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SOUND: ITS NATURE IN CINEMA

A talk by Arun Khopkar at the FTII on the 22nd March, 2010, at 5.00 p. m.

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Dedication

I am honoured to be invited to speak here on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Film and Television Institute of India.

I would like to dedicate this talk to the memory of two of my great teachers: Ritwik Ghatak and Bhaskar Chandavarkar. Apart from making immense contributions to the field of sound through their creative work, they were passionate teachers and laid the foundations of innovative practice associated with the FTII. They showed us that creative practice and creative thinking must go hand in hand.

As Ritwikda had put it, “Carpenters and Brahmins must evolve a common language.” He was a master craftsman as his films show us and he was an Upanishadic teacher, where you sat near him, under the Wisdom Tree here. One of the meanings of the word upa-ni-shad comes from sitting near or sitting at the feet of the master. You did that and struggled to absorb his pan-focal vision of the world. Even in his film he liked to use deep focus which put vast spaces in sharp focus.

Bhaskar’s music room, Jalsaghar, was next to the wisdom tree, where we heard music from all over the world and also learnt about his latest compositions for that all-time great Indian opera, Ghashiram Kotwal, even before he put them on the stage. Bhaskar gave us words to speak about sound and its design, precisely and meaningfully, sans verbiage. He was a pioneer of serious analysis and articulation about the film sound and music as is seen in his writings on music and sound.

Their teaching was neither confined to the four walls of the classroom, nor restricted by some notions of a syllabus. In fact, they did not teach in the conventional sense of the term. As the old saw goes, whatever can be taught is not

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worth learning. They created a charged atmosphere which would electrify you. And the charge stayed with you for a lifetime.

The suggested subject of my talk was 'Sound and its Future in Indian Cinema.' But what I am presenting here is 'Sound and its Nature in Cinema'. The change is simply due to my inability to be able to speculate about the future in times, where every day brings great technological advances and changes of orientation, in the use of sound in general, and in its application to cinema in particular. Predictions today would be as hazardous as building a sand castle on a beach when a storm is about to break.

I have preferred to investigate the terra firma of what has happened and is happening in sound in cinema and analyze it. The ideas I am suggesting here are more of a stimulant for a debate than claiming absolute or even relative validity. Agreement and disagreement are not of great importance because, even to disagree you need to agree about what is a valid way to disagree. What we need is a valid way to disagree, with mutual respect.

Cinema as a sound art

I am neither a futurologist nor a sound recordist/engineer to speak on the nature or future of sound in cinema. I am a filmmaker believing that cinema is an audio-visual art with equal emphasis on the both parts of the hyphenated adjective 'audio-visual'.

Even a phrase like 'equal emphasis' does not adequately describe my viewpoint. For it may suggest a mechanical addition of the audio part and a visual part. No, the view I represent and present here, holds that when they come together expressively, something emerges that cannot be contained in either the audio component or the visual component. It is really a new creation, like a newborn child, that does not just add up the features of its parents, but has its own personality. Michel Chion is one of the most original thinkers about sound and he is going to be our companion in our exploration. He uses a phrase *un art sonore, le cinema,* which Claudia Gorbman, his translator translates as *Film, a sound art.*[1]

Surround sound and the prenatal experience

1 Film, A Sound Art, Michel Chion, tr. Claudia Gorbman, Columbia Univ. Press, 2009. In fact, Chion's earlier book, Audio-Vision, Sound on screen, tr. Claudia Gorbman, Columbia Univ. Press, 1994, establishes the importance of sound to cinema in a convincing manner.

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Sound is one of the earliest senses to develop when we grow up from a fertilized ovum into a human being. As we lie in our mother's womb, we sense the world through sound, about four months before we are subjected to the traumatic experience of light. We are thrust into the visible world outside and to which we respond with a cry and a scream.

The prenatal experience, as well as the trauma of our birth, though we have no conscious memory of it, is one of the decisive factors in shaping our personalities. It stays with us, unconsciously, shapes our desires, fantasies, traumas, phobias and lives. The compressed passage of nine months through millions of years of evolution is within us like circuitry that we do not see or sense, but runs us.

While we lie in the mother's womb, we have no cares of food or anything for that matter. We float in a fluid that gives us experience of weightlessness, a feeling that only astronauts have experienced after millennia of constant pull of gravity. The circular space in which we float is directionless. All categories of experience like inside/outside, up/down, left/right have yet to emerge, as we float in the shunya, hearing our mother's heartbeat, the first percussion instrument that teaches us that life is all rhythm and sound. It may be this experience which makes Walter Murch say that 'There is something feminine about sound's liquidity and all-encompassing embrace that might make it more accurate so speak of Sound as a Queen rather than a king.'[2]

The world begins with our sensing and organizing the sounds internal to mother's body and her voice heard from within. In fact, our first experience of sound is that of surround sound. In the total darkness of the womb, not unlike that of the cinema house before the projection beam penetrates it, the regularity of the heartbeat is the greatest assurance to us that all is well with the world. Any excitement that changes our mother's heartbeat, makes it rush or beat unevenly frightens the unborn child. Hence is many civilizations, including our own, there are restrictions on what the unborn child should hear. According to Lin Yutang, the great Chinese scholar, anyone singing tunelessly or off-key in the presence of a pregnant woman was given fifty whiplashes because it endangered the child's musical sense. I wish we had a similar law in contemporary India.

The comparison between the womb and the projection theatre is not a facile comparison. In both places we surrender our bodies to sensation which continue to flood us and which cut us off from the world beyond. The prenatal experience is relived in an oneiric fashion in a projection theatre. Cinema and dreaming are companions. According to Freud, creativity and day-dreaming are also companions.[3]

2 P. 329, Projections, 14 years, Walter Murch

3 Most of Freud's writings relevant to creativity, art, literature and religion can be found in Vol. 12 and 15 of the Pelican Freud Library, 1985

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In the Kingdom of Shadows,[4] to borrow Maxim Gorky's phrase for cinema, I claim half the Kingdom for sound. Cinema is primarily a rhythmic art, in which sound and visual weave complex patterns and vie with each other in a relay. They also evoke at least two other senses, touch and taste, though indirectly and vicariously. It is not surprising that a great editor like Walter Murch knows that the total experience of cinema lies in his understanding the complex polyrhythmic patterns of sound and visual.

Importance Of Human Voice

From the earliest sound films, from the three kinds of sounds used in cinema, voice, music and sound effects, all efforts have been to render the human voice as clearly and as distinctly as possible. One may feel tempted to attribute this to the dominance of the dramatic narrative. But there is more to it than that. In selective hearing, we have a distinct preference for the human voice and its nuances.

'It is rather the privilege accorded to the voice, over all other sonic elements, in same way that the human face is not just an image like others. Speech, shouts, sighs or whispers, the voice hierarchizes everything around it. …Call this vococentrism if you will. Human listening is naturally vococentrist, and so is the talking cinema by and large.'[5]

Vision has selective focus and hearing seems to have no such selectivity. There is no counterpart of eyelids to give us that momentary relief from hearing unless we use earmuffs. But all of us are familiar with our ability to mask what we are not interested in hearing. As Rick Altman puts it, 'When we listen for a crying child, we are marvelously effective at cutting out extraneous sounds and concentrating on the cries that we recognize as those of our child."[6] A specific case of this is the cocktail-party effect, so called by Collin Cherry, where in spite of clashing voices we are able to hear exactly the person we want.[7]

4 p.407, Appendix, Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film, Jay Leyda, George Allen and Unwin, 1973
5 p. 6, Audio-Vision, Michel Chion, tr. Claudia Gorbman, Columbia Univ. Press, 1999
6 p. 29, Sound Theory and Sound Practice, Ed. Rick Altman, AFI Film readers, Pub. Routledge, 1992
7 P. 29, ibid.

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As we grow older, and meet our friends after a gap of several years, it is often difficult to recognize them, but when one such friend phones you, we see him as we had left him on the last time we had met. As Bresson says, "Telephone. His voice makes him visible."[8]

Acousmêtre and mother: Psycho, Space Odyssey 2001, Dr. Mabuse

For the first few weeks after developing our hearing, we hear our mother's voice as what in mythologies later becomes the voice that surrounds us completely and whose origin we cannot fathom. It is like the voice of God or *Akashwani* in Sanskrit. Though it is an awe-inspiring experience we forget its conscious memory soon, like many prenatal experiences. It is only great directors who are able to use this experience of omnipresence of voice in creating characters, not visible to us, but exist only through sound.

Michel Chion has coined a special term for such a character. It is 'acousmêtre'[9]. We know nothing of its appearance, its character, and know it only as a voice. It is everywhere and can emerge anywhere. That is what makes an acousmêtre so awe-inspiring.

'…let us go back to the original meaning of the word acousmatic. This was apparently the name assigned to a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their Master speak *behind a curtain,* as the story goes, so that the sight of the speaker wouldn't distract them from the message. …This interdiction against looking which transforms the Master, God or Spirit into an acousmatic voice, permeates a great number of religious traditions, most notably Islam and Judaism. We find it also in the physical setup of Freudian analysis: the patient on the couch should not see the analyst, who does not look at him.'[10]

After we are born we connect with our mother through all our sense organs but her voice binds us to her even when she is faraway, out of sight and can't be touched or smelt. A child just has to hear his mother to know about her presence.

It is Hitchcock's genius that he has turned the character of a mother into an evil acousmêtre in Psycho, taking as if, the most secure ground from underneath us. Hitchcock reaches in the deepest recesses of our mind and brings out the fears that haunt us and which we normally hide from ourselves. The Terrible Mother, like the Furies of the Greeks, is such a figure especially, if she is an acousmêtre.

8 All Bresson quotes are from 'Notes on Cinematography by Robert Bresson' in its English translation by Jonathan Griffin, Urizen Books, New York, 1977

9 P. 17, The Voice in Cinema, Michel Chion, tr. Claudia Gorbman, Columbia Univ. Press, 1999.

10 P. 19, ibid

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Another famous acousmêtre in cinema is HAL, the computer of Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey'. He is a memorable and tragic character of cinema. Like the hero of a Greek tragedy, his hubris destroys him. His death conveyed to us only through his changing voice and his losing control over his identity as he loses parts of him memory, achieves great poignancy. Its effect is due to the genius of his creator-director who knew the power of sound.

FILM EXCERPT 1

2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick, …start…end

DURATION

'The not-yet-seen voice…possesses a sort of virginity, derived from the simple fact that the body that's supposed to emit it has not been inscribed in the visual field. Its de-acousmatization, which results from finally showing the person speaking is always like deflowering. For at that point the voice loses its virginal-acousmatic powers, and re-enters the realm of the human beings." [11]

FILM EXCERPT 2

Psycho, Alfred Hitchcock, revealing the mother, start…end

DURATION

One of the earliest examples of an acousmêtre is in the Fritz Lang film, 'The Testament of Dr. Mabuse' made as early as 1932 . Here, as well as in 2001, the de-acousmatization is rather special. It is not a phantom figure like the skeleton of the mother in Psycho. It is not some wicked super-villain as it would be the case with a James Bond kind of film. It is a mere machine, an acousmachine as one may call it that we have been hearing all the while. Hence in the denouement, we arrive at an empty centre, a nothing, a void and the sense of mystery is doubled.

FILM EXCERPT 3

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, Fritz Lang, showing the recording machine, start…end

DURATION

11 p. 45, ibid.

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Muted dialogues

It is a simplistic view of cinema to see it as a technical progress, from deaf cinema to sound, from black and white to colour, from mono sound to stereo and then to Dolby and surround sound. With every stage of its development, you gain something and you lose something. There is a power to deaf cinema that one cannot easily have unless you re-introduce deaf cinema in sound cinema. When colour is easily available black-and-white has a special expressive power.

I am using Chion's term 'deaf cinema' instead of the more common 'silent cinema'. Because, as studies of the early cinema, like Noel Burch's and Rick Altman's books have shown us, was never silent.[12] There was a whirr of projector, musical instruments, simple sound effects generating instruments from coconut shells to tabla in India, where even great tabla wizards created the sound of galloping horses. There were benshis and prompters explaining the meaning of what was happening on the screen. The characters spoke to each other but only the spectator was deaf to them. Hence the term 'deaf cinema'.

So, in fact, as Bresson said , "THE SOUNDTRACK INVENTED SILENCE."

If the human voice is at the centre of human hearing, then in a sound film, what can be more dramatic, intriguing and disturbing than to see the characters on the screen speak, but not being able to hear them! Alfred Hitchcock started muting his dialogues from his early films. He used it for the first time in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938)

When old Miss Froy is asked her name by Iris Henderson, and she answers, the train enters a tunnel, drowning the answer. So, she has to write it out with her finger on the thin film of moisture collected on the window-pane It is almost a throw-back to the deaf cinema, where subtitles told you what the characters say. Later, when Iris needs to prove her existence, it has disappeared.

FILM EXCERPT 4

The Lady Vanishes, Alfred Hitchcock, …start…end

12 Life to Those Shadows, by Noel Burch, Univ. of California Press, 1990; Sounds of Early Cinema, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman, Indiana University Press, 2001

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DURATION

In *Topaz* (1969), Hitchcock has scene after scene done in complete pantomime. In the florist shop, Andre Devereaux, the protagonist, seeks the help of Philippe Dubois, the shop owner. When they want to speak, Dubois closes the glass door. Instead of the camera entering the cubicle for us to hear them, Hitchcock keeps it outside. We can see through the glass that they are talking to each other but the camera, the boom, and with it, the spectator is excluded from hearing it.

Then in the immediate scene at the Cuban embassy, when Dubois is trying to bribe the ambassador's secretary to photograph some documents related to the installation of missiles in Cuba, the camera stays close to Devereaux, who is outside on the street, across the road. We have a classic point-of-view scene entirely shot with telephoto lenses, with flashes of the vehicles passing, with street sounds. All that we can hear is the noisy demonstrators outside the embassy and the street sounds. Not one word of the conversation. The conversation between Dubois and the secretary is accompanied by gestures which are a little exaggerated, again reminiscent of the deaf cinema. This scene lasts for about seven minutes. It is one of the most daring uses of the silence of the deaf cinema and the sound effects of the sound film.

FILM EXCERPT 5

Topaz, Alfred Hitchcock, start…end…

DURATION:

Separation between the voice and the body: comic and terrifying

When sound came to cinema, it threatened the world of cinema by demanding that actors or in Hollywood, stars emote through voice as much as through body. This made some stars into shooting stars who disappeared for ever. Then dubbing was successfully introduced, which made the separation between actor's body and voice possible. No other film shows us this period of transition with such finesse and gentle humour as 'Singing in the Rain' (1951) directed by Gene Kelley and Stanley Donen.[13]

13 'The idea of dubbing was born with the sound film itself. When Hitchcock made his first talkie 'Blackmail' in 1929, it had been conceived as a silent film. He decided to adapt it for sound by shooting several additional scenes. His main actress spoke English badly. So he had her "dubbed", while shooting, by "an English actress, Joan Barry, who did the dialogue standing outside the frame with her

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We have the scene in which the idea of dubbing occurs to Donald O'Connor, after the song number 'Good Morning'. Here we see the mechanism of dubbing, including perfect lip-sync done by Donald O'Connor. It is a happy scene followed by the celebrated number of Gene Kelly, 'I am singing in the rain'.

The concluding scene, in which Debbie Reynolds does the playback, first remaining behind the curtain and then facing the audience, to be followed by Donald O'Connor, still matching the synch with Leena in front, shows us how hilarious the mismatching can be.

FILM EXCERPT 6

Singing in the Rain, Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, ch 36 to 38 start 1.31 hrs end 1.38 hrs

DURATION 7 min

Normally the role of dubbing is to choose an 'appropriate' voice for a body, like a young girl's voice for a young girl's character. But in 'The Exorcist' (1973) a monster is created by assigning a completely inappropriate voice, like a hoarse and vulgar voice to the girl. It was one of the most successful films because Friedkin would stop at nothing to get the bestiality in the film. It touched some deep fears within us, in a way comparable to the way Hitchcock's film do it with much greater subtlety.

Human speech as infra-sense, non-sense and ultra-sense: Chaplin and tarana

It is a common misconception that Chaplin, one of world's greatest mimes, feared the talkies because mime is a silent art. It is true that his entry into the sound cinema is very late. But then in film after film, he proved how well he understood sound.

He brought out the animalism in Hynkel through the speech he makes in 'The Great Dictator'. This is what I call the **infra-sense** in the human voice, where the speech expresses an animal nature that seeks expression through that

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own microphone, while Miss Ondra pantomimed the words." He directed Anny Ondra while listening to Joan Barry through headphones.' p.132, The Voice in Cinema.

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human privilege of language by its intonation and through sounds that express the emotion below the logic of language, of our animal nature.

FILM EXCERPT 7

The Great Dictotor, Charles Chaplin, Hynkel Speech, start end

DURATION

Towards the end of 'The Modern Times', he sings a song using sounds that have no sense, when he has lost the words. It brings out the 'musicality' of singing and human voice as opposed to their conveying the literal meaning. This is what I call **ultra-sense**.

FILM EXCERPT 8

The Modern Times, Charles Chaplin, Song …start….end

DURATION:

Though Chaplin used it for a comic effect the use of syllables, in the Indian Art music, noam-toam of dhrupad and tarana of Khayal express an ultra-sense of sound, which is more harmonious than our speech. The recent tendency in Indian cinema to use human voice, (especially Sankar Mahadevan's , a trained Carnatic Art music singer), shows an increasing awareness of the ultra-sense of the human voice. If I am not mistaken, Nusrat Fateh Ali's voice in 'The Last Temptation of Jesus Christ' was one of the first examples of a mainstream Hollywood film using this ultra-sense of the human voice.

Truth behind the human voice

In dealing with the human voice in cinema, I cannot pass over two great examples of the use of human voice as recorded sound.

My first example is from Francis Ford Coppola's great film, 'The Conversation', where a master worked with him on the sound design– Walter Murch. The repeated use of the same conversation, to unravel its meaning through words and the irony of getting the words but missing the intonation, which provided the clue to the crime, is a great moment when cinema expresses a profound truth about the human condition, its dependence on the literal

meaning and its failure to understand subtle inflexions. The line 'He'd kill us, if he had a chance' is interpreted by Harry Caul, as a line that threatens the couple. Actually, it means that 'our killing him-the husband- is just.' What this film did for the untrustworthiness of our hearing, Antonioni's 'Blow-up' did for the blurring of our vision in seeing the truth.

My second example is from Kurosawa Akira's 'Bad Sleep Well', a inspired by Hamlet. The film deals with corruption in Japan's corporate world. The protagonist of the film is Nishi, whose father has been forced to commit suicide by the company he serves to save the company from a public scandal. Nishi, changes his identity and marries the vice-president's daughter, as a part of his revenge plot. He saves Kawa, another employee, forced into committing suicide. The corporate management believing Kawa to be dead, gives him a funeral full of pomp. Nishi brings Kawa to watch it from a distance. While the funerary chanting is going on, he waits for the officials who have forced Kawa to appear. It is precisely then that he plays the tape where they plot to force Kawa to commit suicide. The use of pan focus which enables us to see the two in Nishi's car and the funeral in equally sharp focus, the solemn funerary chants, with the recorded club music and conversation is a great moment of sound cinema.

Here the recorded sound is used to evoke the space, a club with its gay music and cynical plotting, which is in sharp contrast with the solemn atmosphere of the funeral ceremony. The entire mise-en-scene is designed to bring out the lie of the human speech.

FILM EXCERPT 9

Bad Sleep Well, Kurosawa Akira, disc 1 ch 8 start 38 min end 43 min

DURATION 5 min

Sound film as a palimpsest

Sound allows a film to be layered in a far more complex way than visuals can do or visuals alone can do. In fact, Chion uses a term 'palimpsest' to describe the sound film. Palimpsest, as you know well, is a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which visible traces remain. Instead of 'visible' we can use 'audible' for the layered sounds of a film. In fact, this term is an apt metaphor for the process of mixing of sound. Because we record sounds at almost their full value and then start 'rubbing them out' in different degrees to make them less audible.

Tower of Babel and the Sensorial Sound

'Robert Altman has been closely associated with sound experimentation. In his case, at least, the idea preceded the technology. …he has been developing the practice of overlapping dialogues or as he calls it, 'live sound effects'. It's a

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tradition that goes back through the fast-talking films of Howard Hawks, Frank Capra and Preston Sturges…Altman concentrated …on dialogue simultaneously spoken by two or more characters: a wall of sound, a Tower of Babel…it was another way of making movies like life – where a conversation is carried on in bursts of words and grunts, where people interrupt each other's sentences, where the participants are straining to be heard…'California Split' was Altman's sound breakthrough. He had found the technology – the eight-track recording system- and made a film …as a test of the equipment and techniques he was planning to deploy even further in 'Nashville'. …Altman's interest in sound extends beyond overlapping dialogue…he has recorded live all the music of his films since 'Nashville'. Telephone calls are also done live in his films.

In his search for the perfect system, he met Ray Dolby – the Englishman who invented the Dolby noise-reduction system. 'What Dolby does', says Michael Cimino 'is to give you the ability to create a density of detail of sound – a richness so that you can demolish the wall separating the viewer from the film. You can come to demolishing the screen'[14]

'The Shout' Jerzy Skolimowski's film could not have been done without the Dolby. The movie's two dramatic climaxes take place when the holy madman, Alan Bates lets loose a bloodcurdling shout and the audience is suddenly inundated with a multitrack, all-enveloping hurricane-force sound.[15]

'Dolby's wider frequency range, increased dynamic range and multitrack sound, with independent tracks that carried identical or different signals brought about a much greater range of contrasts in audio intensity. It allowed a far greater range of sounds to coexist without a loss of quality, allowing a generalization of polyrhythmic sounds.'[16]

'With Dolby a certain aerodynamic aesthetic of sound also became possible: the intensity gradients were clearer and better controlled. The notion of sound design came to designate something closer to the idea of visual design.'[17]

Just as Dolby made the loudest sound possible, it made a real silence possible. Chion calls it 'the silence of the loudspeakers'.

14 p. 350, Film Sound: Theory and Practice
15 p. 351, ibid
16 p. 124, Film, a sound art, Michel Chion,
17 p. 125, ibid

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Between the loudest sound and the silence, there is a wide range of choices which is not limited to recorded sounds produced by acoustic means. Digital sound is here to stay, which makes it possible to create sounds that have extraordinary sensorial power.

'In 1978, in Philip Kaufman's 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', the great sound designer Ben Burtt created the sound of a vegetal object opens up and gives birth to a fully adult form with a discreet noise, still wet and undefined. It is a sound of unfolding organs, of membranes unsticking and crackling all in the same instant. This real and precise sound, so clear in high registers and so tactile, is heard as though we are touching it, the way contact of the skin of a peach can make you shudder'.[18]

Today the list of credits on sound has grown so large, that almost all audience leaves except audiophiles. With people like Frank Serafine and his synthesizer, Jimmy MacDonald with his props and vocalization, Ben Burtt, the great archeologist of sound, sound has arrived at such a point that not even sky is the limit. They have no techno-fears and have varied musical backgrounds. What now remains to be seen is the challenges posed to them by the script-writers and directors. Already Randy Thom has written on, *not* how to design sound for a film, *but* on how to design a film for sound.

…and the Silent Scream

We have been looking at how sound can express emotions, be more sensorial. But we should also look at how the new technology has made it possible to achieve something that can be far more expressive than any of the sounds: the silence. Some of the most glorious moments of sound cinema are through achieving a precise kind of silence at a precise point. Such silence is as stunning as the loudest explosion.

Human voice, in moments of extreme pain or anguish, does not produce speech but a scream. There are moments in deaf cinema where you can almost hear speech and its extreme form 'scream' as in the 'Battleship Potemkin'. The scream of the mother with the blood oozing through her wounded eye is so powerful that many spectators feel that they have heard it. But we know that we are watching a deaf film and no sound will come out of that screen even in a moment of excruciating torture.

But Hitchcock silences the scream of in the *sound* cinema. In his *39 Steps* (1935), when the maid who discovers a corpse, screams but what we have is an engine whistle overlapped on her screaming face, from the next scene. We

18 p. 118, ibid

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know from his own testimony that Hitchcock is a little embarrassed by this particular example but he does not give up this device. In fact, its use is seen as a hallmark of his 'style' in sound design and Elizabeth Weiss even names her great book on Hitchcock's use of sound after this device and calls it *The Silent Scream*.

Here is what she says, 'Speechlessness can also indicate a more temporary impotence to which Hitchcock reduces his characters who confront horror too awful to articulate. The adjective unspeakable is made literal in the 'The Birds' when the hero's mother discovers a neighbor whose eyes have been gauged out by the invading birds. She runs out of the house and opens her mouth agape, but she is still unable to speak of what she has seen.'[19]

FILM EXCERPT 10

Birds, Alfred Hitchcock, scene 10 from the DVD, from 58.52 min to 1.01 hrs

DURATION: 3 min

Music in cinema

There are times when a particular directorial problem has been solved in a number of ways, each way being in tune with the sensibility of a director. The situation in which a scene depicts unbearable suffering of a character, has been dealt with in a completely different way by Satyajit Ray. We are all familiar with the scene from 'Pather Panchali' when Harihar shows Sarbajaya the sari he has brought for Durga who has died in his absence. The rising note of *taarshahanai* that expresses the immense anguish of Sarbajaya as she breaks down, on the one hand, puts us at a distance that respects the privacy of her grief and on the other hand brings about a *sadharanikaran,* a universalization of an individual grief.

FILM EXCERPT 11

Pather Panchali, Satyajit Ray, sc start end

DURATION

Though music in cinema has many sources today with digital technology, conceptually it owes more to one figure from the history of music, especially in its grand design. This is Richard Wagner. Wagner is one of the most hated

19 The Silent Scream, Elizabeth Weis, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; illustrated edition edition (April 1982)

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musicians in the twentieth century on account of his anti-Semitic ravings. But this evil coexisted with his not only musical but dramatic genius.

He transformed musical thought through his idea of Gesamtkunstwerk ("total artwork"), the synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, epitomized by his monumental four-opera cycle Der Ring des Nibelungen (1876). His ideas affected not only the sound design, but that of the film form and film sense, through their direct or indirect effect on artists as diverse as Rabindranath Tagore, Fritz Lang, Bertolt Brecht, Werner Herzog, Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein and his guru Vsevolod Meyerhold.

This impressive list of names is of great importance in understanding sound cinema because each of these names is of a pioneer of cinema and/or theatre and not of a 'follower' or partisan of Wagner. There was such universal truth in Wagner that it could overcome the ideological differences between the artists mentioned just now to allow us to consider them as a group. It also shows that fecund and hardy seed will bring forth a rich crop in diverse soils.

Though great operas were composed before Wagner, no one so single-mindedly pursued to unite every element of sound design and subject it to a rigorous analysis. Wagner formulated and practiced what we would today call a total 'auteur' approach to theatre.

Wagner selected his themes, wrote his own librettos and composed the music. Writing librettos was for a composer stepping into a different world, the world of word. Not only he did that but he analyzed the technique of writing of libretto into many of its elements like analysis of alliteration, stabrime, diction and so on. He is most noted for his concept of leitmotif, though he did not use the term and certainly not in its simplified and vulgarized form, as a sign that can be recognized instantly and reduced to a single cognitive or affective value. He went beyond it designed the space where his total art-work could be seen in its full glory.

Wagner did away with a piecemeal approach to the musical composition of opera. He integrated the word, voices, instrumentation, musical structure, mise-en-scene and also built his own theatre which changed the design of the opera architecture. He saw opera, not as a form of entertainment but as a new avatar of the community theatre of the Greeks where some of the most fundamental and universal aspects of human life were dealt with. In fact, many art historians have pointed out that the realization of his ideas was not in opera but in cinema.

If one were to take Wagner's ideas to their logical conclusion, then the music would not be supportive to the film but would, to borrow a phrase from Hitchcock, 'inspire action.' Or the paraphrase it, become the plot. 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' is a such a film. I am speaking of the colour remake in 1956.

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The heroine of the film Jo Conway played by Doris Day is an internationally famous singer, married now to a doctor, Ben McKenna and bringing up her young son.

We have a well-known scene, almost at the beginning of the film, in which Jo and her son sing the song 'Que sera sera'.

FILM EXCERPT 12

The Man Who Knew Too Much, Alfred Hitchcock, start end

DURATION

It is this song, which is repeated towards the end of the film. Like an umbilical bond, it brings them together, when the kidnapped son, hidden in the same building, whistles its tune, as the mother plays it in the hall below.

FILM EXCERPT 13

The Man Who Knew Too Much, Alfred Hitchcock, ch 17,

DURATION: 12 min

The association of murder with music which has just the opposite mood actually begins with Fritz Lang's M, a director who has influenced Hitchcock's work in many aspects. 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' has a planned assassination scene, where the murder is to take place on a crash of cymbals. This long scene is cut only to music until it is interrupted by the heroine's scream which makes the assassin miss his aim.

FILM EXCERPT 14

The Man Who Knew Too Much, Alfred Hitchcock, ch 14, start 1.29 hrs end 1.41 hrs

DURATION: 12 min

The scream, one of Hitchcock's favourite motives, and the most spontaneous personal expression of human emotion, is used in conjunction with its opposite, music - one of the most structured expressions. What is curious is the distinction Hitchcock makes between the classical and popular music.

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Classical symphonic music, a planned and carefully executed expression, is linked with another planned action, that needs careful execution – pun intended – is assassination. What spoils is a spontaneous and generous expression of a mother, who screams to stop the assassination and whose action might jeopardize her son's rescue. As opposed to this use of the classical symphonic music, the popular song 'Que sera, sera' brings the mother and child together, through another spontaneous action, this time on the part of the son, that of whistling when his mother sings.

These are examples from the history of cinema, where the distinctions we make between plot, music, human voice, sound effects, etc., are broken down by genius of a filmmaker and/or a sound designer.

Sound effects as a means of suggestion

What we *see* has a facticity about it, whereas what we *hear* has a strong sense of suggestion about it. What we see has to be always in front of us, but what we hear can be on any side. The sense of direction is not so well-defined as sound never comes to us in a linear fashion. It comes in many directions, along a straight line, along corners and obstacles, along curves, comes after multiple reflections and so on.

Here's what Bresson says about the difference between the eye and the ear: "The eye (in general) superficial, the ear profound and inventive. A locomotive's whistle imprints on us a whole railroad station."

It takes a lot from a director and a sound designer to bring out the 'profound and inventive' nature of the ear. So many factors work against listening attentively, carefully. Bresson has pointed out: "Cinema, radio and television, magazines are a school of inattention: people look without seeing, listen in without hearing."

His own path is described by him, as follows: "Reorganize the unorganized noises (what you think you hear is not what you hear) of a street, a railroad station, an airport…Play them back one by one in silence and adjust the level."

And his other two notes on cinematography tell us: "*Rhythmic value of a noise*

Noise of a door opening and shutting, noise of footsteps, etc., for the sake of rhythm."

"The noises must become music."

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When attention, care and love is lavished on the sound effects, when a director or a sound designer allows the sound effects to caress his hearing, never herding them, never treating them as a crowd, then, like buds opening in the breeze of spring, they begin to open up and their 'music' wafts to the listener, through the medium of cinema.

The great Yahudi Menuhin was asked a question, "What has music given you?" When this question was asked, the musician had crossed eighty years. Music had given him immense fame, spiritual riches, material riches and so much else. Menuhin's answer was simple but startling. He said, "Music has enabled me to hear, to listen. That is its greatest gift to me." D. W. Griffith had also a simple answer to the question, why he makes films. He said, " So, people can see."

Pierre Schaeffer, who is one of the founders of musique concrete was someone that Michel Chion worked with and was deeply influenced by. To make that kind of music out of sounds of everyday objects, you need a very sensitive ear, with a special kind of hearing. Our hearing often stops when we can identify the source of a sound that we hear. We do not care to hear beyond it, to its components, overtones, frequency range, texture, emotional impact and so on. Ustad Allauddin Khan saheb, the great guru of Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan was very fond of birds, especially pigeons. He used to feed them and could tell them apart from their cooing sounds. That's a true 'musician' for you, for whom music is present in all sounds.

Walter Pater had said that all arts aspire to the condition of music. I think in great cinema all sounds aspire to the condition of music. But this is not a given system of music. It is something that has to be discovered by the rasika. I do not like the words spectator and audience. They smack of a kind of passivity. What we need is someone who brings alertness of a samurai to the cinema hall, someone whose life depends on noticing the slightest vibrations of the sounds and visuals.

Ritwikda is a director who even made a car human through his sound effects. The success of 'Ajantrik' due to the care he lavished upon the sounds that the taxi emits during each emotional scene. Its jealousy, obstinacy, aging, its death rattle and finally its life after death through the sound of horn after it has been sold as junk all give it a full-blooded character. I had organized the first screening of 'Ajantrik' in the then USSR, in 1985, immediately after the Chernobyl disaster. 'Ajantrik' which was neither the glorification of machine and science that made it possible nor a Romantic rejection of it, but a human, animistic and equal relationship with the machine, was received by a gathering of artists, scientists and thinkers with tremendous enthusiasm. What had won them over was to a large extent the sound effects track that made them feel the symbiotic relationship between man and machine.

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FILM EXCERPT 15

Ajantrik: Ritwik Ghatak, Death of 'Jagaddal'

DURATION: …..min

Towards a transcendental sound in cinema

Present academic theory of sound cinema likes to concentrate upon the dry and meaningless classification of sounds in various categories and its far-fetched interpretations. Many a beautiful sound film has died on the dissection tables of these theoreticians. Fortunately for us, there are wonderful practitioners of sound like Rick Altman, Elizabeth Weis, Michel Chion, Randy Thom, Walter Murch and others who like to deal with sound in its sensuous, sensorial life. It is only after listening carefully that they write about it, tentatively, with humility and allow its ambiguities to retain their mysteries.

And there are filmmakers like Tati, Kubrik, Lynch, Kieslowskie, Wong Kar-wai, Hu Hsiao-Hsien and Tarkowskie who let their sound speak on their behalf, on behalf of poetry and beauty. Their sounds breakdown compartments like voice, music and sound effects and carry us into a zone where we experience the miraculous. Let me end my lecture with an excerpt from Tarkowskie's 'The Stalker' which will take us into that zone.

FILM EXCERPT 16

Stalker: Andrei Tarkowskie, Trolley Ride into the Zone, from 33 min to 36 min

DUR: 3 MIN