

PARACOUSTICS: SOUND AND THE PARANORMAL edited by Steven T. Parsons and Callum E. Cooper. Hove, United Kingdom: White Crow Books, 2015. Pp. 309. \$17.99 (paperback); \$8.99 (Kindle). ISBN 978-1-910121-32-0.

Within the ranks of parapsychologists, researchers who study phenomena that are associated with claims of ghosts and hauntings are sometimes viewed as particularly controversial denizens of an already controversial field. In this environment, *Paracoustics: Sound and the Paranormal* should reassure readers that those who study anomalous sounds are serious in their intent and critical in their scholarship (notwithstanding the image of a ghost wearing headphones on the book's front cover).

Reports of paranormal activity are often associated with anomalous sounds that seem to have no physical source—unexplained rapping and banging, footsteps, breaths, shrieks, disembodied voices, whistles, and music. In *Paracoustics*, Parsons and Cooper have drawn together a collection of chapters that

review what is known about these kinds of anomalous sounds, as well as phenomena such as infrasound and electronic voice phenomena that cannot be heard by the unaided ear yet can be studied using electronic equipment. The book has an atypical structure, consisting of seven chapters by the editors, five chapters by other scholars, and appendices that consist of reprints of scholarly articles and brief methodological essays. In general, the book is exceptionally readable without being “dumbed-down.” Some of the published articles in the appendices may be difficult for readers without a research background, but even then the gist is clear.

In Section 1, Parsons leads off by providing readers with a brief primer on the physics of sound, followed by a chapter by Cooper on the psychology of auditory perception. Together, these chapters provide a useful introduction to acoustical concepts and the nature of hearing that provides a foundation for the rest of the book. After two chapters on the role of sound in hauntings (Parsons) and séances (Cooper), the editors collaborate on a history of research on electronic voice phenomena (EVP). Parsons then reviews research on the relationship between infrasound and subjective paranormal experiences, including his work with Ciaran O’Keeffe on the Acoustic Research Infrasound Detector and experimental studies of the effects of infrasound on subjective experience. Cooper concludes Section 1 with a chapter on cases in which people ostensibly receive telephone calls from individuals who could not have possibly made the call, either because they were deceased or were known to be otherwise occupied at the time.

In Section 2 of the book, Ann Winsper provides a chapter that focuses on the psychological characteristics of people who are more versus less likely to hear EVP voices in ambiguous recordings. Three chapters then examine three varieties of paranormal music—spontaneous music and melodious sounds (C. R. Foley), music that is heard at the time of death, either by the dying person or others who are present (Melvyn Willin), and music in shamanism, trance states, and spirit possession (Jack Hunter). The section concludes with a chapter by Barrie Colvin on the acoustic properties of anomalous rapping sounds. Colvin’s chapter (my personal favorite) shows that the waveforms of unexplained rapping sounds are quite different from raps that are produced in a conventional manner by striking two hard objects together. Whereas the waveform of an everyday knock shows maximum amplitude at the moment of initial impact that then quickly decays, the waveform of inexplicable rapping sounds shows an increase in amplitude to its maximum level, followed by a longer decay as well.

Section 3 presents reprints of five journal articles on the relationship between infrasound and hauntings (Parsons, 2012; Parsons & O’Keeffe, 2008; Tandy, 2000, 2002; Tandy & Lawrence, 1998), and three brief appendices in which Parsons offers practical advice for measuring ambient infrasound, recording and analyzing sound during paranormal investigations, and recording EVP. The book concludes with an extensive list of references and suggested readings.

By drawing together all of these topics within a single volume, the book establishes paracoustics as a distinct domain of study, which should attract the interest of both parapsychologists and amateur paranormal investigators. Every weekend “ghost hunter” would benefit from reading this book, both in terms of knowledge gained and exposure to the careful, critical, and measured approach that the authors generally take in discussing their topics. Although each of these phenomena has been discussed previously in its own right, much can be gained by considering them together.

Unfortunately, owing partly to its edited nature, the book does not delve as deeply into the possible connections among these topics as it might have, lacking an integrative, “big picture” analysis that draws connections among the various phenomena and poses questions for future work. Some of the individual authors speculate regarding possible processes—both mundane and parapsychological—that might produce the phenomena they discuss, but I finished the book wishing for more in the way of an integrative framework for thinking about anomalous sounds. In particular, little is said about whether the authors believe that various paracoustic effects reflect different processes or are mostly manifestations of the same thing. Of course, no one knows whether these experiences reflect similar or different processes, but readers would have benefitted from hearing the authors speculate on such questions.

By and large, the authors seemed to remain carefully agnostic regarding the causes of the phenomena they address, explicitly invoking “ghosts” or “spirits” as explanations on only a few occasions. When

dealing with such puzzling phenomena and so little data, I applaud authors who consider the merits of various explanations without giving the unwarranted impression that the issue has in any way been decided. At the most general level, the paracoustic phenomena examined in the book might arise from one or more of three broad categories of influences—mundane physical and psychological processes (such as the effects of infrasound on subjective experience or the effects of pareidolia on interpretations of EVP), parapsychological processes (ESP and PK), or disembodied consciousness. None of these explanations provides a parsimonious account for the full range of experiences described in the book, so readers need guidance about how to weigh the evidence and should be encouraged to suspend judgment until more is known. Certain authors seemed to accept evidence of paranormality at face value, while others seemed to dismiss it entirely because mundane explanations can explain some occurrences. From a scientific and logical standpoint, either conclusion seems premature.

Paracoustics succeeds on two different levels. In the hands of a parapsychologist, it provides a scholarly introduction to the role of sound in paranormal phenomena and fodder for theory and research on these topics. For the paranormal enthusiast and weekend investigator, the book provides an overview of interesting studies and cases that should prompt an informed, critical assessment of the auditory aspects of paranormal experience.

References

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