Sonic icons and histospheres:
On the political aesthetics of an audio history of film

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Abstract

Film production and reception are complex fields of discourse in which the form and content of films mingle inextricably with cultural and societal practices. A central category for this connection is an aesthetics of film, which is not confined to substantive or formal analyses, but which – as a political aesthetics – questions and processes such discourses in relation to society.

This paper concerns itself with the discussion of a political aesthetics of the sound track of film and its ability to shape our understanding of history. Such "*Audio History of Film*" will explore how film sound generates, models and makes tangible history auditorily. To what extent can "*sonic icons*" (Currid, 2006) refer to history at the intersection of audio, image, and text? Can the "*experiential field*", in which history in film is perceived (Sobchack, 2007, p. 300), also be extended to the aesthetics of film sound and be referred to as "*histospheres*" in the modeling of history?

Against this backdrop, we propose the development of new categories that focus on the relationship between film sound and history: on the one hand, "*sonic icons*" as complex inscriptions of soundtracks and traces, which finally describe mixtures of sound, image and text. And, on the other hand, "*histospheres*", which emphasize films as complex audio-visual constructions of a historical world and its perception by interlinking aesthetics, narration and reflection.

Keywords: film and history; political aesthetics; audio history; sonic icons; histospheres

1   Introduction

Film production and reception are complex fields of discourse in which the form and content of films mingle inextricably with cultural and societal practices. A central category for this connection is an aesthetics of film, which is not confined to substantive or formal analyses, but which – as a political aesthetics – questions and processes such discourses in relation to society.

This paper concerns itself with the discussion of a political aesthetics of the filmic soundtrack and its ability to shape our understanding of history. Such "*Audio History of Film"* will explore how film sound generates, models and makes tangible history auditorily. To what extent can "*sonic icons*" (Currid, 2006) refer to history at the intersection of audio, image, and text? Can the "*experiential field*", in which history in film is perceived (Sobchack, 2007, p. 300), also be extended to the aesthetics of film sound and be referred to as "*histospheres*" in the modeling of history? As the soundtrack operates, in particular, on a sensual aesthetic level, this study attempts to incorporate film analysis, starting from an aesthetic perception and audiovisual experience.

While historians have not engaged in detail with the question of how films generate history visually and auditively, in film studies approaches have been formulated which posit that watching and experiencing film and media images play a key role in constructing historical events (Sobchack, 1996). In addition, the cinema has been read as a site of historical consciousness that replaces historical depictions of events, making the sensibilities of early periods palpable (Kappelhoff, 2008). The question of the "per se invisible social conditions and their visibility in cinema" occupies Kappelhoff also in his reading of Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler,* in which he concludes: "the pictorial spaces of cinema open up an external reality as a possible experiential field of social reality" (Kappelhoff, 2008, p. 63). On the one hand, this observation supports Marc Ferro's thesis of the representation of "the hidden functional mechanisms of a society" in film (Ferro, 1991, p. 23), on the other hand it establishes far-reaching research perspectives towards the audiovisual nature of cinematic pictorial spaces. In recent years, the field of "visual history" has become established as a new realm of research (Paul, 2012), one that looks at related issues and represents an adaptation of the pictorial turn (Mitchell, 1994).

The auditive level of the moving image has been taken into consideration as well, although the audio history of film has been largely neglected to date. Since the 1980s, sound in film has increasingly become a relevant field of research, but this research remains largely limited to studies of sound aesthetics and the history of sound production or technology. While in some approaches, film sound is explicitly placed within the context of a cultural history of sound recording (Holl, 2012), the general meaning of film sound for modeling history and the construction of historical experience is scarcely examined in a

thorough way. All the same, it should be noted that the auditive level of film in history studies has attracted little attention. But here, too, there are approaches that understand visual history in the context of a society of "*co-viewers*" and, quite expressly, "co-listeners" (Lindenberger, 2004).

This research gap forms the starting point for the "Audio History of Film", which explores how history may be generated in auditory terms, modeled or conveyed experientially by film sound (Greiner/Pauleit, 2014). The focus here is on creating a theoretical framework for the audio history of film. It represents an extension of existing approaches relating both to the cinematic narration of history and visual history. The innovative core stems from the hypothesis that the acoustic dimension of film makes its own unique contribution to the modeling of history. However, the aim of our audio history of film is to describe the complex interaction of narrative, visual and auditory history in film, foregrounding and examining the aesthetic dimensions of film sound and its potential for producing history, as well as looking at the material, technical and cultural dimensions of film sound production (including other fields of production and their interaction) with regard to methods of historical modeling.

The history of film sound is intimately linked with technical and social change, cultural history and the historicity of its perception. The effects of these processes are also of great relevance for an audio history of film. In particular, since the end of the 1950s the growing importance of film sound can be observed in the cinematic production of history. Innovative, metareflexive historical films refer to the Deleuzian theory of modern film that replaces the movement-image with the time-image as a correlate of opsigns and sonsigns (Deleuze, 1989). The French New Wave and later New Hollywood experimented with new sound concepts, which encouraged an emancipation of the soundtrack from the image. Moreover, films such as Alain Resnais' Hiroshima Mon Amour (F 1959) – "the first modern film of sound cinema" (Eric Rohmer) – initiate the discovery and further development of a distinct historiographical significance of film sound. The development and testing of new sound technologies (e.g. by New Hollywood) and the digitization of film sound, which preceded the digitization of the image, also had crucial influence on the production of history by and through film.

Against this backdrop, we propose the development of new categories that focus on the relationship between film sound and history: on the one hand, "sonic icons" as complex inscriptions of soundtracks and traces, that finally describe mixtures of sound, image and text. And, on the other hand, "histospheres", which emphasize films as complex audio-visual constructions of a historical world and its perception by interlinking aesthetics, narration and reflection.

2   Sonic icons

Besides pictorial inscriptions (photo, video, film) Zeitgeschichte also yields
auditory traces (all forms of recordings), and is undoubtedly conveyed in the
recordings of historical political speeches, such as John F. Kennedy´s speech
on June 26, 1963 in front of the Schöneberg Town Hall in Berlin. Frequently
repeated, parts of this speech have become iconic sound citations, like Kenne-
dy's phrase "Ich bin ein Berliner". Within the wider context of reflecting upon
the musical history of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era, Brian Currid
(2006) coined the term "sonic icon" to describe these and similar phenome-
na. In so doing, he characterizes examples such as Hitler's aggressive public
speaking style as acoustic markers or substitutes for political history. Currid's
concept of "sonic icons" basically adapts the art history approach of politi-
cal iconography (Warnke, 1992) to musicology and cultural history. By way
of contrast, we would like to define the concept of sonic icons differently,
as a complex process of sonic inscription, which in film, always consist of a
mixture of sound, image and text: in the course of film production, history in-
scribes itself into the audio recordings – since film productions are always part
of history, which becomes audible through the voices of actors, for example.
    A classical example is the figure of the public enemy that became es-
tablished in the 1930s both as an unmistakable face on the screen and as a
voice of the cinema. The appearance of this type of figure coincides with the
introduction of sound film. Its popularity can, however, only be understood
against the backdrop of the Great Depression, which radically shook up the
previous social order. Hollywood changed its traditional policies within this
context and began casting actors that were recognizable as "*hyphenated Amer-
icans*" in terms of their accents (such as the Irish-American James Cagney, or
Jewish-Americans like Paul Muni, and Edward G. Robinson) in leading roles
(Munby, 1999, pp. 39–65). These actors' accents were thus transferred to the
figure of the gangster, imbuing it with a sense of street credibility and other-
ness in the process. It was due in part to this specific situation that Cagney,
Muni, and Robinson were able to enjoy careers in Hollywood, much as gang-
ster figures such as Tom Powers, Tony Camonte, and Rico Bandello succeeded
in doing so in their films (in the imagination of the spectator) (Pauleit, 2015a).
Therefore, sonic inscriptions of history are not to be taken as a naive copying
or reprint of historical sounds, but rather as particular shifts in the production
of film that use sonic inscriptions to mark a difference and finally lead to "*sonic
icons*". These sonic icons consist of a mixture of sound, image and text, and are
nourished by "*real*" individual voices and their recording to produce particular
timbres and expressions that are intricately bound to history.

What applies to the voices of actors can also be applied to vocal performances (Dyer, 2008, 2012), to the use of voiceover and to musical recordings (Pauleit, 2016). Additionally, Heinz Emigholz, for example, in his late experimental films on architecture highlights buildings as sonic icons, recording the acoustics of specific historically shaped architectures, especially in his film Parabeton. Pier Luigi Nervi and Roman Concrete (D 2012) (http://www.film-galerie451.de/en/filme/parabeton/). But it can also be related to the compositions of the sound design, which – to give a prominent recent example – constructs the border region between the USA and Mexico as a community space (Pauleit, 2015b) in Tommy Lee Jones's The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (USA 2005).

Historical audio tracks in films regarding history may also strike us if the sound recording itself is the subject; namely if microphones, speakers, tape recorders or phonographs play a central role as a self-reflexive agent, thus making the production process of film audible and visible, and producing configurations of sound, images and text, as we know them, for example, from Francis Ford Coppola's The Conversation (USA 1974). The very first scene of this film shows a surveillance operation undertaken by three interception units in a public square in San Francisco. The surveillance personnel try to record the conversation of a couple strolling through a public space which is populated by many other people, including street musicians, and this complicates the interception. Therefore, the recordings are overlaid with various sounds and voices. Moreover, they are characterized by a specific sound design that highlights the directional microphones of the private detectives with sound effects that are to be deciphered as interference on the recordings.

The sonic icon that is created in this scene relies on different sources: the actors' (Frederic Forrest [Mark] and Cindy Williams [Ann]) voices, background noises, random voices and street music, as well as the sound effects highlighting the presence of the microphones. These sonic icons can be heard again and again throughout the film, as they are played and replayed in different rooms and under altered playing conditions. The sound recordings are superimposed with visuals, including the face of Gene Hackman as private detective Harry Caul (head of the surveillance operation), electronically controlled camera movements and images of 'Uher Universal 5000' tape recorders, contemporary recording devices which were used not only in the fictional story, but also as part of the US surveillance scandals surrounding the so-called White House tapes (1971-1973) and the Watergate scandal.

The central feature of this sonic icon is that the recordings themselves are highlighted by sound effects. Its quality is not condensed in the figure of a movie character (like a 1930s gangster), but in the abstract process of vocal recordings, their interference and modulations. Furthermore, not only are the audio recordings characterized by sound effects as markers of difference, but

each replay implements an acoustic modulation. This mode of difference and repetition draws attention to the innovative sound design of New Hollywood cinema of the 1970s in a notably self-confident and self-reflective manner. Therefore, in this example, the acoustic inscription of history is even more complex: in the modulations of (increasingly disembodied) voices and sound effects, two historical developments superimpose on one another: the history of a political surveillance scandal and the history of the sound design, both of which operate with audio tapes to produce voice recordings. This essentially acoustic enactment of political history and self-reflexive history of (film) sound design is attached to the face of Harry Caul, and to the crisis of conscience he encounters as part of his surveillance activity.

3. Sonic histospheres

One of the key strategies in the filmic representation of history is to form a historical environment which is in many ways shaped by sound (Greiner, 2015a). Orientation sounds (Flückiger, 2001, p. 144), which are associated in our minds with certain geographic and temporal coordinates, are linked to other individual sound objects and create complex soundscapes. In terms of history, these soundscapes can provide both an impression of everyday life and a political statement. In terms of film studies, they are closely linked to the genre discourse (Greiner, 2015b). The movie character is embedded within the cinematically modeled historical world, not only by the *mise en scène* and the montage of the images, but also by a kind of *mise en son*. Associated with particular sounds and music the character himself "hears" this environment and reacts to it – often by self-generated tones and sounds, which become a part of the sonic representation of history.

Another important issue in the examination of histospheres is the perception of film, as history is not only represented in and by film, but consists of a sensual filmic experience.[1] The viewer's emotional and cognitive response affects the understanding and evaluation of the cinematically modeled historical world. This includes remembered echoes and allusions, the correspondences between sensation and meaning, and the intersections between perception, affection and cognition (Kappelhoff, 2007, p. 311).

History in film always correlates with the aesthetic codes of history that have emerged in the cinematic representation – on a pictorial level certainly, but also on an aural level. Hence histospheres also refer to media history and film history. While this secondary experience of aural realities produces new

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1 Vivian Sobchack describes history in film "as an experiential field in which human beings pretheoretically construct and play out a particular—and culturally encoded—form of temporal existence." (Sobchack, 2007, p. 300)

hierarchies of perception, film sound can even question the ability to represent history itself, as well as the narration and experienceability of history by and through film. By way of illustration, these ideas will be examined with reference to Tomás Lunák's 2011 animation ALOIS NEBEL.

Lunák's film recounts the fortunes of the eponymous Alois Nebel, an elderly Czech station master who becomes traumatized by events from his past, as around him the communist system begins to crumble. As a small boy Alois bore witness to the forced displacement of the German part of the population in 1945, yet the film blurs the particular levels of historical time and reality. It generates a media space in which time is suspended, and in which both repressed experiences from the past as well as the darker sides of the revolution in 1989 have a place.

> Enigmatic audiovisual codes shape the beginning of the movie, until the audience is able to identify the approaching lights as headlights and the increasingly audible sizzling and gasping as the noise of a steam locomotive. A booming deep musical accent supports the impression that the film opens a mental portal to the past. A metallic sound, reminiscent of a wind chime, heralds an over-the-shoulder shot showing an over-irradiated window. Alois Nebel apparently stands in the station building and looks out onto an oncoming train. The emergent, gratingly loud squeal can be identified as the noise of the brakes, while the harsh shouts are evocative of military force. Right before the perceived sound objects can be assigned to a source, the sequence is charged with suspense and a sinister aura owing to the high volume and the dense, dissonant sounds. Thus, the noise assumes a classical purpose of film music: the emotionalizing of the audience (Flückiger, 2001, p. 19).

The longer the enigmatic sounds are heard, the more they encourage associations. The irregularly modulated, high-pitched squeals resemble the tuning of an analog radio, a sonic metaphor for the media-historical dimension that combines several time levels and locates both the movie characters and the audience in this histosphere. The following sudden fade-out of the noise and the visual cut to the empty railway platform make clear that the previous sequence must have belonged to a different time, one conjured from the imagination of the protagonist. Wind and melody fragments subsequently open up a wide imaginative space that allows the past to unfold. The film sound is assisted by a seemingly endless pan, which turns into a tracking shot through a forest at night. The subsequent accentuation, which is caused by the slow movement, corresponds to an extension of the sonic space, achieved by adding reverb or atmo-elements such as the wind noises.[2] Indeed, wind is often used as a metaphor for human borderline experiences (Flückiger 2001, p. 344). The sonic presence of the wind acts in this regard as a "memory catalyst" (Butzmann, Martin 2012, p. 155), signalizing that the past emerges from oblivion. In addi-

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2   Birger Langkjear states, "[w]hereas the pictures manipulate time by slowing down visual movements, the sound manipulates time by extending the audio space." (Langkjear, 2010, p. 15)

tion, the mysterious voice that apparently reads a railway schedule can be considered as an "acousmêtre", which charges the histosphere with a near-magical sort of determination.[3]

The second example is another flashback from the middle section of the film. Again, this scene is initiated by the arrival of a train. Alois Nebel sits sleeping in his living room. Accompanied by mystical electronic music the room starts to shake. While the visual representation – the vibration of the interior and bright flashes of light – support the impression, it is mainly the metallic creak from outside and the clatter of dishes and the rumble of the furniture which shape the plasticity of the scene. The sounds of the train eventually swell into a noise which identifies the following episode as an element of the infinite stream of history. Literally moving from the present to the past, the flashback is similar to a media channel, a journey through time, which is yielded, in particular, by the soundtrack.

But the sonic part of the histosphere creates not only a sense of experiencing history. It also suggests political interpretations while generating associations to historical films and media. The pounding and hissing of a steam engine and the hard, loud shouts in the analyzed scene of ALOIS NEBEL build directly on the soundscape of deportation scenarios in Holocaust films like SCHINDLER'S LIST (1993). Even the pictorial iconography is retrieved: under the cover of night and fog, armed militia drive civilians in box wagons, just as in Alain Resnais' seminal documentary about the deportation of the Jews of Western Europe, NUIT ET BROUILLARD (1955). While Alois passes between the expellees, the *mise en son* places the viewer in the subjectivized sound space of the child: even in the original Czech soundtrack some German goodbyes and prayers can be heard. Although Czech audiences probably do not understand the meaning of the words, the language refers to the historical background, the displacement of the Germans in 1945. The subsequent dialog is only a semantic confirmation. The really important information – such as the use of lethal force – is in turn represented solely by the sound: when the situation finally threatens to escalate, Alois is carried away by his father. What happens to the young German is not visible for the moment, but the sound of a gunshot and a desperate cry does not bode well.

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3   Michel Chion points out that an acousmêtre is "a kind of voice-character specific to cinema that derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen. The disembodied voice seems to come from everywhere and therefore to have no clearly defined limits to its power." (Chion, n.d.).

4   Conclusion

With the notions of sonic icons and histopheres we aim to describe particular processes of sonic film production that link film aesthetics with history. Both categories lay the ground for an audio history of film that at its heart consists of a political aesthetics – foregrounding the dimension of film sound and its ability to shape history.

Sonic icons take on the form of sonic inscriptions through sound recording. However, a more complex understanding of sonic icons reads these sonic inscriptions as a production and a field of marking differences that always consists of a mixture of sound, image, and text, and that takes shape, for example, in the accented voices of the 1930s hyphenated Irish-American and Jewish-American actors that depicted onscreen gangsters during and following the Great Depression. Another example of a sonic icon is the sound design that coloured New Hollywood film production, fusing it with Watergate and the White House tapes of the 1970s, and linking it to the face of Gene Hackman in the role of private detective Harry Caul.

The *mise en son* of the historical environment, the sensual figuration of historical sounds, and the sonic reflection of historical film scenes and media clips provide altogether an aural experience of history, which can be considered as a histosphere. As a part of the "experiential field", in which history in film is perceived (Sobchack, 2007, p. 300), histospheres suggest political interpretations of the represented historical events and processes. Therefore, its sonic elements interact dynamically with the moving image. The result from this specific combination of the visual and the auditory is a distinct order of sensibility, which may contribute to the understanding of the tremendous authority of film as an audio-visual production in shaping public ideas of history.

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