Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Tati, Hitchcock, Antonioni: Three Approaches to Sonic Creativity

By Elisabeth Weis

When thinking about the moments of film sound that appeal to me the most, it quickly becomes clear that no single approach to sound/image relationships can do justice to the heterogeneity that is necessarily found across different films. So I've settled on not one but three examples, which illustrate contrasting approaches that explore equal but very different avenues for the expressive power of sound in the cinema: the observational, the subjective, and the epistemological.

Tati's *Playtime* (1967) is set up to let us hear sound afresh thanks to its minimal plot, dialogue, and underscoring. In this cinematic environment, the simple "thwup" of a vinyl chair returning to its original position after its seat has been depressed provides great comedy as well as insightful observation. Little moments like this make *Playtime* an observational masterpiece on the sounds and images of artificial materials and modernity. Tati is one of the few artists whose critique of modern society depends as much on what we hear as what we see.

While Tati wants us to recognize aural experiences common to us all, Hitchcock often wants his audience to share his protagonists' misperceptions of reality—so that we can recognize how easy it is to perceive things subjectively. To convey a character's guilt, Hitchcock often distorts sound in ways that would seem much too unrealistic for his aesthetic in other situations.

There are some remarkable instances of subjective sound in Hitchcock's *The Secret Agent* (1936), a film in which the potential for social order to be overwhelmed by chaos is conveyed aurally through constant shifts from music to noise. In so doing, Hitch taps into the fact that what we generally call music is nothing other than sounds that have been ordered in space and time as harmony and rhythm. The shift from music to noise, presented as a character's perception, conveys that character's descent into the world of the irrational.

In *The Secret Agent*, Edgar Brodie (John Gielgud) and Elsa Carrington (Madeleine Carroll) are hired by British intelligence to kill an enemy spy during World War I. Edgar and the General (Peter Lorre) take the putative spy on a mountain hike (where they plan to stage an "accident"), while Elsa stays behind in a hotel with the victim's wife and their dachshund. Hitchcock crosscuts between the hikers and the hotel room, where the dog, which has been associated with the spy throughout the film, whines, paws and then howls at the door, as if to warn its master. As the dog's anxiety escalates, Hitchcock carries its noises over to the shots of the hikers. When Lorre pushes the victim off a cliff, we hear the heartrending baying of his dog, a slow, descending howl that suggests the plunge

of the body, which we never actually see falling. The sequence ends with howling laid under a close-up of Carroll's guilty face.

The next scene is set at a dockside café, where Edgar and Elsa find out that they have killed the wrong man. Once the couple has learned of their mistake, yodeling folksingers in the background sound as much like a dog howling as music. Under a delirious visual montage linking Elsa's stricken face with the film's ongoing motif of spinning objects, Hitchcock escalates the sound to a punishing level; the aural montage includes yodeling, coins whirling in the performers' bowls, and the sound of the (absent) dog's whining, which, while not subliminal, does require conscious effort to be noticed by the audience. Writing subjectivity into a scene's design allows a filmmaker great leeway to exaggerate or otherwise exploit sound in a medium that usually valorizes seamless illusionism.

In *Blow-Up* (1966), Antonioni moves beyond subjective perception; he questions whether objective reality can be perceived at all. When the photographer revisits a park where he may have witnessed a murder, we hear a click that lacks definite attribution. The click can be interpreted as a snapped twig, a clicked camera shutter or a cocked gun. Each possibility suggests a different reality and interpretation, a multivalence that extends the film's epistemological themes. Of course, the issues of subjectivity and interpretation are also raised by the photographs that have been sequenced to create what may or may not be evidence of a murder. These extreme blow-ups provide a display of visual

ambiguity in a medium where images are usually more concrete and identifiable than sounds. So Antonioni manages to establish an all too rare equilibrium between sound and image based on their mutual lack of specificity.

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Bio:

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