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如何超越“小说模仿音乐”的旧争论 ——评格里·斯迈思的《英国当代小说中的音乐：倾听小说》

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摘要：格里·斯迈思的《英国当代小说中的音乐》是当代音乐与文学跨媒介研究的一次有益尝试。作者借助文化音乐学，揭示了当代英国小说如何通过音乐处理历史、怀旧、沉默与爱等主题，但由于其对音乐在小说中的社会使用与身份政治的强调，导致对小说在形式和结构上效仿音乐特性的分析相对薄弱。事实上，在理解音乐与小说的关系上，形式分析可以说是文化分析的基础维度，二者在批评实践中往往相互支撑。斯迈思的论述即是协调形式主义批评与文化历史主义批评的一个尝试。只有以整合代替对立，或许才能找到深化音乐—小说跨学科研究的新路径。

关键词：格里·斯迈思；《当代英国小说中的音乐：聆听小说》；形式主义；文化表征

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Title: How to Transcend the Long-Standing Debate over “Novels Imitating Music”: A Review of Gerry Smyth’s *Music in Contemporary British Fiction: Listening to the Novel*

Abstract: Gerry Smyth’s *Music in Contemporary British Fiction* represents a valuable attempt in the interdisciplinary study of music and literature. Drawing on cultural musicology, Smyth reveals how contemporary British fiction engages with themes such as history, nostalgia, silence, and love through music. However, due to his emphasis on music’s social use and identity politics, his analysis of how fiction formally and structurally imitates musical characteristics remains relatively

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underdeveloped. In fact, formal analysis can be seen as a foundational dimension of cultural analysis, and the two often support each other in critical practice. Smyth's work is an attempt to reconcile formalist criticism with cultural-historical criticism. Only by replacing opposition with integration can we deepen interdisciplinary research on music and the novel.

Keywords: Gerry Smyth; *Music in Contemporary British Fiction: Listening to the Novel*; formalism; cultural representation

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As an interdisciplinary researcher who holds multiple identities as a scholar, musician, actor, and playwright, Gerry Smyth works primarily in Irish cultural history, with a particular focus on Irish popular music, the modern novel, postcolonialism, and contemporary critical theory. His representative publications include, in addition to *Music in Contemporary British Fiction: Listening to the Novel* (2008)^②, *The Novel and the Nation* (1997) and *Noisy Island* (2005). *Listening to the Novel* combines theoretical construction with critical practice: it undertakes a systematic theoretical inquiry into the historical connections between music and the novel, and offers a comprehensive examination of music's role in the British novelistic tradition from the eighteenth century to the present, with special emphasis on the period 1990-2008.

Smyth's research position can be approached from two aspects. First, he explicitly establishes cultural musicology as the theoretical foundation of his method, drawing primarily on Lawrence Kramer's arguments about the "worldly" and "wordy" nature of music. Smyth does not treat music as a self-sufficient, silent, autonomous form; rather, he focuses on how music is described and discussed in the novelistic text and how it is continually mobilised within specific social and subjective discourses. As Smyth writes, "music inevitably speaks the language of those discourses within which it is invoked" (6). This position fundamentally distinguishes him from traditional approaches preoccupied with formal analysis and intermedial mimesis. Second, through the book's chapter organisation and case studies, Smyth systematically challenges both classical music centrism and the hierarchical classification of literary fiction. The second part of the book centres on a range of contemporary British popular music genres—folk, jazz, pop, rock, hip-hop, dance, and world music—discussed in parallel with novelistic subgenres from young adult fiction to crime writing. Smyth's analytical strategy is dialectical: each musical genre shapes the narrative logic of the novel that represents it, and each novelistic genre invests the music it depicts with

^② hereafter *Listening to the Novel*

specific textual meaning. In this way, *Listening to the Novel* transcends the traditional assumption that “serious” literary fiction deals with “serious” art music (142-143), and substantially broadens the research field.

Before Smyth, Lawrence Kramer had already pioneered a cultural-musicological approach to music and literature. Kramer’s key insight—that musical works possess discursive meanings which are inseparable from their formal processes—provides Smyth with the core argument against formalist autonomy. However, while Kramer’s classic analyses focus on the Austro-German art music tradition, Smyth explicitly shifts the corpus to contemporary British popular music and genre fiction. Another relevant figure is Stephen Benson, who in *Literary Music* (2006) proposes that the representation of music in fiction should be treated as primary evidence. Benson and Smyth share the same cultural-musicological resources, but Benson focuses on music’s construction of textual silence and performative tension, whereas Smyth is more concerned with music’s role in history, nostalgia, and collective memory. The most important contrast, however, is with Werner Wolf, whose *The Musicalization of Fiction* (1999) represents the formalist-intermedial tradition. Wolf carefully distinguishes different ways in which novels imitate musical structure (e.g., verbal music, analogies to sonata form). Smyth acknowledges the usefulness of Wolf’s toolkit but argues that purely formal analysis cannot account for cases where music is crucially important yet the novel does not aim to imitate musical form—for instance, Iain Banks’s rock-subculture novel. In short, Smyth’s *Listening to the Novel* is neither a Kramerian hermeneutics of art music, nor Benson’s internal aesthetic analysis, nor Wolf’s formalist taxonomy. It is an attempt to root interdisciplinary dialogue in contemporary British cultural contexts, striving for a more tension-filled relationship between cultural criticism and formal analysis.

Despite these significant contributions, Smyth’s strong focus on the social use of music and identity politics leads to certain analytical weaknesses. Judging from the book’s structure and spatial distribution, the first part devotes only about sixteen pages to “Music and Form,” whereas the second part (chapters three to five) turns entirely to cross-analyses of musical genres, novelistic genres, and themes such as history, nostalgia, silence, and love. Smyth explicitly calls himself a cultural historian rather than a literary critic, and he criticises Wolf’s formalism as too narrow. This self-positioning makes the book’s relative neglect of formal-structural imitation an inevitable one-sidedness. First, Smyth reduces formalist criticism to an easy target, overlooking that Wolf and others also attempted historical contextualisation. Second, while he acknowledges that music can “speak for itself”, his analysis consistently focuses on signs about music and rarely

discusses how acoustic structure, harmonic progressions, or rhythmic patterns independently affect readers or characters. Third, the term “British music novel” contains an inherent tension: Smyth admits that Britishness is a useful fiction, yet he does not adequately address the complex relationships among Scottish, Welsh, English, and transnational musics like jazz and hip-hop. Fourth, the book’s extraordinary range—from Laurence Sterne to Katie Price—often limits each case to thematic summary, lacking systematic close reading. Fifth, he discusses music’s consolation function at length but rarely questions whether this consolation conceals deeper social contradictions or ideological manipulation. Smyth’s analysis would have benefited from examining genres that refuse comfort and instead lay bare harsher realities.

Nevertheless, *Listening to the Novel* makes several indispensable contributions. First, it systematically dismantles the hierarchical assumption that “serious” fiction corresponds to “serious” music, placing folk, hip-hop, and dance music alongside genre fiction. This was particularly pioneering in 2008. Second, Smyth’s metaphor of “listening to the novel” introduces an auditory dimension into the visually oriented study of the British novel, directly challenging established critical habits. Third, through his cross-generic survey of themes such as nostalgia, silence, and love, he demonstrates how music operates as a site of identity politics and emotional resistance—a model that has proven influential for later intermedial research. In short, Smyth is a necessary “one-sided” pioneer: his overemphasis on cultural politics is precisely what opens up new terrain.

From a theoretical perspective, the reason formal analysis constitutes a fundamental dimension of cultural analysis lies in the basic logic of critical practice. Any interpretation of music’s meaning in fiction must be based on an accurate grasp of how that music is presented. Even within Kramer’s cultural musicology, he does not reject form but rather interprets form within multiple cultural contexts. In Smyth’s own critique of Wolf, he does not discard form; rather, he points out that a predominantly formalist approach neglects social use. Yet when Smyth analyses how the sonata form in Ian McEwan’s *Amsterdam* serves a satire of romanticism, he is in fact performing cultural criticism on the basis of formal analysis. Hence, formal analysis provides the underlying code of the text, while cultural analysis supplies an upper-level interpretation. The former is a necessary condition for the latter, not a competing alternative.

For this reason, Smyth’s argument can be understood as an attempt to reconcile formalism and cultural historicism—an attempt that, despite its imbalance, points toward a genuine path of integration. A concrete operational model can be formulated as a “formal marker → cultural

interpretation” circular framework. First, use formal analysis as the entry point: identify overt or covert imitation of musical structures in the novel (e.g., sonata form, counterpoint, rhythmic patterning, leitmotif). Second, ask what historical-social function these formal features serve: what structures of feeling, power relations, or identity politics do they enact? Third, allow cultural interpretation to refine the formal description, avoiding empty technical dissection. The analysis of McEwan’s *Amsterdam* is a case in point: one first recognises the sonata-like shape of the plot (exposition of characters’ rivalry, development of their moral decay, recapitulation in the final confrontation), then interprets this formal choice as a satirical commentary on romanticism and artistic pretension. Only within such an integrated perspective can the interdisciplinary study of music and the novel avoid both formalist technical dissection and unsociological impressionistic criticism. Smyth’s heuristic value lies precisely in his raising the issue of integration, while his weaknesses remind later researchers that formal analysis is by no means a dispensable starting point but rather an irreducible foundation for deepening interdisciplinary research.

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