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Sound in *The Jungle*: Elevating Meatpacking to Hyperobject

Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* opens on a loud and boisterous wedding, whose centerpiece is an impassioned performance by Tamoszius, a fiddler. As his performance begins, Sinclair is careful to note that it would be a “great mistake” to think that “there is one of them who does not hear him” (7); the music is inescapable and completely immersive. Furthermore, Sinclair observes that the Lithuanian revelers in this scene “have only to give themselves up” to the music, which “stretches out its arms to them” (7). Here, sound—or, more specifically, Sinclair’s description of sound in the novel—seems to take on a kind of massive, incomprehensible, uncontainable quality.

Timothy Morton, who coined the term “hyperobject,” might claim that sound in *The Jungle* is a said hyperobject in its own right. According to his definition, a hyperobject is any object that is “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1) but is simultaneously “here, right here in my social and experiential space” (27); sound in the novel, even in its opening pages, seems to fit the bill. Furthermore, Morton specifically discusses the concept of “sound as hyperobject,” citing the distorted, abrasive music of Irish band My Bloody Valentine as an example. His descriptions parallel Sinclair’s: Morton, when listening to My Bloody Valentine, does not “reach out toward the sound,” but is instead “assaulted from inside by a pulsation that is also sound” (30), just as Sinclair’s Lithuanians “have only to give themselves up” to the music, which itself “stretches out its arms to them”; Morton describes My Bloody Valentine’s music as “an x-ray, scanning…strafing…pursuing my innards, searching out the resonant frequencies of my stomach, my intestines, the pockets of gristle in my face” (30), just as Tamoszius’s music is literally piercing—“His notes are never true, and his fiddle buzzes on the low ones and squeaks and scratches on the high” (7)—and also metaphorically “pierces” through its listeners, causing them to “behold home landscapes and childhood scenes returning” and allowing for “old loves and friendships begin to waken” (7).

Though Morton argues that certain manifestations of sound—like the music of My Bloody Valentine—may be categorized as hyperobjects, I argue that, in *The Jungle*, sound itself is not the hyperobject; rather, Sinclair uses careful descriptions of sound to viscerally elevate industrial capitalism—as seen in the meatpacking industry and the Chicago stockyards—to the level of hyperobject within the text.

In the novel’s aforementioned wedding scene, Sinclair notes that, for the revelers, Tamoszius’s music conjures up images of “a fairy place, a wonderland, a little corner of the high mansions of the sky,” as well as “green meadows and sunlit rivers, mighty forests and snow-clad hills” (7). This vast array of images makes it seem like the music emanates from every corner of the earth—and beyond. Here, Sinclair ties his description of Tamoszius’s music with images of near-infinite expanses—“high mansions of the sky,” “mighty forests”—in order to demonstrate, within the text, the sheer and incomprehensible scale of the affect that that music produces in its listeners. As the music washes over them, “They behold home landscapes and childhood scenes returning; old loves and friendships begin to waken, old joys and griefs to laugh and weep. Some fall back and close their eyes, some beat upon the table…men and women cry out like all possessed” (7). There is almost too much emotion for the room to hold; accordingly, the music itself is not descriptively tied to any local or tangible space, instead simultaneously emanating from, and conjuring up images of, the massive and infinite.

Similarly, Sinclair’s descriptions of the sonic world of the stockyards draw upon magnitude and excess, always implying a larger, possibly infinite expanse from which the sound emanates. Jurgis’s first experience of this sonic world begins with “a thing elemental…a sound, a sound made up of ten thousand little sounds” (20). Already, this sound is beyond comprehension—it is composed of countless “little sounds,” each of which may themselves be composed of countless other sounds. As a result, the sound becomes limitless; its boundaries cannot be grasped in any concrete way. Sinclair addresses the sound’s limitless nature, stating, “You scarcely noticed it at first—it sunk into your consciousness, a vague disturbance, a trouble” (20). Here, the sound is so formless, incomprehensible and expansive that it is “scarcely” noticeable to its listeners—just as the voice of “My Bloody Valentine’s singer, Bilinda Butcher…becomes ambient” when her voice is placed “on either side of the stereo image, at extreme right and left” (30). As Morton concludes: “We hardly hear it. It’s as if her voice contained a hyperobject” (30).

In *The Jungle*, however, sound itself is not a hyperobject; rather, Sinclair describes sound in such a way that elevates the source of that sound—the stockyards, themselves an extension of industrial capitalism—to the level of a hyperobject, in a way that other descriptive approaches are unable to. For example, Sinclair attempts to evoke the massive scale of the industry with an extended visual description:

There is over a square mile of space in the yards, and more than half of it is occupied by cattle pens; north and south as far as the eye can reach there stretches a sea of pens. And they were all filled—so many cattle no one had ever dreamed existed in the world. Red cattle, black, white, and yellow cattle; old cattle and young cattle; great bellowing bulls and little calves not an hour born; meek-eyed milch cows and fierce, long-horned Texas steers. (20)

Though this description does evoke the massive scale of the meatpacking industry, it does so literally; even though “as far as the eye can reach there stretches a sea of pens,” the scene depicted still seems containable in some way. The “cattle pens” take up tangible space on tangible ground—nearly “a square mile.” And, though Sinclair states that there are “so many cattle no one had ever dreamed existed in the world”—seeming to evoke the same infinity as his sonic descriptions—he goes on to limit those possibilities, listing them off: “Red…black, white…yellow…old…young.” In doing so, the scale of the larger forces behind this spectacle—industrial capitalism, the meatpacking industry—seems similarly limited, thereby minimizing the affective potential of the scene. When industrial capitalism, or any of its local manifestations, can be neatly broken down into categories, it is no longer a hyperobject; its reach and scale do not seem quite as menacing or pervasive.

By contrast, when Jurgis and the others finally realize that the sound of the stockyards “was made by animals” and discover that “it was the distant lowing of ten thousand cattle, the distant grunting of ten thousand swine” (20), Sinclair does not go on to categorize the sounds like he did the images. Rather, he goes on to describe the sound as being “like the murmuring of the bees in the spring, the whisperings of the forest; it suggested endless activity, the rumblings of a world in motion” (20). So, even though Sinclair has revealed the direct source of the sound—cattle and swine—that revelation does not serve to localize or contain the sound in any way. Instead, the sound of the stockyard seems inextricably linked to the infinite and the “endless”; Sinclair states that the “sound of them here was as of all the barnyards of the universe” (24). Here, Sinclair seems to reuse his earlier description, when he observed that “as far as the eye can reach there stretches a sea of pens.” However, the critical difference here is that he evokes the *sound* of “all the barnyards of the universe,” not the image of them. Suddenly, the industry behind the sound becomes too massive to comprehend. The sound of “all the barnyards of the universe” seems to echo infinitely, feeding back on itself, stretching from “green meadows and sunlit rivers” to “the high mansions of the sky” (7). Industrial capitalism now truly feels as massive as Sinclair wants to imply; he is not simply telling us that it is massive, but rather directly evoking that immensity on the page.

Even within the stockyard itself—a contained, localized space—the sound stretches into the infinite; as he writes, “one feared there was too much sound for the room to hold” (26). As the workers shuttle swine around the stockyard, Sinclair describes a series of “terrifying shrieks”: each shriek is “followed by another, louder and yet more agonizing,” eventually “surging up to a deafening climax” (26). Here, even when the “shrieks” come one at a time, they still layer, echo and build momentum, eventually forming a wall of indistinguishable sound that is “appalling, perilous to the eardrums” (26). Morton’s description of My Bloody Valentine’s music as hyperobject invokes the same sense of physical danger: he states, “I think that this music could liquefy my internal organs, make my ears bleed (this has actually occurred), send me into seizures. Perhaps it could kill me” (30).

Critically, Sinclair shows his hand in this passage; he states that the sound “was too much for some of the visitors—the men would look at each other, laughing nervously, and the women would stand with hands clenched, and the blood rushing to their faces, and the tears starting in their eyes” (26). Here, Sinclair acknowledges that sound has a distinctly piercing and affective quality—it is not the sight of the massacre that ultimately disturbs the visitors, but rather the *sound* of it. The physical, almost weaponized nature of the sound here is its excess made literal; just as the sound is too much for its listeners to bear, the source of that sound is too massive to comprehend. As wave after wave of shrieks echo around them, the visitors, too, find that they cannot fully grasp the true scale of the meatpacking industry, or the industrial capitalist system that keeps it running; thus, they become hyperobjects within the text, “massively distributed in time and space” (1), boundless and seemingly infinite.

Works Cited

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