

Penser l'écran sonore : les théories du film parlant

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Mark McCann.

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Abstract

The thesis, entitled *Penser l'écran sonore : les théories du film parlant* (*Thinking the sound screen : theories of the talking film*) aims to provide at once a survey and critique of such theories as have explicitly addressed themselves to film conceived of in its essence as a carrier of acoustically produced meaning. This position would seem to be the merest commonplace, however, review of the literature will show that the study of the cinematic sound object as such was hardly carried out in any systematic manner before the 1980s and the groundbreaking work of Rick Altman, Michel Chion, and Claudia Gorbman. Perhaps the most simple manner of illustrating previous theoretical approaches to this topos would be to indicate the "polar" extremes which mark the limits of the discursive space within which their coverage is inscribed — pessimism and mourning for the silents (Balász), dizzying mysticism (Eisenstein), Marxian ideological analysis (Adorno and Eisler), and various practical suggestions for filmmakers of the type proposed by Reisz and Spottiswoode.

The thesis is divided into three along the familiar lines of sound *qua* sound — concerning that which is valid for all types of sound in the cinema — the voice in cinema, and cinema music. The main approaches to these objects can be similarly broadly characterised as semiological, second-wave semiological, (i.e. semiology plus psychoanalysis), cognitivist, and techno-pragmatic. The intention is to interrogate the merits and the defaults of these approaches by applying them to a range of problematics arising in the three areas listed above. It would of course be ideal if all approaches were to deal with identical questions, however, the internal dynamics of the various methodologies evidently privilege the framing of one question over another :

in my opinion this presents its own interest, as the questions which can (and, perhaps more importantly, *cannot*) be posed within a given discursive structure are most revealing of the theoretical framework itself.

The importance of cinema sound considered as representation rather than as simple transcription is insisted upon throughout. The limits of multichannelling are established as not greatly extending those already established by stereo. The practice of direct sound — of sound recorded on location or on set in real time — is found to have a distinctly theological dimension. The notion of subjective time as it is experienced by the spectator in the cinema is examined at length. A prominent feminist model of the functioning of sound in the cinema is found to be most unsteady. Finally, an aesthetic of the sound film which utilises the potential of the medium to the highest degree is proposed.

A consideration of the lacunae in the field — which remain possibilities for further study — and an extensive bibliography complete the survey.

Table des matières

Introduction — les théories du cinéma comme art sonore	1
1 Caractériser le son	11
1.1 Le statut mineur du son	11
1.2 Ontologie du son	16
1.3 Enregistré ou fixé ?	28
1.4 Le point d'écoute	31
1.5 La construction de l'espace sonore	41
1.6 Le son direct	45
1.7 Son <i>in</i> , son <i>off</i>	56
1.8 Le contrepoint du son et de l'image	67
1.9 Le silence au cinéma	75
2 «Je vois une voix»	81
2.1 Le «miroir acoustique»	82
2.2 La voix maternelle	87
2.3 Le synchronisme contrôle la voix féminine	88
2.4 Où est donc la voix-over féminine ?	90
2.5 Voix, corps	91
2.6 Intériorité/extériorité	96
2.7 Identification d'une femme	99
2.8 Style, narcissisme	111
2.9 La chanteuse de jazz	114
2.10 La femme sur le divan	115
2.11 Voix, matérialité	118
2.12 Lectrice in fabula	121
2.13 Le corps de la voix	125
2.14 Le retour de la mère	126
2.15 Hors de son corps	131
2.16 Le miroir félé	142
3 Théories de la musique au cinéma	148
3.1 La musique et l'image à l'époque muette	148
3.1.1 Persistance de la musique à l'écran	149
3.1.2 La musique masque le bruit du projecteur	154
3.1.3 Fonctions sémio-narratives de la musique de film	165
3.1.4 Musique, rythme, vitesse, temps subjectif	185
3.1.5 La musique compense l'aspect plan de l'écran, et offre un antidote à la qualité spectrale de l'image	202
3.2 Le film sonore et la musique	206
3.2.1 L'espace sonore se partage	208
3.2.2 Une synchronisation infiniment répétable	211

3.2.3	Standardisation de la musique de film	213
3.2.4	La musique de fond et la «mélodie non entendue» . . .	217
3.2.5	Autour de la diégèse	228
3.2.6	Musique, collectivité	231
Conclusion		235
Bibliographie des œuvres consultés		246
Index des films cités		275
Index des noms propres		279