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism,' *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 156, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412911402880.

[16] Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 8.

[17] Mads Walther-Hansen, *Making Sense of Recordings: How Cognitive Processing of Recorded Sound Works* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 9. Capitalisation in original.

[18] Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 123, 125, 131. This is only a small sampling of such descriptors.

[19] Walther-Hansen, *Making Sense of Recordings*, 9. Capitalisation in original.

[20] McKinnon, 'Materiality,' 278.

[21] Patrick Fester observes, 'Aerial sound waves have a complex three-dimensional structure, but phonographic technologies can only record and rephenomenalize them in two dimensions, from a perspective analogous to that of the ear (or, in the case of stereo, a pair of ears). See Patrick Feaster, 'Phonography,' in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 145.

also makes visible and audible the process that is central to this article's exploration of sonic materiality: transduction, the passage of vibration across different media.[22] This is the manifestation of the 'in/between'-ness McKinnon describes: the gramophone—through collecting, preserving, and reactivating vibrations—reinforces the concept that sound is made real by the way vibration moves across or acts upon matter.

In a different scene in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Nolan narrativizes the process of re-activating sound through transduction with considerable fidelity. When the student watches his uncle and Mr. Corcoran unveil a gramophone in their dining-room, the description lingers on each step of the process:

> The two of them bent together at the adjustment of the machine, extracting a collapsible extensible retractable tone-arm from its interior with the aid of their four hands. [...] Mr. Corcoran opened a small compartment at the base of the machine by pressing a cleverly hidden spring and brought out a number of records, scraping and whistling them together by a careless manner of manipulation. My uncle was occupied with inserting a cranking device into an aperture in the machine's side and winding it with the meticulous and steady motion that is known to prolong the life and resiliency of springs.[23]

Both the narrator and his uncle seem particularly pre-occupied with the winding of the spring motor in preparation for the final processes of reactivating the record's sound. Finally, the uncle

> placed a needle finely on the revolving disk and stepped quickly back, his meticulous hands held forth without motion in his expectancy. Mr. Corcoran was waiting in a chair by the fire, his legs crossed, his downcast head supported in position by the knuckles of his right hand, which were resting damply on his top teeth. The tune came duly, a thin spirant from the Patience opera.[24]

The aria from *Patience* emerges only 'duly,' an adverb that underscores how stored sound is contingent upon the successful activation of this chain of mechanical conversions. O'Nolan also dwells on moments of energy that precede the sonic event. These details register sound as neither purely material nor purely ephemeral, but as something that flickers into audibility at the junctures where matter and vibration meet. In this sense, O'Nolan's fiction instinctively grasps that sonic materiality is that which is always in transit, always in/between things. This is O'Nolan's playground when writing about

[22] McKinnon, 'Materiality,' 281.
[23] O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 98–99.
[24] O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 99.

recorded sound; he takes concepts of sonic material to their absurdist extremes, exploiting the slippage between media and sound as part of his exploration of the sonic landscape of modernity.

We can press the concepts of slippage between sound and media further by revisiting the example of the Good Fairy. It is worth observing that at after this prolonged scene of sound activation via the gramophone in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the voice of the Good Fairy is mistaken by Slug for a 'small gramophone in [the Pooka's] pocket.'[25] Slug's assumption reflects the cultural moment when disembodied voices were already normalized through radio and gramophone technology. By supposing the voice is mechanically stored or transmitted, this scene acknowledges the technological conditions of acousmatic sound. In other words, the characters inhabit the same sonic modernity as O'Nolan: they are fluent in the logic that voices can be untethered from bodies and carried about as objects. Furthermore, Slug's assumption allows us to move beyond symbolic readings of voice-body separation and focus on how sound's materiality is stored, transmitted, and degraded through physical systems—machines, grooves, wires, and atmosphere.

Fetishised Transduction

Having established that O'Nolan dramatizes transduction and treats voices as mobile sonic objects, we can now test the limits of storage and replay where logistics eclipse meaning. The tensions of sonic materiality—its entanglement with machine, preservation, and replay—come to sharp focus in *An Béal Bocht* (published in English translation as *The Poor Mouth* in 1973). The third chapter of the novel famously satirizes the very process by which sound is captured and stored. The scene centres on a Dublin gentleman visiting Corkadoragha in search of 'authentic' Irish language. He arrives with a gramophone, described with almost magical awe: 'this instrument was capable of memorising all it heard... [and] could also spew out all it had heard whenever one desired it.'[26] O'Nolan anthropomorphizes the machine, endowing it with the storyteller's capacity to repeat while denying it the capacity of understanding. Crucially, this scene lays bare a materialist fallacy: the idea that storing sound equals preserving meaning.

As the scene unfolds, the gentleman encounters what he thinks is a drunken old man speaking Irish. He does not 'tarry to understand it' but rushes to position the gramophone to record it:

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[25] O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 123.

[26] Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story about the Hard Life*, trans. Patrick C. Power (Dalkey Archive Press, 1996), 42–43.

> He leaped up and set the machine near the one who was spewing out Gaelic. It appeared that the gentleman thought the Gaelic extremely difficult and he was overjoyed that the machine was absorbing it; he understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible. After about an hour the stream of talk ceased. The gentleman was pleased with the night's business. [...] It was said later in the area that the gentleman was highly praised for the lore which he had stored away in the hearing-machine that night.[27]

The reference to 'absorption' is key: O'Nolan ironizes the fantasy that vibration, once impressed into matter, becomes synonymous with preservation. Sonic materiality is rendered reductive here: stored vibrations ≠ semantic transmission.[28] The scholars' delight in audible Irish exemplifies the way sonic materiality can be appreciated as a physical and perceptual phenomenon rather than semantic content. The scene also dramatizes how sound, once materialized in the gramophone, operates acousmatically: it asserts a presence irrespective of speaker, listener, or semantic comprehension.

When the recording is transported to Berlin, European scholars lavish praise on what they call the most poetic and obscure Irish ever captured. Their delight is not based on comprehension but on auditory mystique. 'There was no fear for Gaelic while the like was audible in Ireland,' they declare[29] — not in defence of the language's vitality, but of its sonic existence.[30] A committee is even formed to 'to make a detailed study of the language of the machine.'[31] The shift here is stark: the scholars do not analyse sound as a lived sonic event but the transduced artifact originating from the machine. And of course, the punchline—that the much-celebrated Irish was spoken by a pig—devastates the entire enterprise. The satire is brutal; once sound's materiality is fetishized as a feat of transduction, any sound will do, even a pig's.

Placed in Ireland's cultural context, the satire is particularly cutting. In the 1930s, projects like the Irish Folklore Commission sought to preserve Irish oral traditions by

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[27] O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 44.

[28] As Carrassi writes, this narrative moment identifies a kind of pseudoscientific attitude that 'prefers to neglect an objective and rigorous understanding of Gaelic language, in favour of a rough and unaware collection of a lore de-contextualized and reified by a hearing-machine.' Vito Carrassi, 'Between Folk and Lore: Performing, Textualising and (mis)Interpreting the Irish Oral Tradition,' *Estudios Irlandeses* 12, no. 2 (2017): 42, https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2017-7554.

[29] O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 45.

[30] Julieta Abella effectively points out that 'there is a complete misunderstanding not only of the meaning of the sounds captured by the gramophone but, more importantly, of what Irish should be or how it should sound.' Julieta Abella, 'Understanding and Mis-Understanding in Language in Brian O'Nolan's *An Béal Bocht* and *Cruiskeen Lawn*,' *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 15 (2020): 7, https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2020-9290.

[31] O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 45.

recording them, motivated in part by the fear that language and culture were on the brink of disappearance. Yet these same technologies risked reducing oral performance (a sonic event) to sonic artifact.[32] The Commission's work recognized, implicitly, that sound is material and fleeting: it vanishes unless impressed into matter.[33] However, O'Nolan pushes that recognition to grotesque extremes, showing what happens when the material storage of vibration overwhelms the semantic and cultural force of lived sonic events. O'Nolan's bilingual fluency made this betrayal sharper: he knew how easily Irish orality could be 'preserved' as mere vibration and stripped of its living force.[34] The pig's speech dramatizes this danger, collapsing preservation into parody.

Sonic Crimes

The satiric reduction of sound to artifact removed from context is not isolated since across his oeuvre, O'Nolan uses the gramophone to push sonic materiality to absurd extremes. In *Blather*, a portion of a bar chart is deemed too small to read, so the reader is told to 'try playing the page on the gramophone.'[35] In a *Cruiskeen Lawn* article, Myles suggests that one might 'speed-read' a record—scanning grooves with the naked eye.[36] These gags invert transduction, treating sound's physical residue as readable script. In many ways, these examples evoke the earliest definitions of phonography, which is the literal writing of sound. As Feaster observes, '[t]he very status of phonography as writing has been recalibrated in light of its reorientation from "reproduction" on paper to "reproduction" as sound.'[37] O'Nolan exploits this theoretical wobble, parodying the unstable threshold of transduction: grooves undeniably hold sonic information, but intelligibility requires machines to reactivate them.

These riffs on recorded sound open onto a deeper concern in O'Nolan's writing: sound as a material actor whose agency is tied up in the culpability of the machines that store and reanimate it. In his article 'Records,' Myles reports the use of wire recorders

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[32] As Christopher Morash points out, in Ireland, sound technologies arrived into a context where print was often seen as 'the medium of [...] colonial administration,' while oral culture—particularly in Irish—stood as its oppositional mode. In this way, sound recording appeared tailor-made for cultural preservation. Yet the same technology also threatened to abstract oral performance into stored sound, flattening dynamic, living traditions into static archival objects. Christopher Morash, *A History of the Media in Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 98.

[33] Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935 – 1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Finnish Literature Society, 2007).

[34] Carrassi, 'Between Folk and Lore,' 40.

[35] 'Our Tottering Circulation,' *Blather* 1, no. 2 (1934): 35.

[36] Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *Irish Times*, May 15, 1944.

[37] Feaster, 'Phonography,' 143. For example, Feaster continues, some theorists don't consider gramophone records as phonography since humans are not biomechanically able to read them. See also Roy Harris, *Signs of Writing* (Routledge, 1995), 116.

at Leinster House to record political conversations. What begins as commentary on mechanical bureaucracy quickly transforms into an exploration of the culpability of sound. The narrator expresses contempt for 'the tale-bearer' and casts the machines as guilty of 'mechanical espionage.'[38] They are no longer storage units or conduits for sound, but agents by association—witnesses capable of betrayal. Myles dramatizes the fact that once vibration is impressed into matter, it always shadows the future with the threat of replay. Here the escalation becomes clear: sonic replay need not occur since the mere possibility of reactivation of sound renders machines treasonous. Once transduced back into acoustic energy, sound ceases to be inert inscription and becomes an event with material and social consequences.

Myles imagines a scenario in which one such machine—a gramophone—stands trial and is sentenced to death by firing squad:

> In a former day spies were shot at dawn. You cannot, however, shoot one of the machines I mention. Technically, it *can* be put out of order with bullets. But this process makes the executioners look ridiculous. The shooting detail will talk in the mess. 'The commandant is afraid of a gramophone. I have to be up at six in the morning to bump off one of them machines. And do you know what? One of the six of us is to have blank ammunition. Etiquette!'[39]

The farce literalizes a problem of media ethics: who bears responsibility when preserved sound re-enters the world as event—the original speaker, the machine that stores it, or the reanimated sound itself? Myles refuses to settle the question, instead exploiting the slippage between agent and instrument, medium and message, storage and event. Here, Tyler Shoemaker's concept of sound's 'agential force' and 'listening agents' provides a useful framework.[40] Sound, once encoded, is not static but matter with the capacity to act. As Shoemaker argues, sonic materialism must account for the fact that agency is an 'open variable'—distributed among humans, machines, and material substrates alike.[41] Myles pushes this theory further, suggesting that the

[38] Myles na gCopaleen, 'Records,' in *The Hair of the Dogma: A Further Selection from* Cruiskeen Lawn (Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1977), 168.

[39] na gCopaleen, 'Records,' 168. Emphasis original.

[40] Tyler Shoemaker, 'Sonic Materialism and/as Method,' in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, ed. Michael Bull and Marcel Cobussen (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 172.

[41] Shoemaker, 'Sonic Materialism,' 179. For further context, Shoemaker explains, 'I am, in effect, arguing that sonic materialism should not galvanize but rather mediate the gap between a sonic thing's arrival and a listening agent, and it should do so by asserting that the agents involved therein are open variables. Whether an agent be human or nonhuman, whether its mode of listening aligns with cochlear activity or takes on other sensibilities (technical, material, whatever else), there is a place for the listener in and of sonic materialism' (179).

technology of transduction—the wires, grooves, circuits that return inscription to audibility—cannot be considered entirely innocent conduits. They are bound into the chain of agency by virtue of their replay.

The tension between sound preservation and activation, between containment and consequence, becomes even more pressing as sound moves from analogue playback (gramophone) to airwave transmission (radio). At first glance, radio seems to dematerialize sound, lifting it free of its grooves, wires, and horns into the open ether. But O'Nolan—and the realities of early Irish broadcasting—suggest otherwise. Early radio did not transcend materiality—it amplified it. Behind every broadcast was a chain of transductive events, where vibration had to be reanimated, amplified, and relayed through fragile infrastructures. Accounts of early radio in Ireland reveal the ongoing materiality of transmission. Geraldine Neeson, reflecting on her work at Cork's 6CK (a Dublin relay station) in the 1920s, describes how technical failures between Cork and Dublin led to last-minute programming built entirely around gramophone records:

> A breakdown of the [telephone] lines between Cork and Dublin on a weekday often brought down a small crisis, for it meant that 6CK [...] had to put out a programme of records. Not long-playing records, be it remembered, but the old style. With a small library, a three hours' programme to fill, and little time to prepare, this called for some dexterity, for it meant changing records, changing the needle, announcing the items, and often, whilst a record was still playing, a quick run downstairs to collect another stack.[42]

Her account makes clear that the wireless was not ethereal but resolutely tactile: each broadcast remained anchored in the labour of activating stored sound and pushing it across wires and air.

O'Nolan's fiction not only references the radio as a medium but enacts its mechanics. Joseph LaBine and Yuta Imazeki ground O'Nolan's writings in 1930s Irish radio culture, making it clear that he was familiar with the infrastructure at play in sonic transmission. LaBine argues that O'Nolan seems to have 'translated radio consciousness into his fictional writing,'[43] and Imazeki demonstrates that through 'transference and appropriation of narratorship,' O'Nolan creates a narrative structure that parallels radiophonic relay—one voice layered atop another, one transmission

[42] Interview from 'Forty Years of Irish Radio,' RTÉ Radio, 21 July, 2015, https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/716221-forty.

[43] LaBine, 'Information, Please,' 1. LaBine also details O'Nolan's extensive contributions to Irish radio, including early broadcasts and commentary on Radio Éireann programming, reflect a writer deeply immersed in the institutional and material landscape of 1930s radio culture.

replacing another.[44] But where their readings stress formal mimicry, I emphasize how O'Nolan's narratives foreground the slippage inherent in the physical components of transmission—the way sound, once mediated, can collapse distinctions between signal and noise, agent and machine. It is in this messy overlap between gramophone and radio, between sonic containment and dispersal, that O'Nolan begins to narrate sonic saturation to the point of breakdown.

In his 1932 Irish-language short story '!CEÓL!: Eachtra an Fhir Ólta'[45] ('The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!'[46]), Ó Nualláin imagines what happens when that transductive cycle of repetition overwhelms both medium and listener. The story marks a conceptual pivot between the two technologies. It implicates both gramophone and wireless in a repetition so extreme that it erodes distinctions between machine, source, and subject. The titular drunk reacts viscerally to the mention of a gramophone, which then launches his explanation that he has continuously heard the same song, 'Annie Laurie,' coming from a neighbour's house for a decade. The drunk claims: '"Annie Laurie" was the first sound I heard as I woke up, and "Annie Laurie" was the last note that broke my heart.'[47] At a minimum, he heard the song over 7,300 times;[48] while the higher-end estimate is nearly incalculable, it would be roughly over two million repetitions.[49] However, the numerical scale is less important than the affective accumulation: Ó Nualláin dramatizes repetition as sonic assault, a vibration replayed so relentlessly it remakes perception and subjectivity.

Most telling is the way this sonic saturation collapses perceptual categories. It erodes the distinction between sound, source, and subject—the repeated sound acts on perception and ontology. The text leaves us to infer that a neighbour is playing 'Annie Laurie' on a gramophone, though the man never makes that distinction. In fact, he

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[44] Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming,' 247.

[45] Here I follow the title order suggested by Tobias W. Harris and Joseph LaBine when they argue that '!CEÓL!' is the main title of the story based on the illustration in the original publication. See Tobias W. Harris and Joseph LaBine, 'Drink-Music: The "Ól" in Brian Ua Nualláin's "!CEÓL!" (1932),' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 1, https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.10521.

[46] Brian Ó Nualláin, 'The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).

[47] Ó Nualláin, 'The Tale of the Drunkard,' 36.

[48] This number comes from hearing the song twice a day for ten years.

[49] Ó Nualláin, 'The Tale of the Drunkard,' 36. If the song played literally unceasingly for ten years as the man describes, he could have heard 'Annie Laurie' approximately 25 times an hour, 600 times a day, 219,000 times a year, and 2,190,000 times in ten years. This calculation is based on the 1914 recording of 'Annie Laurie' performed by Louise Homer, which lasts 2:40. Of course, it is impossible to know for certain which recording (if any) O'Nolan had in mind in this story. However, Homer's recording stands out as a strong contender. It predates the publication of the story in 1932, was distributed by a prominent company (Victrola), and was performed by a woman. See Louise Homer, *Annie Laurie*, 78 RPM – 10' (Victrola Record, 1915), Recoded Sound Archives, Florida Atlantic University Libraries, https://rsa.fau.edu/album/9196.

describes his neighbour as singing the song. And as the story progresses, even that distinction is lost as he beings to describe the song, the neighbour, and the implied gramophone all by the proper name 'Annie Laurie.' Repetition, in this instance, undoes the distinctions between playback and presence, container and source.

The interpretive ambiguity extends to the medium itself. I described the sounds of 'Annie Laurie' as coming from a gramophone; this deduction is based on the man's initial reaction to the mention of the machine and the perpetual replay which is a foundational function of the technology. LaBine reads the story as a reflection on 'the radio craze,' suggesting that it is '"Annie Laurie" constantly playing on the wireless' that drives the man mad.[50] That reading is equally plausible, since repeated broadcast of records was a common occurrence in early radio. And that ambiguity is the point. The text resists resolution because, in a saturated sonic environment, those boundaries blur. Medium specificity gives way under material excess in a collapse that is not only figurative but material. At the time O'Nolan was writing, shellac records degraded quickly: a groove replayed thousands of times would hiss, crackle, and distort until the melody was barely recognizable. This aligns with the story's thematic erosion of distinctions between neighbour, machine, and melody. The more 'Annie Laurie' repeats, the less stable it becomes. The material degradation of the record mirrors the degradation of perception, aligning medium fatigue with psychic fatigue.

Repetition becomes a force of destruction, eroding not only the stored sound but the subject who endures it. As McKinnon argues, repetition is a means through which sound 'exerts affective and bodily control.'[51] Shoemaker similarly reminds us that repeated sound destabilizes and makes 'impossible brackets [...] around the situation of sound.'[52] In '!CEÓL!', the man's madness is material: the affective impact of repeated vibrations exerting force over time.[53] Here, Ó Nualláin aligns with the wider cultural discourse of

[50] LaBine, 'Information, Please,' 10. Harris and LaBine also comment on the lack of specificity between medium, writing, 'The drunk man who relays the tale is surrounded by what he interprets as terrifying apparitions which the reader recognises to be gramophone records or radio broadcasts.' Harris and LaBine, 'Drink-Music,' 2–3.

[51] McKinnon, 'Materiality,' 274. He goes on to describe bodily reactions to sound as follows: 'The "spooky action at a distance" power of sound, encapsulated in *obaudire*, in which sound exerts affective and bodily control over the listener, demonstrates the way in which sonic immateriality takes material form not only in the invisible materiality of sound as sound waves, but also in the material bodies, particularly human bodies, which—in various ways—vibrate in response to the transduction of sound.' (274)

[52] Shoemaker, 'Sonic Materialism,' 181.

[53] Richard Grusin also explores the affect of media technologies, writing 'Like the way media operate affectively, mediation must also be understood ontologically as a process or event prior to and ultimately not reducible to particular media technologies. Mediation operates physically and materially as an object, event, or process in the world, impacting humans and nonhumans alike.' See Richard Grusin, 'Radical Mediation,' *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015): 126, https://doi.org/10.1086/682998.

early radio as 'etheric bedlam.'[54] By invoking this discourse—even if implicitly— Ó Nualláin's story situates the drunkard's mental unravelling within a broader anxiety about radio's sonic capacity to disorient and derange. What is striking is the way he grounds this madness in the materiality of sonic repetition. Madness emerges as the logical consequence of transduction without limit: sound replayed until boundaries collapse.

Madness here is a consequence of transduction pushed to absurd excess: sound is stored, reactivated, and transmitted until it destabilizes both subject and system. Whether the song is played on a gramophone or a radio and whether the 'Annie Laurie' is machine, song, or person, ultimately matters less than the fact that repetition degrades the medium, the machine, and the very possibility of distinction between them. The gramophone, in conjunction with the radio (played by other neighbours), drives the man mad; he 'murder[s] the two men who were so fond of the radio' but leaves Annie Laurie (in all her possible iterations) alive.[55] The escalation is crucial: earlier, O'Nolan showed that stored sound could be fetishized (*An Béal Bocht*) or treated as culpable ('Records'). Here, he demonstrates that the repetition of recorded sound can accumulate as affective and destructive materiality, producing ontological collapse and serving as the impetus for violence. The next escalation comes with O'Nolan's radio satires, where repetition is joined by interference and atmospherics, dissolving the boundary between intentional broadcast and environmental noise.

In the *Cruiskeen Lawn* article 'The District and Other Courts,' Myles pushes his satire of repetition to its most juridical extreme by staging sound as a form of legal evidence. Here, sonic materiality is not metaphorical but bureaucratically acknowledged: 'M. Copaleen' stands trial for (among other things) the 'mysterious business of the broken gramophone records' after a break in at Radio Éireann.[56] Myles, in his defence, asks the witness (a broadcaster for Radio Éireann) how often the records 'The Blue Danube' and 'Tales from the Vienna Woods' were broadcast in the span of a year. The witness replies: '4,312 times in all... about twelve times every day of the year,' and '6,835 times,' respectively. The Justice muses, 'I thought it was oftener.'[57]

Sonic repetition here, like in '!CEÓL!', becomes a quantifiable material burden. It also causes a similar slip in distinction between the sonic material and the medium

[54] Carolyn Birdsall and Senta Siewert, 'Of Sound Mind: Mental Distress and Sound in Twentieth-Century Media Culture,' *TMG Journal for Media History* 16, no. 1 (2013): 29, https://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.258.

[55] Ó Nualláin, 'The Tale of the Drunkard,' 37.

[56] Myles na gCopaleen, 'The District and Other Courts,' in *Further Cuttings From* Cruiskeen Lawn (Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), 52.

[57] na gCopaleen, 'The District and Other Courts,' 52.

as actors, as explored in Myles's hypothetical execution of a gramophone. In the early days of Irish radio—as early as 1926—individuals were hired to manage the station's commercial gramophone record library since recorded sound was deeply embedded in the new transmission technology.[58] Similarly, Radio Éireann installed a disc recording studio in 1936 as 'a means of preserving programmes as they were broadcast, and preparing programmes for later broadcasting.'[59] The prominence of a gramophone library and a disc recording studio in the station's history works against assumptions about the ephemerality of radio. Ironically, the surviving traces of radio production are recorded media that precedes the event and predates the new technology.[60] Placed against the backdrop of Radio Éireann's reliance on disc libraries, it is fitting—if absurd—that Myles finds himself on trial for (allegedly!) breaking into the station and smashing records. This act of vandalism is actually an attempt to interrupt the circuit of transduction. In 'The District and Other Courts,' Myles doesn't confess to anything but argues that 'it was plain that the situation reeked of superhuman provocation. The most law-abiding man must not be tried too hard.'[61] Breaking the discs is the only way to halt the cycle in which grooves become vibrations, become broadcasts, become burdens. It was, he argues, justifiable sabotage. The implication is clear: sound leaves traces—on airwaves, on records, on listeners. The line of questioning is valid specifically because the sonic provocation is not abstract but documented, mechanical, transductive: a material circuit of storage and release. Myles thus collapses the distinction between sonic materiality and mediation, showing how the very act of transmission transforms sound in the form of music into a prosecutable injury. Someone *needed* to break the gramophone records so their relentless transmission would cease.

Jammed/Atmospherics

The slippage between sonic repetition and listener frustration with the media returns in a more chaotic form in *Blather*'s satirical radio schedule, 'Listen in to 2BL.' The mission of the pirate station is announced with the line: 'The objects of the station are twofold, even manifold. The primary object is to give Athlone hell.'[62] And one

[58] In 1926, 2RN employed Máiréad Ní Ghráda, who became the first woman announcer for the station, and her duties included 'managing the gramophone library' at the station. See Éamon Ó Ciosáin, 'Ní Ghráda, Máiréad,' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James Quinn (Royal Irish Academy, 2009), https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.006187.v1. Furthermore, in 1937, Radio Éireann hired Kathleen Evans as an official 'Gramophone Librarian' for the station and 'had to sort out and index the mass of commercial records that the station had collected and build up a proper library.' See Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Talbot Press, 1967), 104.

[59] Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 104.

[60] Daniel Gomes, 'Archival Airwaves: Recording Ireland for the BBC,' *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus* 3, no. 4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0084.

[61] na gCopaleen, 'The District and Other Courts,' 54.

[62] 'Listen in to 2BL,' *Blather* 1, no. 3 (1934): 49.

mechanism of that hell, it seems, is the repeated use of gramophone records in 2BL's programming. The machine is not referenced as a background device, nor as a source of specific content—it is listed, repeatedly, as the event itself. Programming lines include:

1.30–2.0 Gramophone records. [...]
6.0 Gramophone records. (*What, again*!) [...]
7.0 Gramophone concert. (*Happily, we subscribe to the old fashioned view that sooner or later these people will have to answer for all their acts. It is a useful and beautiful philosophy.*) [...]
8.30 Gramo—(*No, you don't, by heavens! We are going out for a bottle of stout and we will be gone half an hour.*) [...]
9:45 Gramophone selections: 'You will remember Vienna.' (*Yes, we said it, but you did not hear us. Vienna will never let you know.*)[63]

The repetition is not subtle, nor is it neutral. These listings don't simply name musical content; they name the record as the object storing the sound and, by extension, the time of the stored sound's reanimation. In this sense, the listings could just as easily read: '1:30—Reactivated Sound Event,' '6:00—Vibration Released from Container,' '8.30—Transduction.' This meta-structuring actualises McKinnon's sound-as-event framework.[64]

We can see the same logic at play in Myles's *Cruiskeen Lawn* article 'Criticism,' where he contrasts the blunt honesty of American program listings like 'News, Talk, Discs' with the more poetic but deceptive phrasing of Radio Éireann schedules that list 'From the Violin Repertoire Ida Haendel plays,' or 'Tuesday's Concert of Light Music: Mendelssohn and Schubert.'[65] Both versions describe the same sonic action—a gramophone releasing stored sound—but only the former acknowledges the container's involvement. As Imazeki notes, O'Nolan's radio satire 'foregrounds radiophonic awareness,' appropriating the logics of broadcasting into narrative form.[66] But O'Nolan sharpens this awareness by literalizing it: he names the playback device itself as the program, collapsing distinctions between content, medium, and sonic event.

This framework primes us for the twist in the 2BL programming in both 'Listen in to 2BL' and its follow up 'More About Our New Wireless Service' where the material atmospherics and pervasive sound of the wireless make it onto the schedule. When introducing the 2BL station, the *Blather* author claims, 'The primary object is to give

[63] 'Listen in to 2BL.'
[64] McKinnon, 'Materiality,' 278.
[65] Myles na gCopaleen, 'Criticism,' in *Further Cuttings from* Cruiskeen Lawn (Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), 93.
[66] Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming,' 237.

Athlone hell. [...] We are going to jam and jam and jam. We are going to perforate its [the Athlone station's] wretched programs with screams and whistles and scrapings and head noises and streams of bad language.'[67] This isn't just sound-as-chaos; it is sound-as-material-intrusion, the uncontainable 'noise' of the system elevated to programmatic content.

Myles may be pushing his parody of radio atmospherics to an extreme, but he is drawing from the actual sonic texture of Irish radio in the 1930s. There were only a finite range of frequencies available for radio transmission, and '[i]nterference had increased exponentially alongside the growing number of radio stations in Europe,' Rebecca Scales writes, 'as stations were forced to transmit too close together on the radio spectrum.'[68] Add to this the fact that atmospheric conditions were influenced in 'complex and unpredictable ways by the time of day, the seasons, and solar cycles,' and shortwave broadcasters 'needed to switch wavelengths several times a day in order to overcome transmission and reception problems.'[69] While Ireland fared relatively well in the mix of all these battles for wavelengths, '[c]onstant changes of stations' wavelengths cannot have been encouraging for listeners' in these early years.[70] As James Connor documents, listeners of early Irish radio regularly encountered violent interference caused by overlapping radio frequency signals, mechanical instability, and environmental conditions. He describes the result sounding like 'the coils of hell,' with banshee-like howls, screeches, and spectral echoes flooding the aural stream.[71] These effects were so pervasive they became material actors in the sonic chain, shaping how radio was experienced at its point of reception.[72] *Blather*'s pirate programming is thus not just satire but a stylized, if exaggerated, encounter with the material sonic intrusions of early wireless transmission.

Where traditional broadcasters feared silence and interference, 2BL revels in them. The revised schedule in 'More About Our New Wireless Service,' includes long deliberate

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[67] 'Listen in to 2BL.' The term 'object' here carries a deliberate ambiguity—this reading plays on the semantic slippage in 'objects of the station,' which could refer both to goals and to sonic outputs. The text's obsessive sonic violence—'jam and jam and jam'—encourages a reading in which sound becomes a weaponised material object.

[68] Rebecca P. Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 127. See also Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio*, trans. Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read (Faber and Faber, 1936), 236–238.

[69] Simon James Potter, *Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening: Britain, Propaganda, and the Invention of Global Radio, 1920–1939* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 41–42.

[70] Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 68.

[71] James A. Connor, 'Radio Free Joyce: "Wake" Language and the Experience of Radio,' *James Joyce Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1993): 829.

[72] Damien Keane also documents the audible 'squeals and howls' of early Irish transmission, paying particular attention to those sounds for 2BE, the B.B.C.'s station in Belfast. See Damien Keane, 'Time Made Audible: Irish Stations and Radio Modernism,' in *A History of Irish Modernism*, ed. Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

segments of 'Atmospherics,' giving sonic distortion the same formal status as opera or news. As Imazeki explains, early Irish radio sought to minimize atmospherics, worried that dead air would alienate listeners.[73] However, 2BL not only embraces these elements, it floods its programming with them. Silence, interference, white noise, and static are not evidence of failure—they are programmatic content. Here is a sample of 2BL's revised programming:

1.0 p.m.–1.30 p.m.	Atmospherics.
1.30 p.m.–2.0 p.m.	Readings from Old Moore's Almanac.
3.0 p.m.–3.30 p.m.	Readings from Old Moore's Almanac. [...]
3.30 p.m.–4.0 p.m.	Readings from Old Moore's Almanac continued.
4.0 p.m.–5.0 p.m.	Borstal Boys' Reunion Dinner.
5.0–6.0 p.m.	Atmospherics.
6.0 p.m.–7.0 p.m.	Talk on *Blather* circulation figures. [...]
7.30 p.m.–8.0 p.m.	Morse concert, relayed from SS Muirchu. [...]
9.0 p.m.–10.0 p.m.	Opera *The Flying Scotchman* (Verdi-gris).
10.0 p.m.–11.0 p.m.	Atmospherics.
11.0 p.m.–12.0 p.m.	Atmospherics, continued.
12 midnight, onwards:	Reverent silence.[74]

By giving atmospherics airtime, 2BL legitimises environment as sonic material and as the main sonic event. These distortions—what Connor calls 'static' in its two forms: 1) chaotic noise like pops, whistles, and squeals, and 2) the white hiss that 'sometimes drowns out everything else'—were unavoidable.[75] Weather, vacuum tubes, sunspots, and even the opening of a transmitter room door are material actors in this scheduled sonic transmission.[76]

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[73] Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming,' 243.

[74] 'More About Our New Wireless Service,' *Blather* 1, no. 4 (1934). This *Blather* article yet again signals a tendency toward pervasive, madness-inducing sonic repetition when it claims that this new radio program 'is so perfect that it will never be changed. You will be able to tune in every night with the calm assurance that everything will be just the same as you heard the night before. No irritating variations, no baffling novelties. Just the same old thing in the same old way. [...] Years afterwards, when you are sitting in your padded cell, you will be able to go over the programme word for word, syllable for syllable, note for note. It will be simply seared into your brain' (80).

[75] Connor, 'Radio Free Joyce,' 829–30.

[76] Fagan's work on atmosphere serves as an important intersection here. He defines atmosphere as trans-corporeal and affective, even, as I interpret it, going so far as to foreground 'vibrant' in his title as a potential connection to the vibrations of energy transduction; he does, however stop short of connecting this to radio atmospherics. See Paul Fagan, 'Flann O'Brien's Vibrant Atmospheres,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): 2, 1, https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.16349.

O'Nolan's satire thus makes clear that sound's materiality cannot be disentangled from its mediation: atmospherics are not outside the broadcast but constitutive of it. *Blather*'s radio station stages an auditory world in which the categories of music, noise, interference, and atmosphere are given equal weight in its broadcast terrain. The wireless is no longer a transparent channel for delivering content—it is content. And in this frame, O'Nolan's satire demonstrates how sound, especially in its most chaotic or degraded form, insists on its material presence and refuses to be dismissed as mere background.

Conclusion

From a needle retracing grooves in a record to a pirate station drowning in static, O'Nolan's writing evokes the friction that makes sound material. These moments reveal the underlying systems that lie in the between spaces of sound's production and preservation. By staging sound at the site of its transduction—from inscription to replay, from transmission to interference—he dramatizes how sonic materiality unsettles distinctions between medium and content.

O'Nolan inherited the infrastructure of stored and transmitted sound at the moment of its cultural saturation, not its novelty. As a result, his instincts, shaped by domestic gramophones, attempts at oral language preservation, ceaselessly repeating records, and early broadcasting idiosyncrasies, yield a satirical grammar fluent in the absurdities of sound's physicality. His fiction treats these technologies as actors that produce excess, breakdown, and slippage—what might appear as 'absurd' is, in fact, sonic materiality asserting itself. His writing insists that sound is never immaterial. It is transduced, repeated, degraded, and reactivated through physical systems that implicate both machines and listeners. This insistence makes his satire legible as critique: when repetition becomes sabotage, when atmospherics become programming, when gramophone grooves become legal evidence, O'Nolan exposes how mediation does not erase materiality but amplifies it.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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