

PART 2

BEYOND
SOUNDS AND
IMAGES

SEVEN

SOUND FILM —

WORTHY OF THE NAME

SIXTY YEARS' REGRETS

Films projected in theaters have had soundtracks for sixty years now, and for sixty years this fact has influenced the cinema's internal development. But for the past sixty years as well people have continued to wonder whether the cinema did right in becoming "the talkies." One form of this tenacious prejudice is the widespread opinion that in all this time no valuable contributions (or almost none) have been made by sound. The Sleeping Beauty of talking cinema forever awaits her prince, her new Eisenstein or Griffith. Surely whoever holds such ideas runs no danger of being proven wrong. In fact, why not extend this

criticism to cinema's visual dimension? For, indeed, not a whole lot has been dared in that department either, compared to what remains possible. Discussions of image and sound might thus easily remain stuck at the protest stage: since what we dream of doesn't exist, there's no use in getting interested in what does exist.

But rather than speculate in the abstract about what remains to be done, I would like to question whether we have properly assessed those changes that have occurred. I think there is a tendency to look at the sound film with our eyes staring directly backward, regretting (overtly or not) that the confounded thing didn't remain a nice little silent cinema, the way we once loved it.

Reevaluating the role of sound in film history and according it its true importance is not purely a critical or historical enterprise. The future of the cinema is at stake. It can be better and livelier if it can learn something valuable from its own past.

So far the history of film sound has almost always been told in relation to the supposed break it caused in a continuum. Everything since is related to the coming of sound. This rupture can conveniently be pinpointed historically, especially in that it happened to affect all the aspects of cinema at once: economic, technical, aesthetic, and so forth. But after the coming of sound, you'll find, if you leaf through essays on the subject, it is as if nothing ever occurred since. Historians continue to apply the same models and voice the same regrets that people expressed fifty years ago. But it seems to me that beyond the cinema's *discontinuous* history, marked by recognizable break points, which are like easily memorized dates of major battles, there lies a *continuous* history, made up of more progressive changes that are more difficult to detect. This is the history that interests me.

AN ONTOLOGICALLY VISUAL DEFINITION

Ontologically speaking, and historically too, film sound is considered as a "plus," an add-on. The underlying discourse goes like this: even though the cinema was endowed with synchronous sound after thirty years of perfectly good existence without it, whose soundtrack in recent years has become ever richer, crackling and pulsating, even now the cinema has kept its ontologically visual definition no less intact. A film without sound remains a film; a film with no image, or at least without a visual frame for projection, is not a film. Except conceptually: Walter Ruttmann's 1930 limit-case film *Weekend* is an "imageless film," according to its creator, consisting of a montage of sounds on an optical soundtrack. Played through the speakers, *Weekend* is nothing other than a radio program, or perhaps a work of concrete music. It becomes a film only with reference to a frame, even if an empty one.

The sound film, as I have said, is just this: sounds in reference to a locus of image projection, this locus being either occupied or empty. Sounds can abound and move through space, the image may remain impoverished—no matter, for quantity and proportion don't count here. The quantitative increase of sound we've seen in films in the last few years demonstrates this. Multiplex theaters equipped with Dolby sometimes reduce the screen to the size of a postage stamp, such that the sound played at powerful volume seems able to crush the screen with little effort. But the screen remains the focus of attention. The sound-camel continues to pass through the eye of the visual needle. Under the effect of this copious sound it is always the screen that radiates power and spectacle, and it is always the image, the gathering place and magnet for auditory impressions, that sound decorates with its unbridled splendor.

How can it work this way? Let us recall several facts about the cinema. The projector is located behind the spectator, the speaker in front. The speaker is not strictly the equivalent of a screen, but of a projector. Only doesn't the word *projector* have a different meaning here? For we must consider the mode of dissemination too. Light propagates (at least apparently) in a rectilinear manner, but sound spreads out like a gas. The equivalent of light *rays* is sound *waves*. The image is bounded in space, but sound is not.

Sound is mental, cannot be touched. An image can; this is what is done in religious ceremonies. You can touch the screen.

With film we can also say that the image is projected and the sound is a *projector*, in the sense that the latter projects meanings and values onto the image.

Today's multipresent sound has insidiously dispossessed the image of certain functions—for example, the function of structuring space. But although sound has modified the nature of the image, it has left untouched the image's centrality as that which focuses the attention. Sound's "quantitative" evolution—in quantity of amplification, information, and number of simultaneous tracks—has not shaken the image from its pedestal. Sound still has the role of showing us what it wants us to see in the image.

Nonetheless, Dolby multitrack sound, increasingly prominent since the mid-seventies, has certainly had both direct and indirect effects. To begin with, there is the new territory noises have conquered.

MULTITRACK SOUND, DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS

Revalorizing Noise

For a long time natural sound or noises were the forgotten elements, the "repressed" part of film not just in practice but also in analysis. There are a thousand studies of music (by far the easiest

subject, since culturally the best understood), and numerous essays on the text of dialogues, and finally some work on the voice (a new topic that does not fail to fascinate its researchers). But noises, those humble footsoldiers, have remained the outcasts of theory, having been assigned a purely utilitarian and figurative value and consequently neglected.

For much traditional cinema this neglect is proportional to the scanty presence of noises in the films themselves. We all carry a few film sounds in our memory—the train whistle, gunshots, galloping horses in westerns and the tapping of typewriters in police station scenes—but we forget that they are heard only occasionally, and are always extremely stereotyped. In fact, in a classical film, between the music and the omnipresent dialogue, there's hardly room for anything else. Take an American film noir or a Carné-Prévert from the forties: what do the noises come down to? A few series of discreet footsteps, several clinking glasses, a dozen gunshots. And with sound quality so acoustically impoverished, so abstract, that they all seem to be cut out of the same gray, impersonal cloth. The exceptions cited in classical cinema are always the same ones, so rare, that they only prove the rule: Tati, Bresson and two or three others. That's it.

Both technical and cultural explanations for this situation suggest themselves. Technical: from the beginning the art of sound recording focused principally on the voice (spoken and sung) and on music. Much less attention was paid to noises, which presented special problems for recording; in the old films noises didn't sound good and they often interfered with the comprehension of dialogue. So filmmakers preferred to get rid of them and replace them with stylized sound effects. Cultural reasons: noise is an element of the sensory world that is totally devalued on the aesthetic level. Even cultivated people today respond with resistance and sarcasm to the notion that music can be made out of it.

When sound was just coming to film, however, there was no shortage of courageous experiments in admitting noise into the audiovisual symphony. I say courageous, because we must remember that the technical conditions of the era were hardly amenable to a satisfying or lifelike rendition of these phenomena. We find some examples with the Soviets (Vertov and Pudovkin) and the French, especially Renoir and Duvivier, who took pains to render, behind dialogue, the sonic substance of city life. The Germans were pioneers of recording and among the greatest technicians of sound. To them we owe such attempts as the astonishing *Abschied* (1930); Robert Siodmak's entire film uses for its set the interior of an apartment, and it makes extensive use of household and neighborhood sounds. These scattered experiments in the earliest sound years took advantage of the temporary banishment of music (which had issued from below the screen in the silents); they called on music only if the action justified it as diegetic. The sparsity of music made room for noises on what was a very narrow strip for optical sound.

What happened next? Pit music, which comments on the action from the privileged place of the imaginary orchestra pit, returned with a vengeance within three or four years, unseating noises in the process. The mid-thirties witnessed a tidal wave of films sporting obtrusive musical accompaniments. Sandwiched between equally prolix doses of dialogue and music, noises then became unobtrusive and timid, tending much more toward stylized and coded sound effects than a really fleshed-out rendering of life. Bear in mind that composers considered it the mission of the musical score to reconstruct the aural universe, and to tell in its own way the story of the raging storm, the meandering stream, or the hubbub of city life by resorting to an entire arsenal of familiar orchestral devices developed over the past century and a half. For illustration we need only consider Renoir's *A Day in the Coun-*

try, an open-air film par excellence. Practically the only natural sounds we hear are those expressed in a stylized way in Kosma's orchestral score, which was composed ten years after the filming, at the time of the editing and postsynching of the film.

Not until the arrival of Dolby sound did films receive a wide sound strip and a substantial number of tracks, permitting one to hear well-defined noises simultaneous with dialogue. Only then could noises have a living corporeal identity rather than merely exist as stereotypes.

Of course not all films have used this technical capability to its best advantage. The greatest sonic inventiveness has often gone into genre films—science fiction, fantasy, action and adventure films. Most of the others, including "auteur" films, have not yet given noises the status of an integral cinematic element with the recognition that above and beyond their directly figurative function they might have the same expressive capacity as lighting, framing, and acting. And let us not blame it on budgets. Sounds cost the least of anything in the production of a film.

Gains in Definition

Basing their opinion on the fact that since the late twenties sound has in most cases occupied one channel that has remained basically the same (the optical soundtrack), people often pretend to believe that nothing further developed until Dolby. In reality, all you need to do is listen to a film from the early thirties and compare it with the sound of a film of the forties, and then with a fifties film, to see that even before the widespread adoption of noise-reduction technology, significant evolution occurred in the technical area of sound definition. Whether it led to "better" sound is not so much the question; the task is first to acknowledge the changes.

If by comparison we turn to the example of the image, everyone will agree that in the sixties and seventies black and white was progressively replaced by color. This led in turn to a new status for black and white: no longer the norm, it became something unusual, an aesthetic option. For sound, parallel technical developments occurred that were just as decisive although much more gradual. If for the visual side there had been a history of almost imperceptible stages from an image consisting of absolute contrasting black and white to an image having all gradations of color and light at its disposal, this would provide a fair analogy to what has happened on the sound side.

So at the beginning of sound the frequency range was still rather limited. This meant, first, that sounds could not be mixed together too much, for fear of losing their intelligibility; second, when the soundtrack did require superimposed sounds, one sound had to be featured clearly above the others. The audio element that had primacy in the emerging talking film was not music (already present in the silent film) or noises but speech, which is the most coded element of all. Neither was there any question of designing soundtracks of any sensory complexity. The point was to give viewers something clear and distinct. Noises and music, for their part, needed to be as stereotyped as possible in order to be immediately recognizable. As the film's sound strip very gradually became wider, and as new technologies of sound mixing were developed, it became easier to produce sounds that were well-defined and individuated in the mix. The means became available to produce sounds other than conventionally coded ones, sounds that could have their own materiality and density, presence and sensuality.

The fact that this became possible certainly does not mean that everyone instantly made use of it. In fact, most filmmakers continued to rely on the same dry and impersonal noises as before.

But even so, little by little, they began to create ambient sound behind voices and beyond the musical accompaniment, which gave life to narrative space. Little by little, sound acquired a richness of detail, especially in the higher frequencies, which resulted in changing, by impregnation, the nature of the image itself.

Sound Infuses the Image

It can be said that sound's greatest influence on film is manifested at the heart of the image itself. The clearer treble you hear, the faster your perception of sound and the keener your sensation of presentness. The better-defined film sound became in the high frequency range, the more it induced a rapid perception of what was onscreen (for vision relies heavily on hearing). This evolution consequently favored a cinematic rhythm composed of multiple fleeting sensations, of collisions and spasmodic events, instead of a continuous and homogenous flow of events. Therefore we owe the hypertense rhythm and speed of much current cinema to the influence of sound that, we daresay, has seeped its way into the heart of modern-day film construction.

Further, the standardization of Dolby has introduced a sudden leap in an older and more gradual process that paved the way for it. There is perhaps as much difference between the sound of a Renoir of the early thirties and that of a fifties Bresson film as there is between the fifties Bresson and a Scorsese in eighties Dolby, whose sound vibrates, gushes, trembles, and cracks (think of the crackling of flashbulbs in *Raging Bull* and clicking of billiard balls in *The Color of Money*.)

Be that as it may, the fact remains that Dolby stereo has changed the balance of sounds, particularly by taking a great leap forward in the reproduction of noises. It has created sonic raw materials that are well defined, personalized, and no longer con-

ventional *signs* of sound effects; and it has led to the creation of a sort of superfield, a general spatial continuum or tableau. Which changes the perception of space and thereby the rules of scene construction.

Superfield

I call *superfield* the space created, in multitrack films, by ambient natural sounds, city noises, music, and all sorts of rustlings that surround the visual space and that can issue from loudspeakers outside the physical boundaries of the screen.¹ By virtue of its acoustical precision and relative stability this ensemble of sounds has taken on a kind of quasi-autonomous existence with relation to the visual field, in that it does not depend moment by moment on what we see onscreen. But structurally speaking the sounds of the superfield also do not acquire any real autonomy, with salient relations of the sounds among themselves, which would earn the name of a true *soundtrack* (see chapter 3). What the superfield of multitrack cinema has done is progressively modify the structure of editing and scene construction.

Scene construction has for a long time been based on a dramaturgy of the establishing shot. By this I mean that in editing, the shot showing the whole setting was a strategic element of great dramatic and visual importance, since whether it was placed at the beginning, middle, or end of a given scene, it forcefully conveyed (established or reestablished) the ambient space, and at the same time re-presented the characters in the frame, striking a particular resonance at the moment it intervened.

The superfield logically had the effect of undermining the narrative importance of the long shot. This is because in a more concrete and tangible manner than in traditional monaural films the

superfield provides a continuous and constant consciousness of all the space surrounding the dramatic action.

Through a spontaneous process of differentiation and complementarity favored by this superfield, we have seen the establishing shot give way to the multiplication of closeup shots of parts and fragments of dramatic space such that the image now plays a sort of solo part, seemingly in dialogue with the sonic orchestra in the audiovisual concerto.² The vaster the sound, the more intimate the shots can be (as in Roland Joffe's *Mission*, Milos Forman's *Hair*, and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*).

We must also not forget that the definitive adoption of multi-track sound occurred in the context of musical films like Michael Wadleigh's *Woodstock* or Ken Russell's *Tommy*. These rock movies were made with the intent to revitalize filmgoing by instituting a sort of participation, a communication between the audience shown in the film and the audience in the movie theater. The space of the film, no longer confined to the screen, in a way became the entire auditorium, via the loudspeakers that broadcast crowd noises as well as everything else. In relation to this global sound the image tended to become a sort of reporting-at-a-distance—a transmission by the intermediary of the camera—of things normally situated outside the range of our own vision. The image showed its voyeuristic side, acting as a pair of binoculars—in the same way that cameras allow you to see, when you're at a live rock concert, details, projected on a giant screen, otherwise inaccessible to fans in the back rows.

When multitrack sound extended into nonmusical films, and eventually into smaller dramas with no trace of grand spectacle, filmmakers retained this principle of the "surveillance-camera image." This development obviously might shock those who uphold traditional principles of scene construction, who point an accusing finger at what they call a music video style. The music

video style, with its collision editing, is certainly a new development in the linear and rhythmic dimensions of the image, possibly to the detriment of the spatial dimension. The temporal enrichment of the image, which is becoming more fluid, filled with movement, and bubbling with details, has the image's spatial impoverishment as its inevitable correlate, bringing us back at the same time to the end of the silent cinema.

TOWARD A SENSORY CINEMA

Cinema is not solely a show of sounds and images; it also generates rhythmic, dynamic, temporal, tactile, and kinetic sensations that make use of both the auditory and visual channels. And as each technical revolution brings a sensory surge to cinema it revitalizes the sensations of matter, speed, movement, and space. At such historical junctures these sensations are perceived for themselves, not merely as coded elements in a language, a discourse, a narration.

Toward the end of the twenties most of the prestigious filmmakers like Eisenstein, Epstein, and Murnau were interested in sensations; having a physical and sensory approach to film, they were partial to technical experimentation. Very few of their counterparts today are innovators ready to meet challenges of new technical possibilities, especially concerning Dolby sound. A symptom, perhaps, of a new stage in the eternal "crisis" of the cinema.

Frankly, many European directors have simply ignored the amazing mutation brought on by the standardization of Dolby. Fellini, for example, makes use of Dolby in *Interview* in order to fashion a soundtrack exactly like the ones he made before. In Kubrick's latest films there is no particularly imaginative use of Dolby either. With *Wings of Desire*, Wenders puts Dolby to a kind

of radiophonic use, in the great German *Hörspiel* tradition.³ As for Godard, for whom expectations were high, he has not fundamentally revitalized his approach to sound in his two films with Dolby. Neither in *Detective* nor *Signe ta droite* does he offer anything original in lapping and joining of sounds, by comparison to what he already achieved in monaural films; in addition, for *Nouvelle Vague* he has returned to his usual monophonic technique.

We could continue down the list and note that from the oldest (Bresson) to the youngest (Carax), there seems to be a contest of who can show the least enthusiasm for the new sound resources: just about everyone either neglects them or uses them without inventing anything new. To end on a positive note we should point out Kurosawa's purity and sure hand in mastering Dolby in his *Dreams*. But there are many other directors not necessarily classified as great auteurs and many films not generally revered as great works that are developing these resources in new ways. Some recent examples: the films of David Lynch, of course, but also Coppola's *One From the Heart*, William Friedkin's *Cruising*, and Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven*.

Just what does Dolby stereo offer to a director? Nothing less than the equivalent of an eight-octave grand piano, when what she or he had before was an upright spanning only five octaves, less powerful and less capable of nuance. In short, Dolby offers a gain in resources on the level of sound space and sound dynamics that, of course, no one is obliged to use all the time but that is nevertheless available.

Let us recall that Beethoven wrote his piano sonatas for a smaller instrument than the piano of today: where he reached the limits of his keyboard, we have another two or three octaves. In this sense it is perhaps more correct to play Beethoven on the piano of his era. But there would be something absurd in seeing

today's composers writing pieces for modern pianos with the same limitations as those that constrained the author of the Pathétique. We'd call that working with blinders; and this is precisely what many filmmakers are doing these days, irrespective of any issues of finances.

For writing big does not necessarily mean filling up the whole available space. It means that even when you write only one single note or melodic line, the empty space around the note is bigger. Dolby stereo increases the possibility of emptiness in film sound at the same time that it enlarges the space that can be filled. It's this capacity for emptiness and not just fullness that offers possibilities yet to be explored. Kurosawa has magnificently exploited this dimension in *Dreams*: sometimes the sonic universe is reduced to a single point—the sound of the rain, an echo that disappears, a simple voice.

Return to Silent Film: The Sensory Continuum

In chapter 5, we compared techniques in *The Bear* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Personal preferences aside, we discovered a certain convergence between the two films: the American one, horizontal, depends on speed, while the French one, vertical, rather works toward a certain density of reality. But don't both films share the impulse to bring to a wide family audience an attempt to render sensations, this being a preoccupation formerly reserved to a more limited audience? I'm speaking of the sci-fi and horror film (Sam Raimi, Cronenberg, Phil Kauffmann's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) that used to be the privileged proving ground for such sensory experiments. This pursuit of sensations (of weight, speed, resistance, matter and texture) may well be one of the most novel and strongest aspects of current cinema. To the detriment, as some object, of delicacy of

feeling, intelligence of screenwriting, or narrative rigor? Probably. But didn't the much-admired films of the old days, for their part, achieve their emotional force and dramatic purity at the expense of yet something else—of "sensation" for example, when in reproducing noises they gave us an inferior and stereotyped sensuality?

Recent American productions like John McTiernan's *Die Hard*, Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, or James Cameron's *The Abyss* have also added to this renewal of the senses in film through the playful extravagance of their plots. In these movies matter—glass, fire, metal, water, tar—resists, surges, lives, explodes in infinite variations, with an eloquence in which we can recognize the invigorating influence of sound on the overall vocabulary of modern-day film language. It is certainly looking as if an epic quality is returning to cinema, making its appearance in many films in the form of at least one fabulous sequence. Think of the Dantesque escape of the heroes, in thunder and rain, in Kontchalovsky's *Tango and Cash*, which is otherwise a pretty bad film.

The sound of noises, for a long time relegated to the background like a troublesome relative in the attic, has therefore benefited from the recent improvements in definition brought by Dolby. Noises are reintroducing an acute feeling of the materiality of things and beings, and they herald a sensory cinema that rejoins a basic tendency of . . . the silent cinema.

The paradox is only apparent. With the new place that noises occupy, speech is no longer central to films. Speech tends to be reinscribed in a global sensory continuum that envelops it, and that occupies both kinds of space, auditory and visual. This represents a turnaround from sixty years ago: the acoustical poverty of the soundtrack during the earliest stage of sound film led to the privileging of precoded sound elements, that is, language and

music—at the expense of the sounds that were pure indices of reality and materiality, that is, noises.

The cinema has been the talking film for a long time. But only for a short while has it been worthy of the name it was given, a bit hurriedly: sound film.

EIGHT

TELEVISION, VIDEO

ART, MUSIC VIDEO

TELEVISION'S OPTIONAL IMAGE

As we have seen, the image defines the cinema ontologically. Now, the difference between cinema and television lies not so much in the visual specificity of their images, as in the different roles of sound in each. In *La Toile trouée* I wrote (with no pejorative intention) that television is illustrated radio.¹ The point here is that sound, mainly the sound of speech, is always foremost in television. Never offscreen, sound is always *there*, in its place, and does not need the image to be identified. To illustrate this distinction, let us look at two works by Marguerite Duras, both shot in 16 millimeter and both presented as "films." One of them, *India*