

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Into the Zone

By Donato Totaro

The trolley scene in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is a pivotal moment, which transports the three central characters from the edge of the city to the rural outskirts. The titular Stalker (Aleksandr Kajdanovsky) guides two men, known only as the Writer (Anatoli Solonitsyn) and the Scientist (Nikolai Grinko), in search of a wish fulfilling room at the heart of a government-imposed restricted area referred to as the "Zone." Perhaps most striking in this scene is its remarkable treatment of time: with five shots lasting a total of 3'42", the sequence is experienced as 'short' in relation to the physical space traveled in the narrative, yet 'long' in relation to the psychological time as experienced by the characters. This effect is achieved, in large part, through the use of sound.

After they fire up the engine and head out along the track, a cut brings us to a close shot of the three men seated on the trolley. Along with this change in the image comes a stark change on the soundtrack: from the distant whirring of the loud trolley engine we move to the close-up clanking sound of the wheels on the tracks. This abrupt cut foreshadows the unreadable temporal intervals between each shot that serve to "elongate" the sequence's representation of time. In the

next shot we still hear the diegetic sound of the wheels on the train tracks, but here a non-diegetic sound is subtly introduced: an “unnatural” series of percussive electronic tonalities akin to the sound of bending sheet metal. By the end of this long take (1’37”) an aural balance has been established between the diegetic and non-diegetic sound. The shot then cuts to a close-up of the Writer in profile with his head tilted downward and then again to the Stalker in close-up, standing upright and looking steadfastly ahead. By this point the diegetic trolley sound is overwhelmed by the non-diegetic electronic sound. An effect of this shift in sonic balance is that the sound of the trolley wheels seems to take on the properties of the electronic sound, thus providing a point of cross-over between the inside and outside of the diegesis. The wheels no longer clank but appear muffled, distorted, and varied in pitch, much like the gyrating qualities of the electronics. This merging of diegetic and non-diegetic sound plays a great formal role in elongating and manipulating our understanding of time; the bending of pitch on both sonic planes creates the aural equivalent of “stretched” time.

The final shot of the trolley journey cuts from the black and white aesthetic used up until this point to a colour image of a lush, wooded landscape. The dramatic change to colour helps to increase the sense of geographical space covered (and hence affects our estimation of time). As the journey nears its end, the unnatural, non-diegetic sound abruptly stops and is replaced by a return to the diegetic sound of the wheels and tracks. The trolley then comes to a halt and we rest for a moment in absolute silence. Thanks in large part to the modulating,

changing soundscape — combining the real with the unreal, natural with unnatural, diegetic with non-diegetic — the trolley journey registers a temporal vagueness, which symbolizes the spiritual journey that the three travelers are about to embark upon. In so doing this journey also foreshadows the very same shifting, “unreal” time-space properties of the “Zone,” a space that is perhaps miraculous, perhaps imaginary, and entirely perfect for exploring alternative possibilities in the relationships between sound and image on film.

Bio:

Donato Totaro has been the editor of the online film journal *Offscreen* since its inception in 1997. Totaro received his PhD in Film & Television from the University of Warwick (UK) and is a part-time lecturer in Film Studies at Concordia University (Montreal, Canada). He has published on recent Asian cinema, the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky, the horror genre and is currently preparing a manuscript entitled *Time and the Long Take in Narrative Cinema*.