

T L R

TEXTUAL PHONOGRAPHY AT HEATHROW



ED GARLAND

The narrator of Rachel Cusk's *Outline* is watching a safety demonstration on a plane before it departs from Heathrow. "We were strapped into our seats," she says, "a field of strangers, in a silence like the silence of a congregation while the liturgy is read." This sentence tells us two things: when people don't make a sound they can still give off a tone, and in the rituals of transit there are echoes of worship. Cusk's on-board silence is directed towards the sight and sound of a routine irritation, which the narrator then describes as a "coupling of formality and doom."

Sited under the roads around Heathrow's central bus station, the Chapel of St George is an empty concrete dome with

three spacious alcoves around its centre. The bare grey walls are weakly illuminated by a few discs of off-white light. A dozen rows of wooden seats, each with a black leather cushion hung underneath, face the altar, over which is draped a blue velvet cloth. On the portion of this cloth that hangs over the altar's front are three gold crucifixes. Each of these crucifixes is surrounded by a silver aeroplane, whose wings reach out from the crucifix's horizontal tips.

The chapel's mounds of silence swallow the splinters of my applause. I applaud slowly so I can listen to the space's strange acoustic profile. Each clap begets two almost-instant echoes of itself and a half-shot of short-lived reverb, after which the abrupt resumption of the chapel's stuffed-leather silence creates the feeling that the ears have closed around the hand-sounds like tiny mouths holding blobs of atmosphere. Since nobody else is in here, I believe I can applaud as much as I like.

Cars and buses on the road overhead always veer away before they reach the

auditory centre of the chapel's concrete dome. Clouds of engine hum carry mists of tyre hiss. No matter the direction of travel, the tone of the hum always descends as the vehicle recedes.

The flying crucifixes shining at the empty seats suggest that somewhere there's a congregation who worship Jesus and air travel in equal amounts. A group that uses prayers like radar and emits an enraptured hush during pre-take-off couplings of formality and doom.

The seats are still empty when I leave the chapel, past the table housing a guestbook full of thanks and moans and up the spiral staircase to the dark circular garden where the airport's deceased employees are memorialised by plaques and blooms and benches. The silence here shimmers in the thick breath of vehicles.

Terminal 2's departure building has tall glass walls and a high curved ceiling. It looks like it should sound like a cathedral, but inside there's a dissonant quiet, as if

somebody's turned the volume down or hacked the air-conditioning so it regulates decibels instead of temperature. Every fifteen minutes there's a *bing-bong* and a commandment. An anxious computer insists that children must not frolic on baggage trolleys or escalators.

Terminal 2 is "The Queen's Terminal" and the pub in its departures area is a well-known chain pub which must also be the queen's pub. The price of a drink in this pub is, like the royal family, a financial atrocity. Whenever I think of the queen I also think of Shane Hogan, who was a sniper in the army and is therefore dead now. He tells me in his chewy Wolverhampton accent how he saw the queen drink half-pints of Carling on both of the occasions he failed to assassinate her at a banquet.

From the balcony of the chain pub you can observe planes beyond the windows depart and people within the windows check in for departing flights. The movements of the pre-departure people produce a soundless

dissonance. Their mouths move but do not make any honks or blurts or murmurs. Every footstep detonates a silence. In this departure hall there's a snarl of absorption where it seems there ought to be a swirl of reflection.

One way the airport reduces the noise footprint of arriving planes is by making them descend at steeper angles. This maximises the time during which the planes' cacophonous vortices are confined to inaudible altitudes.

Heathrow Airport has two runways. When the airport is on westerly operations, the take-off runway becomes the landing runway and vice-versa at 3pm. Thus the communities surrounding Heathrow are given shifts of respite from sounds of ascent, which cause much more agitation than sounds of descent. When on easterly operations, however, a lack of appropriate infrastructure means that no such respite is possible.

Myrtle Avenue contains some of the first houses a plane will pass on an easterly

departure from runway two. There is a small field at the end of the avenue nearest the runway. When a departing plane is directly above this field, the intensity of sound it emits seems to exceed a person's capacity to perceive it. A roar scours the eardrums and pinches the auditory nerves. A helical shrieking screws through the eyes. A blaring thunder turns the blood turbulent and granulates the brain. There follows a silence made of land-traffic and grass-blown breezes for approximately 45 seconds before the next roar begins to gather.

The Lombard effect happens as a person raises their voice when speaking in a loud environment. Étienne Lombard discovered and described this effect in 1909, after asking people to continue to speak while he blasted large noises into their ears.

Within Heathrow's apparently shrinking noise footprint, there must be a network of Lombard veins. The map of these Lombard veins, branching out from the runways, would be the map of everybody's heroic

commitment to finishing their sentences at any cost, their semi-involuntary efforts to remain unsilenced, even for a few seconds, by the loudest vehicles they'll ever encounter.

Wheeled luggage pulled over the tiled floors of the corridors connecting transfer trains to terminals makes a minimalist clatter. In a group of eleven people pulling identical suitcases at varying speeds, the grind of circular plastic on flat ceramic billows through the underground air. Punctuating and sustaining the billow is a core of synchronised clacks caused by wheels going over the joins between tiles. As the speedier suitcases move ahead, the gaps between their clacks decrease, and two simultaneous statements emerge from the collective percussive luggage-voice.

Terminal 4's arrivals area is a small shopping centre with a low ceiling and a gleaming black baby grand piano and a vending machine that only sells Pringles. Between this vending machine and Caffè

Nero, a long ramp leads down into tunnels towards the stations for trains to other terminals and London. Many people go underground as soon as they arrive, descending a half-inch every step down this ramp until they're in the tunnel underneath the ground-level feet, out of sight but still sending twists of sound back up the ramp.

The piano clears its throat and begins to emit slow clusters of refrigerated chimes that diffuse through the swirl of wheel-grind and shoe-clop and the hot static of the coffee machine. The clusters sprout melodic bristles at their edges and soon these bristles merge into a continuous musical chug. For three or four minutes this self-renewing music trundles across the hard surfaces of the waiting area, pressing down upon the other sounds and blurring their intensities. Without announcing its ending the music ends, and immediately the sounds of anticipation and consumption and arrival re-emerge, mown.

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