

Krsmanović, Ivana

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# SOUNDSCAPES OF SUBJECTIVITY, DESIRE AND VIOLENCE: A LACANIAN READING OF JENNIFER EGAN'S BLACK BOX

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**IVANA KRSMANOVIĆ**

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## **Abstract**

The article investigates the roles of and relations between violence and desire in Jennifer Egan's flash fiction "Black Box" (2012), with special attention to aspects of voice/sound, as theorized in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Read as an allegory of the processes within our psychological development, "Black Box" thematizes the problem of attaining subjectivity in its social context. The protagonist transitions from the pre-verbal narcissistic domain of the Imaginary, in which the subject-to-be emerges as both unified and alienated, to the predefined realm of the Symbolic, – a realm of culture, law and language. A strong analogy between the Lacanian theory of voice and the treatment of voice and sound in the story is exemplified in different narrative elements – characterization of the protagonists, narrative voices, and theme. Finally, the analysis shows that violence is inherent in both Self and the Other, as an essential attribute of identity formation.

## **Key words**

*Voice; sound; desire; violence; Jennifer Egan*

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If literary sound studies "examine the ways that literary writers textualize sound, hearing and listening, express the sound of their times, imbue the sound with meaning, and evoke noise" (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2013: 9), then exploring representations of sound in flash fiction means exposing how contemporary literary works contextualize sound within or in spite of their own intermediality, thus outgrowing the general literary tradition. To put it in Digi-vocabulary, it corresponds to inserting a #sound hashtag into the flash fiction research on sound and sonicity. Undoubtedly, what connects flash fiction and sound studies are modernity and interdisciplinarity within their respective fields, which make them both hybrid in nature. When discussing the history of short stories, Ailsa Cox suggests that "[s]hort fiction was at the heart of the modernist experiment" (Cox 2011: 1) through the works of many writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, although theoretically neglected for too long, a short story was commonly considered eccentric and experimental in nature (Patea 2012: 7–8), in comparison to other literary genres. Owing its popularity to the advent of print at the beginning

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a traditional short story was commonly published in magazines and other periodicals (Einhaus 2016: 5), aiming at reaching potential readers by what, at that time, looked like a grandiose conceptual shift in publishing literature. In the contemporary context, flash fiction, as the latest expression of the short story genre “expand[s] even further the original hybridity of the genre” (Patea 2012: 20) by introducing new alternatives and possibilities to both flash fiction’s production, reception and interpretation. Similarly, sound studies, although still a young field with many overlapping disciplines and diverse methods (Mieszkowski 2014), deal with modernity brought about by advances in science and technology which strongly affect the way sound is conceptualized and constructed. Much like a piece of flash fiction, which cannot be considered merely a short story but a separate genre shaped not only by itself but by various extraliterary elements as well, thus a “[s]ound is no longer just sound; it has become technologically produced and mediated sound” (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2013: 4).

Flash fiction as a sub-category of the short story (Shapard and Thomas 1986, xiii) emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a literary genre which adopted the temporality and materiality of contemporary digital technology and publication culture. Therefore, flash fiction features the ‘disruptive elements’ of the digital era; brevity, extreme shortness in length, and exclusivity of the medium of delivery to the readers. Nowadays, as the paper has been often replaced with the screen, and readers by followers, flash fiction introduced other changes to the field of e-literature; stories are delivered by less expensive modes of production and disseminated fast. In addition, the invention of hashtags as keywords search has allowed for better content visibility, whereas flash fiction’s non-linear form accounted for more interactivity between writers and readers. Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box” (2012), therefore, rightly belongs to what Mariusz Pizarski called “digital postmodernism”, a term coined to refer to e-literature which is “short in form, high-paced and fast-served” (2017: 41), and which is adapting itself from within in order to reach wider audiences.

Postmodernist flash fiction, although resonant of its generic particularities, has often been criticized as too unconventional in its hybridity, in the same way as Jacques Lacan’s approach to psychoanalysis (which shifted the field from modernity to postmodernity) has often been perceived as controversial and radical. However, it seems like more than ever careful a scrutiny of flash fiction as a non-normative literary genre and its treatment of sound in regard to Lacanian psychoanalysis is needed, which will transvalue the emerging literary field into a more comprehensive understanding of the tripartite postmodernist literary phenomenon – sound, flash fiction and psychoanalytic literary criticism.

### **“Black Box” and the Lacanian Psychoanalysis**

First published in 2012 as an experimental Twitter flash fiction narrative, Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box” has inspired much literary criticism. Thus, Egan’s story has been interpreted and explored from different perspectives by scholars focussing on different aspects of the story. One of these frame flash fiction as the experi-

mental narrative form media of production (Nie 2015); another re-conceptualizes the body as information (Precup 2016); or foregrounds temporality and serialization as characteristics of a short story in a post-digital tradition (Andersen 2017); one highlights how the story's narratological technique is concerned with identity and resistance to political and cultural oppression (Newman 2018), another interprets it as a dystopian story about the human experience in the digital age (Gutman 2020). So far, however, Egan's story has not been explored yet in relation to the Lacanian psychoanalytical framework and its treatment of sound, which appears paramount in understanding how a contemporary literary text thematizes the overall problem of subjectivity in its social context.

Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" is a suspenseful techno-thriller set in the near future, first delivered to readers in an easily navigable and "potentially noisy environment" (Nie 2015: 822) such as Twitter, sentence by sentence, from the @NYerFiction account over the span of 10 days with one tweet tweeted every minute for an hour. A series of 606 tweets was presented in a stream of disjointed sentences. The present-tense, second-person narration, although visually broken into incoherent segments, is narratively firmly grounded in the female protagonist's voice herself. As the story unfolds, the chorus of voices and sounds constructs the powerful, although obscure, soundscapes of unheard thoughts, onomatopoeic language, almost inaudible sounds and sounds of inanimate objects, most of whom revolve around the main protagonist. The protagonist is an unnamed spy (only later readers realize her name is Lulu)<sup>1</sup> who is recounting the story in the form of the 'mental dispatches', which become part of the narrator's 'Field Instructions' serving "as both a mission log and a guide for others undertaking this work" (Egan 2012:15). Readers learn that Lulu has been trained as a spy and that high-tech equipment has been implanted in her body by a national security department. The reasons for Lulu's anti-terrorist activity remain obscure: she volunteered for this operation as a 'citizen agent' (Egan 2012: 21) and is doing this work for the benefit of the USA. Towards the end of the story, Lulu is sent to the Mediterranean to steal some information from 'an enemy subject', referred to as the 'Designated Male' (Egan 2012: 2), who is suspected of somehow threatening American security. As Lulu goes undercover among the suspected terrorists, she keeps a mental log of events in her body, which is the "Black Box", without which her employers "have no record of what has happened on [her] mission" (Egan 2012: 38). In the suspenseful sequence of events, Lulu becomes 'the object of a power play' between the two criminals who rape her several times. The story ends with the scene of the protagonist being shot by another female, after which Lulu manages to flee in a speedboat from where the agency recovers her body by helicopter.

The connection between "Black Box" and Lacanian psychoanalysis is their specific attention to the concepts of voice and sound. As far as the literary text is concerned, the initial metaphor for the voice is found in the title of the story itself – the text refers to the black box, commonly known as a box found on board all aircraft, consisting of a voice recorder and a flight data recorder, used to help investigate reasons for a plane crash. As the story unveils, the voice/sound is additionally utilized as a structural element of the discourse, a means

of characterization, and a main motif of the narrative. As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, since its inception, this approach in psychology has treated the human voice as a phenomenon of the highest relevance. Be it the 'voice of consciousness', the hallucination experience of 'hearing voices' or a means of the talking practice as a cure, a voice has emerged as both 'a symptom and a gateway to the unconscious' (Laagaay 2008: 54). In other words, as Mladen Dolar states, to provide space for the voice and silence as the voice's reverse, has been one of the core objectives of psychoanalysis (Dolar 2006: 152). The voice appears to possess a 'fingertip quality' (Dolar 2006: 22), or is perceived as 'an acoustic mirror' (Dolar 2006: 40) which has no meaning that could be assigned to it, but is a 'residue, the remnant of the phonological operation' (Dolar 2006: 36). Indeed, this suggests that the voice, as a focal point for both the Lacanian psychoanalysis and the 'Black Box' narrative, can be utilized in order to expose to which extent these two can interpret each other.

In this article, I will investigate the concepts of voice and desire through a Lacanian reading of "Black Box" by interpreting the main aspects of the theory and applying it to the story. To interpret the literary text from a psychoanalytical perspective, I will especially base the analysis on Lacan's ideas of desire, the *objet petit a* and violence. The investigation into how we as social beings are constructed will be addressed by relying upon the Lacanian framework of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, as the major structures of the unconscious that control our lives and desires. Sound categories and aural conditions for the protagonist's transition to the Symbolic are understood as a means through which identity formation is experienced. Lastly, the paper will inspect the operations of desire and violence on the articulation of subjectivity.

### **Voices of Discord: Are you turning a deaf ear?**

Lacan's positioning of the voice as a psychoanalytical phenomenon of the highest relevance finds its parallel in the treatment of voice in the account of Lulu's spy mission. I argue that the narrative structure appears analogous to a subject's (more precisely of a subject-to-be) psychological passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order, and that sound categories such as the acousmatic, the voice, and language mediate and shape that transition. The first literary evidence of such a claim is the narrative voice itself. The narrative ambiguity of "Black Box" is illustrated by the lack of distinction between the character's and the narrator's discourses throughout the text, which exemplifies the Lacanian concepts of the 'speaking subject' (Selden et al 2005: 157) and the subject of the enunciation. In psychoanalytic terms, the pronoun 'I' (which can be equated with the ego) is ambiguous; that is, it is both a signifier acting as the subject of the statement, and an index which designates the subject of enunciation (Fink 1995: 37). In differentiating the two, Lacan argues that enunciation (the act of uttering the words), irrespective of the meaning of the utterance, belongs to the unconscious, which affirms that the source of speech is not the ego, but the unconscious. As "[t]he splitting of the 'I' into ego and unconscious brings into being a surface, in

a sense, with two sides: one that is exposed and one that is hidden” (Fink 1995: 45), the speaking subject is divided or split while articulating ‘I’ in its speech, and from the perspective of the speaker the unity in the speaking act itself is an illusion. This duality within the ‘speaking subject’ is personified in the “Black Box’s” narrating voices. Throughout the story, the narrator’s voice shifts from the omniscient narration in the second person structured as a self-reflective account of the past events, to the same voice entering an instructional tone of a manual. Even Lulu’s remarks to herself at difficult times are interrupted by other voices the source of which is difficult to detect: “We can’t promise that your lives will be exactly the same when you go back to them” (Egan 2012: 5). The proverbial character of the Instruction log statement “Ears must be kept clean at all times” (Egan 2012: 38) echoes a ‘trick of the trade’ notice, but it could have easily been misunderstood either as a narrator’s commentary or Lulu’s remark to herself. In fact, a strong pattern of brief, instructional sentences, which sound impersonalized and fabricated within the story-telling process, recalls the hidden side of Lulu’s ‘I’, so that, towards the end of the story, a semantic conflict emerges from the subtle transitions from the narrator’s utterances and the protagonist’s voice. This narrative technique reflects the gap between what Lulu thinks for herself and what the narrator’s voice tells. Apart from the occasional dialogues, Lulu does not emerge as a ‘speaking subject’; in other words, there is no first-person narration.

Within the narrative structure, it is the protagonists’ characterization that exposes the two opposing worlds of the story, the world of the Symbolic and the world of the Imaginary. Unlike the Imaginary which is constituted by an infant’s constant perception of a blissful unity with its mother, the Symbolic order is a collection of codes and distinctions embodied in language and culture, the domain of society, which expands the child’s experience of existence (Hook 2006: 60–70). On the one hand, the Symbolic is personified in Lulu’s patriarchal marriage, her employers and colleagues, other citizens, and finally her job and her country. On the other hand, the Imaginary is personified in Lulu – the alienated main protagonist surrounded by images of people and objects, and overwhelmed with sounds. The Imaginary quality of Lulu’s world, which abounds with images and sensory stimuli, is contrasted with the Symbolic, from the first lines of the story. The story opens with a focus on senses, starting with the visual: “People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you’ve seen pictures” (Egan 2012: 1). In Lacanian terms, the Imaginary order as an infant’s earliest experience is constituted by a constant perception between identities and images, as the subject perceives images as vital extensions of itself (Hook 2006: 61). Lulu’s initial sense of identity is limited to visual impressions, as suggested by her capacity to focus on ‘perceiving and projecting’ (Egan 2012: 1). Furthermore, Lulu perceives other people as characterless images: all the females she encounters are referred to as ‘Beauties’, and there is no evidence in the text that other characters, including her husband and father, have names. Lulu’s classification of others is based on previously established social relationships (a husband, a father, a mother). In the Lacanian sense, Lulu’s incapacity to name people is due to the failure of the signifier to function as a naming concept. In other words, while within the Imaginary

domain, a child cannot master the unstable relationship between the signifier and the signified (Hook 2006: 66), and it remains beyond the grasp of the language. Finally, as her name is never mentioned in the text, Lulu's non-naming of people does not exclude herself, which concurs with Lacan's idea that a child perceives itself to exist through the identities and images it encounters in the surrounding environment.

The story provides illustrations of Lulu's existence in the Imaginary realm, which is characterized by her social excludedness and absence of communication. To Lulu, the representatives of the Symbolic order (the public realm represented in her employers, criminals and their girlfriends) sound delusional and almost threatening, so that she experiences verbal or social interaction coming from the 'outer' world as inadequate or excessive, as illustrated in the Instruction log statement: "You need not identify or comprehend the language your subject is using" (Egan 2012: 13). For example, Lulu perceives her female colleagues as 'frenemies' who speak "at high volume in an unfamiliar language" (Egan 2012: 36), and she finds their utterances not only meaningless, but openly distracting. Frequently throughout the text, she defines them as a noise registered within an "earshot of conversation" (Egan 2012: 33). As the story progresses, Lulu's incapacity to communicate with others is illustrated in rare male-female dialogues in which the utterances seem so incomprehensible that they have to be interpreted: "You are a lovely girl may be meant straightforwardly. Ditto I want to fuck you now" (Egan 2012: 6). Apart from the communication obstacles mentioned above, the restricted social interactions with the people inside and outside of Lulu's family reinforce her position within the Imaginary. Her sense of existence remains within the realm of silence and alienation.

Lulu's sensory sensitivity reiterates her being in the position of an infant, who is still stuck in the palpatory, pre-discursive reality: almost exclusively, Lulu's soundscapes encompass objects and her experiencing them engages her auditory sense. Thus, the Mission Data "leave[s] ringing in [her] ears" (Egan 2012: 36) which provokes "disability of hearing alarms" (Egan 2012: 38), implying temporary deafness. Similarly, a helicopter noise is "inherently menacing" (Egan 2012: 44) to her, whereas she senses a boat "vibration [...] trembling up through the soil" (Egan 2012: 28) and hears that "bullets whistle" (Egan 2012: 37). As an infant absorbed within its perpetual circle of self exchange of impulses, Lulu is captivated and fascinated by sounds, which allows for a constant transposition of her sensory experience. Finally, Lulu's auto-affection, as a self-experience, will have her vulnerably exposed once her inner voice is unleashed: "[t]he Primal Roar is the human equivalent of an explosion, a sound that combines screaming, shrieking and howling" (Egan 2012: 38). This non-verbal voice recalls archetypal, primitive sediments of the psyche. In addition, Lulu's narcissistic position within the Imaginary is confirmed by her childlike behaviour, ignorant and imperceptible to any difference between herself and the world. Being in the Imaginary, means being in the pre-Oedipal world of narcissistic identifications and mirror reflections (Hook 2006: 61). In Lacanian terms, children, when they are within the Imaginary, usually identify with similar reflections of themselves, the 'images' of other children (Hook 2006: 62). Lulu recognizes herself as one of the 'Beau-

ties' and identifies herself with them both visually and in an auditory sense: she "mirrors" (Egan 2012: 9) the attitudes of the Designated male and does what a child would do – she takes a nap (Egan 2012: 12), has long showers, changes her clothes often (Egan 2012: 16) and enjoys tasty meals (Egan 2012: 18). Although she admits she easily satisfies her "childish attention-seeking" (Egan 2012: 21), Lulu consumes her food "by ripping the bird apart with [her] hands and sucking the meat from the bones" (Egan 2012: 18). Such a behavioural repertoire is a typical of infancy, especially the oral phase, as the initial psychosexual stage in infant's development.

Another indicator that Lulu resides in the Imaginary, is that Lulu's child-like behaviour belongs to the auditory. Giggling, as one of the most common sound-related activities associated with children and immature adults, appears to be Lulu's behavioural trait, the one she frequently exhibits as a substitute for speech. As she finds giggling "sometimes better than answering" (Egan 2012: 6), she reminds herself that at times of discomfort "[a] giggle and a look of incomprehension are a beauty's most reliable tools" (Egan 2012: 24). In terms of characterization, Lulu's voiced but speechless giggle, a remainder of the Imaginary and the voice of unconscious, camouflages her feelings and thoughts. However, within a psychoanalytical framework, giggles imply that there might be something more beneath the allegedly brave and sexy figure of the spy-beauty Lulu. Giggling, a "paradoxical manifestation of language" as Mladen Dolar defines it, is the amalgamation of the highest and lowest, culture and physiology (Dolar 2006: 29), and is basically very close to hiccups, slips of the tongue and coughs. Giggling, as well as speech impediments, all correspond to the subject's resistance, and are considered the evidence of the drive, taking over the analysand's speech to protect it from what must not be thought (Hallsby 2018: 3). Once she acknowledges that the Designated Male suggests "a preference for direct verbal responses over giggling" (Egan 2012: 6), as if the Symbolic order strongly pushes her to use a language instead, Lulu takes the path from the self-absorption to the realm of language and culture. What exemplifies Lulu's childlike behaviour, as evidence that she resides within the Imaginary, is her excessive interest in herself, often realized through her sonic experience of herself. For example, as an infant would often do, Lulu experiences fear or discomfort as a sound of her own "gasp" (Egan 2012: 26) or hears "the shallow bleating of [her] breath" (Egan 2012: 46). Not rarely, her "abrupt awakening may feel like a reaction to the sound" (Egan 2012: 33) after "having heard something inaudible" (Egan 2012: 26), a similar reaction one could see in infants.

### **Lessons learned: Écouter aux voix intérieures (listen with your inner voices)**

The narcissistic nature of relations in the Imaginary represents an impasse for the subject, and for that reason, Lulu needs to escape "a kind of closed circuit" (Hook 2006: 62) and undergo a mirror-stage experience. As Lacan argued, the mirror-stage is a developmental process within the Imaginary order, which occurs when an infant sees its reflection in the mirror and suddenly grasps the idea of



the visual projection of itself (Hook 2006: 61). More precisely, at this transformative moment, the child perceives itself as a distinct, physical body existing in the environment. Lacan insists that this “identification is crucial, because without it the child would never be able to view itself as a whole self” (Homer 2005: 25). However, this identification comes at a price: the child recognizes a coherent vision of its own Self-image in the reality of its physical body and falls in love with it, while it simultaneously experiences conflict and hateful relations with these images, feeling aggressive and alienated. This duality in the awareness of both Self and the Other produces “a rivalry over which is the self and which is the other, which is the ego and which is the replica” (Gallop 1985: 62). Thus, the mirror image splits in two. Through the repeated encounters with its mirror reflections, the child accumulates the notions of its dualistic self-images which pattern the sense of its identity. Yet, that sense of identity is based on a false vision of itself (misrecognition); an infant identifies with something it wants to be but it is also feeling that it can never measure up to the mirror image, and becomes jealous of it. This moment is defined as the emergence of the ego. The ego (or ‘ideal I’) is formed within the Imaginary order because the child refuses to accept the thought of alienation (fragmentation). The function of the ego is to maintain the illusion of the wholeness.

The turning point of Lulu’s transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, or, more precisely, her mirror-stage experience, which transforms her, occurs just after the Designated male rapes her. The significance of this metamorphosis was emphasized beforehand, in the introductory scene in which the Designated male shows interest in Lulu’s childhood: “*Where did you grow up?*”, asked of a man who has just asked you the same thing, is known as ‘mirroring’,” (Egan 2012: 9). The term ‘mirroring’ brought upon by the narrator is suggestively contrasted with Lulu’s formative years, and it introduces the theme of Lulu’s setting off to pursue the wholeness of a being. As if she were an infant confronted with a crucial stage in its psychological development, Lulu is overwhelmed with a “false notion of [her] identity and purpose” (Egan 2012: 2), anticipating that this journey will “deliver a strong self-lecture” (Egan 2012: 5). By ‘mirroring’ her own actions in the behaviour of the ‘Beauties’ she encounters, Lulu’s identification with her mirror-image occurs through a transitory object such as the moon:

A bright moon can astonish, no matter how many times you have seen it. If you were a child who loved the moon, looking at the moon will forever remind you of childhood. Fatherless girl may invest the moon with a certain paternal promise. Everyone has a father. (Egan 2012: 19)

This passage marks a turning point in Lulu’s mirror-stage phase, during which she realizes that “our notorious narcissism is our camouflage” (Egan 2012: 21), and that her ‘coming into being’ must additionally engage her strength to re-define the role of her father in her life, re-question the purpose of her job and re-examine her overall position in relation to the social reality. The diligent and time-consuming work on re-defining one’s identity through critical introspection is difficult since, as the narrator dictates, it “can change the fit and feel of your

adulthood” (Egan 2012: 19) and leave the person engaging in the process “irreparable” (Egan 2012: 19). Upon the first mention of the moon (which coincides with the first rape), Lulu’s reminiscing about her childhood started revolving around her being a “fatherless girl”. Having found out that she is an unacknowledged offspring of a late celebrity with seven children from three different marriages (Egan 2012: 19), Lulu decides the moon is well worthy of acting as a replacement for such an important figure she was deprived of in her formative years. Further on, the moon will take place of the paternal metaphor, its proximity and strength of illumination being critically important in the formative perspective of attaining subjectivity. The love/hate relationship Lulu would have had with her father had she been brought up by him, recalls the conflictual nature of the emerging self conveyed in the misrecognition in the mirror-stage: Lulu apprehends the moon as her “Personal Calming Source” (Egan 2012: 20) while, at the same time, she admits: “At times, you may wish to avoid the moon” (Egan 2012: 32). Likewise, Lulu’s undergoing the identity transition changes who she is, in spite of her participating but not being aware of the complexity of the process: “[t]he moon may appear to move, but really it is you who are moving” (Egan 2012: 21). In other words, the transitioning object such as the moon enables Lulu to emerge as the ego: rivalrous, aggressive and alienated. Finally, in order to complete her personal Oedipal drama, Lulu needs to redefine her Imaginary position in relation to her mother and her father first.

The source of Lulu’s desire stems from her own fixation within her mother’s desire. To understand desire, which is inseparable from, yet not identical to lack, in Lacanian terms, one must first examine the nature of what is lacking. First of all, it is important to understand that whatever is found lacking has never been not-lacking and will, on top of that, always remain elusive. The void left in the subject will, therefore, always remain unfilled. In spite of desire being beyond articulation, it articulates itself through demand seeking fulfilment, which is never to be fully realized. The impossibility of satisfying desire first occurs during a child’s infancy and stems from the primary repression of the desire for the (m) other. Early in the child’s life, with the first absence of the mother (first Other), who desires something which remains outside the child’s reach, the child realizes that there is something beyond itself. What the mother desires is a phallus, the imaginary object of the mother’s desire (Sheikh 2017: 3), a signifier of desire, possessed by the father. However, once the child realizes that it will never be the exclusive object of its mother’s desire, due to not having/being (Hook 2006: 75) a phallus, and that it will forever remain incomplete, the child seeks to identify with the object of the mother’s desire. If the child gives up the attempt to be the phallus, the Oedipus complex will get successfully resolved (the equivalent of the castration process completes), and the child reaches the entry into the Symbolic grasping the fundamental operations of language: “the entry into language is itself a form of castration” (Hook 2006: 68). In Lacanian terms, the name of the father, or a paternal metaphor is what establishes the law of the Other and provides the ground for the rise and development of desire. Paradoxically, the phallus will always remain a signifier of both lack (what a child does not have) and desire (what the mother desires). Desire always remains the desire of the Other,

which implies that we want to be desired by the Other and that we learn to desire what we think is desired by the Other.

In the Lacanian sense, Lulu's notion that "everyone has a father," but that she is a "fatherless girl" indicates that she has experienced a lack of a father figure and wishes to fill the void caused by her father's absence in her early years. In that context, the account of Lulu's having been deprived of a father figure reveals the nature of her desire and helps us better understand her position within a complex mother-father-child scheme. Unable to form a marital unity with her father, Lulu's mother concealed the truth of Lulu's paternity telling her that her father had died before she was born (Egan 2012: 19). The bitter truth of the "paternity discovered in adulthood" (Egan 2012: 19) was not "a comfort" (Egan 2012: 19) to Lulu, so she used to sit and watch her father's movies from the beginning of his career (Egan 2012: 19). While watching her father on the screen, Lulu projects his presence and addresses him within her Instruction log's 'inner voice': "You may think, watching said movies, You don't know me, but I am here [...] I am invisible to you, but I am here" (Egan 2012: 19). Thus, a strong feeling of alienation and inferiority in relation to her father makes Lulu apprehend what her mother desired. Put in Lacanian terms, Lulu seeks to identify with the object of the mother's desire, which is a marriage or a family union with Lulu's father. However, she realizes she can not 'incarnate' the phallus for her mother and provide her with a harmonious family relationship. In the context of the story, as the operations of the symbolic phallus disrupted the harmonious symbiosis between her mother and herself, Lulu's aspirations to become the mother's object of desire expired, the authority of the father is established and Lulu undergoes the Oedipus complex so that the equivalent of castration has been completed. It marks the separation from the mother and Lulu's entrance into the public world.

Lulu's entrance into the Symbolic is exemplified in the nature of her job and the relationship with her husband, which I argue is a substitution for her *objet petit a* (which stands for *object little a*, 'a' meaning 'autre' or other, and which translates as the object-cause of desire). Like the phallus in the Imaginary, *objet petit a* is essentially a signifier for desire, but, in a more general sense, belongs to the Symbolic order. Lacan's *objet petit a* can be defined, in simple terms, the cause of desire, as the quality which makes an object desirable. The true cause of the subject's desire is not the physical object which they think they desire, but the unattainable phallic quality of the object. The subject of desire is always chasing after their *objet petit a* which is "their demand for surplus love from the Other never being fully answered and the subjects must find substitute objects [...]to alleviate stress" (Hallsby 2018: 13). In other words, it is from the desire to regain the lost object (the phallus), that the subject is attracted to the *objet petit a*. As the Symbolic order is the domain in which a subject is forced to align its identity within the predetermined framework of existing social positions, Lulu chose to integrate into the social world by finding the job of a secret agent and by marrying a man who does the same job. However, Lulu's *objet petit a* is not her job or her husband, but that what they actually represent – the phallic quality which makes them desired by her. The void Lulu is seeking to fill is her deep feeling of inferiority and alienation, triggered by the lack of her father's love and

support. Her father's popularity and success in the movie business influenced her choice of profession which is best illustrated in her attempts to recreate herself as "a potential hero" (Egan 2012: 21) in the activities of establishing a new national identity or the "the new heroism" (Egan 2012: 21). Concerning her husband, his admiration and support emerged to Lulu as the best alternative to her father's, which is confirmed by the scenes of Lulu's husband acting as a companion who "understands and applauds (her) patriotism" (Egan 2012: 15) while participating with her in her heroic mission. However, towards the end of the story the substitutes Lulu pursued as the *objet petit a* proved to be inadequate and unsatisfactory along the way – a quasi-heroic profession which exposed her to violence neither secured the feeling of dominance and superiority for her, nor helped her feel liberated. Yet, in Lacanian terms, where there is object, there is anxiety (Hook 2015), so it is inevitable that we as subjects embrace our anxieties and helplessness and move forward. It only confirms the Lacanian idea that our desires are revealed through the search for the desire itself – the actual activity of desiring, but the substitutions never manage to fully respond to our desires.

### Sanctity of silence and escalating voices: violence and language

Central to the Lacanian reading in the context of Lulu's transition to the Symbolic and attaining subjectivity is understanding the role of violence and language in such a transition, and their interconnectedness within the process. For that reason, I argue that there is a strong parallel between the significance of violence in the Lacanian framework of human psychological development and the violent acts in Lulu's reaching subjectivity. Thus, Egan's incorporation of violent scenes in the narrative is consistent with the general idea of this paper that "Black Box" exemplifies the process of subject-formation in which aural conditions for the protagonist's transition are understood as a means through which identity formation is experienced.

With this story, Egan thematizes the concept of violence and aggressive behaviour as an extremely complex phenomenon essentially found in many spheres of human existence. To illustrate this idea I can mention that, as remarked before, the representatives of the Symbolic world around Lulu all resort to violent acts or are being described in relation to the negative connotation; the Designated male Lulu is being sent after by the agency is "widely feared" (Egan 2012: 2) due to his being "violent and ruthless" even in "such basic things as his swim-stroke" (Egan 2012: 4); Lulu's mission targets are described as "the violent rich" (Egan 2012: 39), whereas the narrator addresses criminals' actions as "coordinated violence" (Egan 2012: 30). Additionally, violence emerges in the fact that, as the narrator dictates, traumatic sexual encounters were expected in the job of a secret agent, so that a 'Dissociation Technique' to escape such situations had been available, but "only when physical violence is imminent" (Egan 2012: 8). However, an opposition of violence is provided in the scene of Lulu's urge to locate resilience within herself, as an adequate response to violence and aggression she was exposed to:

The moon shines everywhere. The moon can seem as expressive as a face. Human beings are fiercely, primordially [sic] resilient. In uneasy times, draw on the resilience you carry inside you. (Egan 2012: 29)

In this particular section, the narrator dictates that resilience is a constitutive element of all beings, and, if necessary, it should be awoken and utilized accordingly. However, the 'uneasy times', in Lacanian terms, are rather frequent and they are characterized by numerous repetitions of conflict; firstly, the evidence of conflict is found in the mirror-stage, in which a self exists in a state of unrest, as a result of an unresolved encounter with the Other; secondly, in a realm of narcissistic identification as "a domain of rivalry and aggressivity" (Hook 2006: 61); thirdly, in the symbolic castration process in which a child experiences repression, conflict and fear imposed by the father's threat to the child's desire for mother; and finally, in the process of child's entry into the Symbolic in relation to language: "It is language itself which pushes our desire beyond its proper limits [...] elevating it into an absolute striving that can never be satisfied" (Žižek 2008: 65). The latter especially implies that violence through language is comprised in the (repressed) desire to speak even though the filling the void can never be secured. On the societal level, the tension aroused by a father in a child is reflected in the relation between citizens and the state that represents authority, so violence varies from implicated (grounded in the subject as innate from birth) and non-implicated (carried out as collective acts). Clearly, the repetition of violent acts as elements of the Egan's narrative are, thus, analogous to the repeated encounters of the 'ideal I' with the mirror, the repeated tensions and rivalry between the subject and the ego, the subject and the other. Repetition as such, being fundamental to the operations of the unconscious, is derived from 'repetition compulsion' in which the subject experiences unwanted symptoms (Hallsby 2018: 11) and helps a subject achieve mastery over alienation. Indeed, repression is at the heart of psychoanalysis – it is exposed in other psychoanalytic concepts such as incest prohibition, unconscious repressed thoughts, and resistance found in parapraxes (Hallsby 2018: 4).

The final stage in Lulu's coming into being, as a violent transition from the pre-linguistic to verbal, is her entry into language. It occurs in one of the final scenes in which she finds herself "cornered or outnumbered" (Egan 2012: 38) and ready to release her 'Primal Roar'. For Lacan, one only properly becomes a subject after one acquires language (Hook 2006: 66). The language itself presents a form of castration because it introduces a kind of alienation in the language just as there was in the image (Hook 2006: 69). This means that the Lacanian subject is divided and alienated with the ever-present gap between what we intend to say and what we actually said (Hook 2006: 69). Due to the Lulu's entering a language she unleashes her Primal Roar, which "is the human equivalent of the explosion, a sound that combines screaming, shrieking and howling" (Egan 2012: 38). The confirmation that Lulu transitioned to the Symbolic is also illustrated in her untypical body movements and physical transformation from a 'beauty' (her Mirror-image) to a monster (subject), so that she was completely altered to

fit the world of the Symbolic: “The Primal Roar must be accompanied by facial contortions and frenetic body movement, suggesting a feral, unhinged state. The Primal Roar must transform you from a beauty into a monster” (Egan 2012: 38). It is only at the end of the story that she finally aspires to speak. Speaking, as well as hearing, both closely connected to sonicity, indicate that the identity acquiring comes through sound, so aural experience appears as a privileged source of knowledge, or, as Novak and Skakeeney put it:

To ‘hear’ a person is to recognize their subjectivity, just as to ‘have a voice’ suggests more than the ability to speak or sing, but also a manifestation of internal character, even essential human consciousness. Sound, then, is a substance of the world as well as a basic part of how people frame their knowledge about the world. (Novak and Sakakeeny 2015: 6–7)

The climax of Lulu’s secret mission coincides with the climax of Lulu’s transitioning. Egan’s story culminates with the scene of Lulu’s approaching death. Threatened with actual dying, after having been shot, Lulu forces herself to remain in the “semi-conscious state” (Egan 2012: 42), which alludes to the Lacanian idea that the Imaginary, although silenced, still continues to exist along with the Symbolic, and that the individual is forever split (unified and alienated) between an eternal and external notion of self. Summarizing the thrilling story of Lulu’s coming into being, the narrator suggests that Lulu’s endeavour requires some considerable effort; “Experience leaves a mark, regardless of the reasons and principles behind it” (Egan 2012: 39). As an outcome of such unpleasant (violent) venture, Lulu’s reaching the fullness of being within the Symbolic marks the re-birth of a subject whose existence in the domain of culture and law is yet to commence. The narrator’s dictum “the fact that you are dying doesn’t mean that you will die” (Egan, 2012: 43) implies that factual death is psychologically as important as birth, but that in relation to ‘dying’ in one psychological register, to be ‘born’ in the other means that there is a possibility of a new, altered existence. Such a possibility should be neither ignored nor denied, but it should be viewed as a goal worth achieving. Yet, before she *does not* die, Lulu must uncover the root cause of her desire and reconcile with her mother: “The wish to tell your mother that you forgive her is yet another reason you must make it home alive” (Egan 2012: 43). Finally, Lulu’s language as the most significant exponent of a subject’s entry into the Symbolic will be born – Lulu will come *home* and she will *tell* her mother that she forgave her.

## Conclusion

Read as an allegory of the processes within our psychological development, Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box” thematizes the problem of attaining subjectivity in its social context. A human being, as exemplified by Lulu, transitions from the pre-verbal narcissistic domain of the Imaginary, in which the subject-to-be emerges as both unified and alienated, to the predefined realm of the Symbolic – a realm

of culture, law and language. Such a transition to the acquired identity is accomplished by the repressive, violent work of the psyche in relation to the acceptance of the Other and re-defining the object-cause of the desire, admittedly at a high cost. A strong analogy between the psychoanalytic theory of voice and the treatment of voice in the account of Lulu's spy mission is epitomized in different segments of the story – narrative voices, characterization of the protagonists, and the main motif. The story represents Lulu's predominantly aural existence in the Imaginary realm, which is characterized by her social excludedness, absence of communication, childlike behaviour and sensory sensitivity. Finally, the analysis shows that violence is inherent in both Self and the Other, as an essential attribute of many psychological processes in our development.

“Black Box”s’ engagement with sound indicates how a soundscape can amount to a self-revealing experience of the protagonist’s identity formation or ontology, in the societal context. Jonathan Sterne proposes that “[t]o think sonically is to think conjuncturally about sound and culture” (Sterne 2012: 3), whereas Novak and Sakakeeny perceive sound as a phenomenon that “resides in [the] feedback loop of materiality and metaphor, infusing words with a diverse spectrum of meanings and interpretations” (Novak and Sakakeeny, 2015: 1). These two definitions of sound and its functions infer that aurality cannot be relevantly theorized without inclusion of the whole spectrum of diverse sounds, from spoken or onomatopoeic language, to the acousmatic, to sound emanating from inanimate objects, but also to hearing and interpreting those sounds, in a wider societal or even ontological contexts. To understand sound as a ‘metaphor’ means to acknowledge not only the nature of sound, but also its dimensions and the reference it makes to us in its particularity. Bruce Johnson uses Steve Feld’s term ‘acoustemology’, which means ‘knowing through sound’, to pinpoint how important gaining knowledge through sound is: “It reminds us that the field of sound studies raises epistemological issues” (Johnson 2017: 9). In the context of Egan’s flash fiction, what constitutes a soundscape around Lulu’s quest for identity is not a mere sound or a voice per se, but a set of sonic experiences in relation to sound, the voice and language, which mediate and shape her transitioning. Sound, as demonstrated above, is understood as a privileged source of knowledge about the Self and the Other. In that sense, Egan’s flash fiction narrative “Black Box” is an invaluable contribution of contemporary flash fiction to illuminating sound studies.

The Lacanian psychoanalysis, the article shows, is an adequate source of knowledge that can engage with literary sound studies adding to the scholarship in an informed manner. In Lacanian terms, human culture is defined as opposing the biological sphere of human existence, and human subjectivity can exclusively be sustained within the framework of language and culture. A literary text, as a written exponent of human culture in a general sense, plays a pivotal role in constructing invaluable resources for shaping a value-based and informed society. Finally, through a Lacanian blueprint of human existence, we can examine the artistic capacity of literature to participate in the debate on how we as humans function, but not as an alternative to the framework of psychoanalysis, but as a relevant and meaningful complement. Contemporary literature research radically chang-

es and expands our understanding of how we, as humans, are constructed in relation to Self and Other – as fragmented subjects of lack and repression – and its epistemological character should not be ignored. Interpreting literature with the tools of psychoanalysis can be utilized to re-examine and valorize the position of a subject within the Symbolic, which demonstrates the enormous potential of contemporary literature to provide fresh perspectives on important questions of human existence. Sound, as this article argues, plays a major part in it.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lulu is a character from Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning work of fiction *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010).

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IVANA KRSMANOVIĆ is a professor of English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak, University of Kragujevac, where she currently serves as a Chair of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. She holds a PhD in eighteenth-century English literature, from the University of Belgrade. As a scholar who acknowledges the contemporary multimodality of the Humanities, she is interested in mapping the interconnections among the triad of language, literature, and digital reality. Her research interests include British Romanticism, from the perspectives of archetypal literary criticism, Hybrid pedagogy and technology. She has also published extensively on various segments of Computer-assisted Language Learning in ESP, and Foreign Language Acquisition.

Address: Ivana Krsmanović, Faculty of Technical Sciences Čačak, Svetog Save 65, 32000 Čačak, Serbia. [email: [ivana.krsmanovic@ftn.kg.ac.rs](mailto:ivana.krsmanovic@ftn.kg.ac.rs)]



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