

Sara Pinheiro (FAMU)

The Sound of *Saute ma ville*

“Akerman cleanses her narrative of anecdote and of psychological overtones. The performance also has a presentational quality that dispels dramatic development.”

Ivone Margulies¹⁾

At first listen, the sound of Chantal Akerman's first short film, *Saute ma ville* (1968), is baffling. For many reasons: it is asynchronous, exaggerated, absent, surreal, detached. It seems lo-fi, raw, and amateurish. In fact, it reflects the technical obstacles of its time: recording sound in movement was difficult in practice, with most productions being (insufficiently) completed with ADR.²⁾ In some parts, the sound is not synchronized with the image, seeming to enhance the nonsensicality of the protagonist's individual tasks. The action is sometimes exaggerated and absurd. Its intentions, ideas, meanings and strategies unfold themselves more and more upon a closer look/listen. In her first exercise, Akerman's general attitude is already shaped: the simplicity, the intentional naivety that distracts the audience for what is to come, the feeling of *vérité*, as much as the feeling that “nothing happens”.³⁾

Akerman made use of sound as a direct tool for storytelling. All sounds reflect the story in their own way but equally take the same direction of discomfort and restlessness

-
- 1) Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 2.
 - 2) ADR stands for 'Automated Dialogue Replacement'. In some iconic movies from this period, the technique was underdeveloped, less accurate than nowadays. For example, see the bridge scene in Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) versus any contemporary mainstream film.
 - 3) When confronted with the idea that *Saute ma ville* is a young version of *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman replied roughly that [her character] did not want to become a Jeanne Dielman herself (at a public talk at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem; see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zT3BDXIwuv8>>, [accessed 7 December 2018]).

as the visual part. This paper argues that *Saute ma ville*'s soundtrack is a complex exercise in storytelling, giving meaning to a term about to emerge: Sound Design.⁴⁾ In line with this, the sound will be noted under the light of the concepts developed in the "Acousmatic Foley" project, such as "sound-prop", "sound-actor", and "sound-motif".⁵⁾ While "Acousmatic Foley" contributes to understanding *Saute ma ville*'s sonic content, *Saute ma ville* provides an understanding of these three concepts all in one. They share the same elements.

As mentioned above, at first listen, one might think the sound is quite defective. However, a closer listen will reveal an attentive choice for each element. Every decision is intentionally producing a consequence in the intrinsic perception of the movie, be it subconscious or literal. As such, there are several props to punctuate the main actions and also the details in the story. The character plays around a few objects, establishing the general tone of the film, the aesthetics of the plot, and the mood of the character. At times, the sounds reflect Akerman's naivety, both as a filmmaker and as role character, but they also show the talent, accuracy, and craft of a magnificent storyteller.⁶⁾

The introduction

As in many other movies, there is the presentation of a certain routine. In this case, the main character arrives at what seems to be her home via a classic "establishing shot" with a generic sound atmosphere matching the visual expectations of a suburb with some construction works going on (00:14)⁷⁾. The girl picks up her post in a shot that seems to have direct sound (00:36 — right acoustics, right synchronism). She then calls the lift (00:46). The sound of this call is the first sign of nonlinearity in the film, of *naivety*: it is clearly added in post-production, the synchronization is dubious and indeed almost matching the visuals, but at the same time distinctly fake. It seems to be a "pretend sound", resembling a children's game, one of these noisy toys with no definition (as in lo-fi vs. hi-fi). The texture is just not right. There is no ambiance, no embedded space; it is a dry and low-quality sound.⁸⁾ As she runs up the stairs, this game is confirmed: her footsteps are the first

4) The term Sound Design is often attributed to Walter Murch, for being the first appearing as such in the final credits of Coppola's *The Rain People* (1969). It was ultimately popularized later with another Coppola film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). See Michael Ondaatje and Walter Murch, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

5) Acousmatic Foley is a practice-based research on sound dramaturgy stemming from *Musique Concrète* and Foley Art developed by the author. It proposes an approach of fiction that is specific to sound. The project foregrounds a sequence of concepts — sound-prop, sound-actor and sound-motif — which allows to develop this dramaturgic framework. It is based on several examples from film history and tradition, but also on a sense of performance and staging acousmatic music. See Sara Pinheiro, Acousmatic Foley: Staging Sound Fiction, *Organised Sound*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2016), pp. 242–248.

6) This exposition makes almost no distinction between the character and the filmmaker, often meaning both.

7) All the timecode references hereby are based on the available versions online, such as, for example, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jx2RNzl-p3Q>> [accessed 7 December 2018]. This is intended for "study purposes only", given that the timecode from the analog version and consequential DCPs are not available to the general audience.

8) A dry sound is a raw direct sound (with no effects or any kinds of modifications, in this case typically

clear mismatch (00:52). The whole scene is accentuating this childish tone, with the girl behaving silly. Throughout the movie, she will use her voice over the image.⁹⁾

Yet, a sense of composition is already in place. The lift's moving door is shown with a droning sound accompanying it. Here, the need for *real* accuracy is dismissed. First, because the movement in question allows for abstraction; second, because this sound stands on its own anyway, as an added value rather than an illustration of an action. At this point, a sense of alienation has already been suggested. The filmmaker is subtly preparing the audience for a permanent juggle between sound and image, raw and refined choices, realistic and absurd moments.

The props

In theatre, a prop is part of the *mise-en-scène*; an adornment, or a distinct method of characterization, which contributes to the comprehension of the action or the characters. It is often through the use of the sound of a prop that filmmaking can produce direct associations with meaning. Acousmatic Foley proposes a way to conceptualize these props as sound-props. In *Saute ma ville*, Akerman makes use of a few such props.¹⁰⁾

The scene in the kitchen is a sequence of actions with minor ellipses. The objects keep the dynamism in the scene and give it a certain sense of *happening*, as if there were a motive. Some objects are audible, some are not. Some choices seem rather technical, some are punctuations. For example, the water flushing provides a cue for the cut, smoothing its roughness by distracting the audience, justifying the jump (00:59). On the contrary, the **letters** taken from the post box must be of some importance, as she chose to roughly magnify the movement of placing one of them in the kitchen cabinet (01:46), but not much reasoning is given. Would the letters count as the last trace of society to which the character will connect? Is it the motivation for what will follow? This could be the story's inciting incident.

Similarly, the **keys** in the girl's hands are silent when she sits, until being dropped on the floor (01:57). This is an important moment. It seems one should pay attention to the action of locking the door (02:08 — properly audible). In fact, she subtly calls attention to this moment with a cute sound of clearing her throat (01:58). It might seem random or unintentional, but later it will be understandable why the filmmaker wants us to notice this action (the locking of the door). Following this, the character proceeds with her routine. It is "time" for cooking (02:14 — the sound of a clock suggests so).

recorded very close to the microphone) as opposed to a wet sound, which is modified with natural or artificial effects or conditions (for instance, long reflections caused either by the architecture of the space, or by positioning the microphone a little bit off). In this case, it would translate as a "reflected" sound, as in a sound which is propagated in that hall-space.

9) In the same conversation referred to above, Akerman also mentions that she had no budget for the movie, particularly the sound; perhaps that led her to make most of the sounds with her own voice (in post-production).

10) For other examples, see the whistle in *Bye Bye Monkey* (1978); or the scissors in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990).

Naturally, the action continues with what seem to be aleatory choices between audible and inaudible actions. The clock is off-screen and supposedly unnecessary. But it contributes to punctuating the movements, establishing a somewhat conventional compass of waiting. It is a routine, both in the sense of a habit and in the sense of a choreographed sequence of movements. This moment could have been very ordinary, with almost appropriate foley work (02:16 — the sound of the cabinet's doors and the grabbing of the spaghetti package), but again, something will confuse us and break the linearity of regular sound design. At this time, another prop appears: the **matches**. The choice to emphasize this moment is bold (its first appearance is at 02:22).¹¹⁾ This should not go unnoticed. For the sound of the matches, the filmmaker used her own voice, mimicking the sound of a match lighting. The moment seems to follow the naivety of the previous vocalizations, but this onomatopoeia is far from innocent. The matches (and later also the gas, at this point inaudible) are to play an important role in the plot.¹²⁾

All these hints are very subtle. The tone is endearing: this young girl, humming, just having fun in her little kitchen while making spaghetti. Although it never lasts very long, this is the apparent atmosphere prevailing. Nevertheless, this sense of normality is permanently challenged. A small sign of aggressivity is then given by the opening of the can in a rough way (02:42). Then, a new odd moment takes place: the character decides to isolate the kitchen door with some **tape** while eating an **apple** (02:56). Unlike some other classic narratives in which there is some sort of decision-making (a turning point), this action seems almost routine. By any means, it is not exactly a dramatic decision... nothing of the kind. As if insulating a door with tape is as spontaneous or natural as cooking spaghetti. Once again, these actions are far from random. In fact, they are all structured, composed, arranged. They construct the story without declaring it. This is another moment of sonic composition: the sound is coordinated, a rhythmic arrangement between the tape and the biting of the apple. Another waiting compass. The camera gets closer and closer, making sure the action does not go unnoticed. And again, not for too long. A rough cut comes, motivated by sound, to the pot on the stove with spaghetti (03:33).¹³⁾ If before it was the clock, now it is a sort of alarm (resembling the alarm of an oven with the same proximity/lack of accuracy as some of the sounds mentioned above). All these cues are diegetic, and thus justified. A different sound but saying the same thing: it is time. On the one hand, technically well-executed fiction. On the other hand, a conceptually distracting one: the illusion that this is just a young girl cooking for herself as on any other day. The character,

11) It can be taken as a creative decision, but the author said she could not make it any other way. See footnotes 3 and 9.

12) In *Senses of Cinema*, Fernandez Ferrer identifies this sound as “scotch”, relating it with the object “scotch tape” that will appear shortly after. While this is rightly addressed especially in French, this paper proposes such sound to be an onomatopoeia. It asserts that it stands for the sound of lighting the matches. It might seem odd because the sound happens before the action itself. In comparison with other bold choices, attempting at a clearly asynchronous sound is not so off. And it does end up synchronizing (02:32). See Nicole Fernandez Ferrer, ‘About Saute ma ville (1968), Chantal Akerman’s first film’, *Senses of Cinema*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015), <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/chantal-akerman/saute-ma-ville/>> [accessed 7 December 2018].

13) Although this paper focuses on the sound of *Saute ma ville*, one can notice other techniques. In this cut, a Hitchcock moment: the famous dissolve into the character’s back, justifying the complete dark frame and therefore the cut (*Rope*, 1948).

innocently eating her spaghetti. The filmmaker, innocently dropping a few sounds here and there, and failing at some others (e.g., no sound for popping the cork from the bottle of wine, but some sound for pouring the wine into the glass — 03:52).¹⁴⁾

Locking the door, using gas, insulating air circulation

At this point, four minutes into the movie, the viewer might just be alienated. In fact, eating the spaghetti is the longest and quietest moment one has to get distracted by, perhaps in one's own thoughts; perhaps considering the filmmaker's incapacity to make the movie accurate and credible, a realistic fiction. And again, not for too long. Soon, the audience finds out that feeding herself is of no importance, as she stands up and puts the plate on the floor, conceivably for a pet (04:11). In a blink of an eye, it is not about eating, enjoying a meal, or some daily routine after work. There is no point in it. To some extent, this is the "Crossing of the Threshold" moment, a point after which nothing will be the same. It initiates the escalation towards a point of no return, leading the character and the story to their ultimate fate.¹⁵⁾

All these lurking ideas are accentuated by sound. The image alone would not be so bizarre. Sound-wise, however, the closer the film gets to its climax (will it?), the more absurd it becomes. It grows detached from the image, becoming singular in its content. As the character finishes taping/insulating the door, the sound initiates a crescendo towards the climax (04:31). The crooning becomes more intensive, while the visual action *per se* is not so awkward. In the meantime, a cat jumps in. Its sound is clearly added in post-production. Otherwise, we would hear the whole encounter between them (04:40) and not just the cat's voice. Besides, it is the same structural interruption as the two previous clocks/alarms: the first clock resembled a bell (as in time for cooking); the other resembled an oven clock (as in the spaghetti is ready). None of them necessary or justified. These three interruptions are jump-cuts, stripping off the continuity, moving the narrative a step further, turning over the page. Additionally, the cat's presence is not aleatory. The space has been confined; the tape isolated the air circulation. She opens the window to set the cat free (04:50). Like most of the previous actions, this one is also not explicit. Only afterward does it all make sense together.

14) This can, of course, be understood in a different way: many things in *real* life make no sound. In this case, sometimes the popping of the cork makes a prominent sound, sometimes it does not. Sound-cinema, however, taught us to look at a big screen in a way that things always *sound*. A door always squeaks, a dog always barks, the bottle's cork always pops. See 'sound driving' — Marilyn G. Boltz, 'Auditory Driving in Cinematic Art', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2017), pp. 77–93 and Birger Langkjaer, 'Audiovisual Styling and the Film Experience: Prospects for Textual Analysis and Experimental Approaches to Understand the Perception of Sound and Music', *Music and the Moving Image*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2015), pp. 35–47.

15) The "Hero's Journey" is a path of 12 steps in a classic film narrative. One of them is "Crossing the Threshold", the moment in which the character leaves the "Ordinary World" and enters the "Special World", which will include tests, challenges and conflicts and usually occurs after some "Inciting Incident". In this structure, most likely the hero (the protagonist) would find a way back to the ordinary world, re-establishing a sense of normality, some sort of "Resurrection". [See Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Seattle: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007)]. This is not the case: Akerman guides us in an "anti-plot" fashion, and there is no return after the climax.

From this moment on, sound and image will take on different paths. The number of actions without sound increases, as does the number of sound events without a synchronized image. Akerman never ceases to engage the audience through sounds linked to the image (04:48: biting the apple). But, in a manner of speaking, things get progressively out of control. The opening of the window (04:50) brings in a strange sound. It sounds more like a huge gate than an apartment window. It also resembles the water flushing from the beginning of the film (00:59), but soon enough it blends in with the water running from the faucet (04:54).¹⁶⁾

When she drops some objects from the cabinet, the film becomes more and more chaotic/noisy. She is preparing some sort of cleaning, and both the preparation and its sound-design are clumsy. Again, this moment is punctuated by sound in an evasive way. It sounds almost like a bell, but at the same time, it could be just the objects falling and rolling off the cabinet. It is always ambiguous. It does not really belong there, and at the same time, it does. Then, the character seems to be looking for something (05:21) and, for no apparent reason, finds a coat below the sink cabinet, which she puts on. There is a certain formality to this gesture, as if she were preparing for something specific. The nonsense is gradually becoming more explicit, because it is not expected and because her attitude seems to become more pronounced. However, none of these moments implies any clear decision-making (neither the looking for nor the finding of). In a way, all actions are semi-flat, remaining at the same level of importance, without any majestic drama. It all seems neutral, but it also starts to seem more cryptic (from 05:27). What exactly is this character up to? What is this gesture with the coat and headscarf?

For over a minute, the audience is left in silence. As if the actions either needed no further explanation or perhaps closer attention. It is as if the filmmaker gave up on trying to make a proper soundtrack or as if the moment is of such solemnity that there should be no disturbance in witnessing it (until 06:19). Either way, this is one of three long, silent moments in the movie. Whether left silent with a specific purpose, e.g., for being politically self-explanatory, or due to the already known technical reasons, these scenes are reduced to being mute. More than what is seen, it is what is not heard.¹⁷⁾

In fact, what seems to be a moment of audiovisual anarchy is a manifestation of Akerman's creative control over the filmic material. What follows this first moment of silence is a chaotic mismatch of sounds and images in an organized sequence of different sorts of information, and none of it is aleatory. From 06:19, the silence is interrupted, but image and sound already are on parallel paths and will hardly meet again. Or better said, they will meet again in their very final encounter. Again, this parallelism also operates between the character and the filmmaker, in a twofold understanding of the narrative. On the one hand, the character struggling with (and failing at?) the domestic chores; on the other

16) Mistaking the "flushing" with the "faucet" and vice-versa is also a consequence of the lo-fi sound quality mentioned in the introduction, which became an aesthetic identity of cinema in this period (not only during the *nouvelle-vague* period but already since the times of neorealism), characterized by sounds happening "outside", that is, moving in an uncontrolled environment.

17) Filmic silence, for somewhat being not granted, always has some dramatic impact; it magnifies the image to a deafening condition. See Erik Bihl, *The captivating use of silence in film: How silence affects the emotional aspect of cinema* (Blekinge Tekniska Högskola Institutionen för Teknik och Estetik, 2017).

hand, the filmmaker is struggling with footage without sound. Akerman was a storyteller, and both sound and image could deliver the actions of her story and *tell* it. She was a “maker”. It is not difficult to understand why she allowed for mismatching combinations of sounds and images, as she knew which story to tell. Nevertheless, there are three critical moments of silence in the movie for which it is harder to find justification (beyond the nonexistent production conditions already mentioned). Instead of trying to justify these moments, perhaps it will be more revealing to observe the consequences of this silence.

The truant sound

As mentioned above, this paper asserts that *Saute ma ville* demonstrates very precise artistic choices at any moment. Every frame carried a decision, and therefore a consequence in the perception thereof. Besides a certain rawness that remained in the whole body of her work, the filmmaker always showed certainty in her attitude.¹⁸⁾

The first moment of silence happens when the character finds a coat and puts it on (05:27–06:20). As mentioned above, this action seemed more like a gesture than any of the actions up to this point, particularly due to the movement of the headscarf. Most likely, the feeling of witnessing a meaningful moment results from silence. In a way, this silence provides more time to perceive her movements. It room to wonder whether it means something specific, almost like clearing up previous doubts and confusion. It initiates a new mode; it triggers a new feeling. It allows for closer observation. She *is* getting ready for something. Finally, it is suggested that *something* will happen. The silence brings in the solemnity of this moment. And as it is more visible that she is up to something, the silent image acquires a certain comic tone — it almost resembles physical comedy in slapsticks.¹⁹⁾ The whole segment lasts about one minute, and it is not clear whether the character actually wants to tidy up or make a bigger mess. She is preparing to clean but ends up making more of a chaos.

At 06:19, this long silence is momentarily interrupted by a few sounds. Again, these sounds are not at all in sync with the images, despite somehow matching what is seen. It is not the first time this happens, but it is the most prominent one: both sound and image have one single message, but their own way to send it. Once in a while, there is a little detail that will again attach the sound to the image and consequently the audience to the film. It does not allow for alienation. It happens at 06:30, when a very rough sound matches the throwing of the water. By now, this is clearly a very peculiar way of cleaning up a kitchen. Indeed, Akerman, the filmmaker and the character/actress, has no vocation to be Jeanne Dielman. And yet, Akerman, the young filmmaker, already seems able to tell a story with whatever resources available.

The second moment of silence happens shortly after, with the beginning of the domestic chores (06:36–07:35). In fact, it seems to work the opposite way than the previous block

18) As Margulies puts it, “a dry intensity”. Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 1, 22 and 171. Even when in doubt, Chantal Akerman’s discourse has been very straightforward all along. An idea that is very present in any of her films, but also noticeable in any of her interviews. See, for example, the documentaries *Chantal Akerman, From Here* (2010) and *I Don’t Belong Anywhere: The Cinema of Chantal Akerman* (2015).

19) Physical comedy, as a choreographed body, is in fact very present in Akerman’s work. See, for example, *I’m Hungry, I’m Cold* (1984).

of silence. Instead of adding solemnity to it, it detaches the image from the character, the character from the audience, and so on. It makes her struggle inaudible. It disconnects the audience from these actions as much as the filmmaker is. The character might try, but *no one* will hear it. The relationship is cut off, alienated. In this case, the silence emphasizes the disruption. It creates a gap, both between the filmmaker/character and between the audience and the filmmaker/character. The silence makes the moment feel helpless: it reminds us of the passivity of the listener as it exposes the immutability of this experience. In a way, it is the confirmation of a point of no return. The disassociation between sound and image, her actions and the audience's incapacity to perceive them fully, spells out the hopeless faith of this story.

The third moment of silence happens after a short ellipse. The kitchen is clean, all tidy and shiny, and the character is now polishing her shoes with a **brush** (08:13–08:47). This action evokes the same feeling as the putting on of the coat. It is a moment of preparation: she is “getting ready for something”. If it were not for the disruption of the second silent moment, or for the fact that there was already a solemn moment, this section would have the same impact. Due to the previous silent moments, this one seems in conformity. It is redundant, prolonging. And yet, it is refreshing because it is the very first moment in which the filmmaker assumes the latent sound fallacies; in which the challenge of synchronicity is clearly combined with a sense of composition. Before, one or the other had their own turn: biting the apple and insulating the door with tape was clearly a rhythmical composition but asynchronous; the cleaning of the floor was completely out of sync but had no particular sonic arrangement. Now, they are assuredly fictional.

However, at this point, none of it matters. It is neither about synchronicity nor about composing. Both components, the visual and the sonic, send the same message. The means of storytelling are not conflicting: it is impressive how both sources of information say the same thing, at their own pace and capacity. In line with the concept of sound-prop, the main objects of these silent moments are potential props that did not get to be used. However, this last moment of silence combines silence with “real” sound, and thus it puts forward this prop as a sound-prop. The brush is acting visually, but it also acts sonorously. The assumption that the filmmaker was unable to continue with matching sound and image is misapprehending the artistic value of her choices. She has explained this many times, for instance, when she claims that *a corridor and a door already tell a story*.²⁰⁾ She could see a trigger in anything, creating tension and expectation in everything. Akerman was very certain how to tell a story. The silence also allowed her to do so. As Kane asserts, “in the silence of imagined sound, where there is nothing actually vibrating, one can perform intentional acts, (...) such as conceiving, comparing, composing, and distinguishing sounds.”²¹⁾ In this moment, she unfolds her craft. The fact that most sound was done in post-production but still in a very limited way only pushed the filmmaker forward in her ability to tell stories. It is an act of liberation.²²⁾

20) Paraphrasing from *Chantal Akerman, From Here* (2010).

21) Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

22) “Liberation” as in a parallel with Varèse and Wen-chung’s “Liberation of Sounds” (1966), which is not so decontextualized when geographic and chronological proximities are considered and given the general attitude towards experimentalism, *nouvelle vague*, and *acousmatic* music. (See Edgar Varèse and Chou

Following these moments of silence, there is one last sequence of actions before the ultimate end. The girl is sitting on the floor for a while (08:35) and seems pensive. She grabs a newspaper (08:50), which also makes no sound, and plays with it for a short while. Over this action, her own voice is humming the same melody as in the beginning. Again, this also seems pointless. Nevertheless, while in the beginning it seems she could, for instance, even be looking for a job, now she starts scribing all over the newspaper. She is restless. She looks outside and then goes to the window frame, to insulate it as well (09:41). Then, she starts off a weird dance, still giving this feeling of getting ready for something. She is laughing awkwardly, spills lotion all over herself, and seems to be having fun, once again disrupting the initial purpose of these tasks (the lotion is not supposed to be used this way). It is a Resurrection dance.²³⁾ Then, there is a moment of confrontation, a moment in which she finds her own reflection in the mirror (10:35). Her expression changes, and she slaps herself in the face. Then she writes something on the mirror's glass with her finger (no sound) and walks to the stove again. Only at this point does sound again align with the image. The matches, previously heard as an onomatopoeia, are now with *real* sound (10:47). Image and sound return to one another. It gets solid again, as a "Return of the Elixir", the last step in Vogler's narrative structure.

The actors

When a prop acquires an extra layer of meaning within the narrative, it has an *acting* function. In a normal context, that prop would be a regular object, but in the context of the story, the prop amounts to development and/or understanding of the plot. By that time, this prop is no longer a mere object. The prop was chosen according to a sonic-dramaturgic function. It becomes an actor within this context, for it plays a role. Once this meaning has been established, evoking its sound will consequently evoke the meaning it carries. It becomes a reference within the narrative.

In *Saute ma ville*, most props are mere props. They are objects, belong to the scene, and happen to make sounds, which the filmmaker took advantage of. They establish a sense of rhythm, even of duality, but their role is circumstantial. However, there is one sound that translates into a specific idea. Just like with the anklet in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009) or the zippo in *The Butcher* (1970), the sound of the gas contributes to the resolution of the plot. For example, in *The Butcher*, the sound of the zippo becomes a direct association to the murder investigated; it passes on from character to character until, finally, in a moment of increasing suspense and tension, its sound informs the audience of Popaul's presence in the room (off-screen), and therefore identifies him as the murderer. The main plot is then solved. This prop has an acting function, being, therefore, a sound-actor.

Wen-chung, "The Liberation of Sound," *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1966, pp. 11–19). Besides, the Acousmatic Foley research project aims precisely at crossing the references and terminology from Concrete Music and Sound for Film. Even if at the time (or ever) Akerman was not aware of Schaeffer, Varèse, and others, the idea is that she had exactly the same understanding of sound's possibilities as these composers.

23) See footnote 14.

As for *Saute ma ville*, the sound of the **gas** is a sound-actor because of the role it plays. Incidentally, it is an abstract object, but that is not why it cannot be considered a prop. It is because its presence is beyond the impossibility to maneuver it (and not for being non-physical). In fact, this is one of the main distinctions of “sound-props” and “sound-actors” when compared to “sound-objects”. These concepts are ramifications of the sound-object concept while avoiding its amplexity. Ideally, paraphrasing Kane, the sound-object does not exist beyond its audible manifestation,²⁴⁾ as it “only truly emerges when a sound no longer functions for another as a medium, but rather is perceived as such.”²⁵⁾ However, Kane also asserts that “the objectivity of the sound object is intended to emerge across its various instances,”²⁶⁾ which is the case of film sound being multimedia (sound and image). Besides, unlike the film examples mentioned above, a sound-actor is not necessarily a plot resolver, nor is it intangible.

But as soon as the gas sounds (11:11), the *plot* is revealed. For it all was a suggestion until now, blurring with the illusion of a silly young girl just playing around. Seconds after, she lit a long match, blew up a balloon, said “bang-bang”, and set fire to the letter (which might, after all, also carry more meaning than it would seem). At this point, the gas acquired many synonyms: blowing up, suicide, explosion, etc. This is a quick escalation towards the final Elixir.²⁷⁾ This escalation soon exhausts every possibility, and the moment comes in which the character finally leans her head over the stove and does nothing else. The sound of the gas tells what is going to happen, adds the relevant information. Back when she was cooking spaghetti, the sound of the gas was not important, and thus inaudible. But now, this very same action without its sound would not lead to the same conclusion. It would not translate the image as a moment of suicide; it would not suggest the explosion after the black image appears. The gas has a very specific dramaturgic function: it says more than any words. It is the final punctuation that ties together all the split ends, and this image could not go without it.

The motifs

In some cases, the prop, sometimes evolving into an actor, can develop into a musical construction as well. In fact, the parallelism with *Musique Concrète*’s concept of sound-object lies in the prop’s intrinsic potential to produce sounds.²⁸⁾ If these sounds become a “repeatable reference,”²⁹⁾ they produce a pattern as in a musical phrase. They recur to an idea, defining an internal logic that is recognizable and understood as such. Stemming from the musical concept known as *leitmotif*, a sound-motif uses the same strategy but throughout this chain of prop-actor-motif.

24) Kane, *Sound Unseen*, p. 34.

25) *Ibid.*, p. 25.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 32.

27) See Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey*.

28) See Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017) and Kane, *Sound Unseen*.

29) Kane, *Sound Unseen*, p. 21.

A classic example of a *leitmotif* is the main musical theme of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Incidentally, the main instrument of this melody (the harmonica) is also a sound-prop, for being the object accompanying the main character at all times. In fact, it bears a direct relation to the plot, as it is intrinsically related to the development of the narrative. Most importantly, it is actually the presence of this instrument (and its musical phrase) that announces the presence of the character in the scene. Nevertheless, the outline of a sound-motif is shared by music composition too, because its structure is in the realm of musical understanding (composing phrases). An example of a cross-over between sonic and music composition can be found in Brown's film adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, starring Greta Garbo (1935). The motif is composed of two sounds that carry no particular meaning or assumption per se. As objects, there is a train and a hammer. As actions, there is a train about to depart, and a hammer being used to break the ice stuck on a train rail. At an early point of the "Hero's Journey"³⁰⁾, Anna Karenina goes to the train station. When she is about to leave, the departing train is marked by a combination of sounds, including the hammering. Suddenly, unexpected shouts are heard, and the crowd (and the audience) understands that someone committed suicide on the tracks. In a semi close-up, Anna Karenina expresses her sensitivity to the incident, slightly horrified but emotionally distant. Much later, when her journey is reaching the end, she returns to the train station. This new sequence seems almost like a *déjà vu*; it immediately recalls the previous episode. The scene is built sound by sound, growing in tension, which is confirmed when the hammering is heard once again. This sound is grounded in a well-known and previously established meaning so that it can proceed on its own, announcing what is about to come. Its existence is so well justified that it can afford desynchronization, claiming autonomy from the image. It extends the waiting, giving it a tempo, increasing the suspense and the expectation. As "in a narrative there exist simultaneously a linear dimension — events happen at different moments in time — and relations of cause and effect between these different events,"³¹⁾ the hammering, just like the gas in *Saute ma ville*, corresponds directly to the idea of suicide within the context that has been established.

As mentioned initially, right at the start of the movie, the humming is a very concrete cue. It could have seemed random or unrelated, but the happy humming misleads the audience into expecting an "innocent" story. As she goes up the stairs, it seems that the singing is there only to fill in the space. Besides, it goes together with the action because she seems to run out of breath, either singing or climbing, but it is more than that. The song is a reference to the final scene in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), which is accompanied by the same melody. In relation to this, it is a clear presage, announcing the story's direction. In this case, it is not only a sound-motif, it also turns into a *leitmotif* across movies. From the beginning, she has been saying what the character is up to, and (within the reference) why and what for, but its meaning is codified. Towards the end, when she is sitting on the floor looking at the newspaper, she recalls the motif, singing it again (08:47). It is a reminder.

30) See Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*.

31) Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Katharine Ellis, 'Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 115, no. 2 (1990), p. 242.

Just like everything else in the film, this is not an explicit statement. Everything is a suggestion. Of course, perhaps it becomes more explicit for those recognizing the melody, but that is not necessary. The story goes on with or without such cognizance. In fact, what seems relevant is that the “happy” tone of this humming prevails afterward, in a bitter-sweet feeling of joy. It is the mood left in the end, despite the suicide. Just like in *The 400 Blows*, this melody is a statement of freedom. Both characters are about to liberate themselves from oppression. In the end, that is the meaning of this motif.

The end

Saute ma ville is Akerman’s first short movie, but it announces many of the themes, techniques, and interests that prevailed in her work. It was the start of a career that brought many different artworks, with one common thread despite the differences. Her interest in sound is shared amongst them all. In each of her movies, there is at least a detail, a moment, an object that evinces her attention to it.

For example, in *Night and Day* (1991), a neighbor keeps complaining about the noise coming from the main character’s apartment. This should make no sense, for they are quiet. The neighbor then comes to the flat and, while in the bathroom, claims “we can hear everything through the sink pipes”. This is a very awkward moment, for it seems unnecessary and unjustified. Also, Aurore Clément, who plays Anna in *The Meetings of Anna* (1978), told the story of Akerman spending much time choosing the characters’ shoes.³²⁾ She thought that the footsteps of the main character should sound in a very precise way. And she was aware that this is not a question of post-production. The sound the character makes while walking influences the acting itself. It may give it strength or discomfort, for example. Simultaneously and most importantly, the direct sound defines the scenographic tone.

Saute ma ville is in line with Akerman’s approach: no spectacle, no commodity.³³⁾ Everything flows very naturally, despite the discomfort. The experience is ambiguous, nothing holds for too long (as opposed to Jeanne Dielman), and at the same time, it seems to last forever (as in “nothing happening”). There is a sense of alienation, yet at the same time, everything is so down to reality. In between all the mess, the certainty of a goal is there all along. After the sound of the gas, the screen goes black. Together with that cut, the sound of an explosion is heard (11:37). That was the final destination. It is done now. The young girl, the kitchen, the flat, the building: several explosions. All gone. At 11:52, an indistinguishable sound appears. A sort of chapter-splitter, a distorted twinkle. The young girl mumbles the song again.

Following up on this melody, another tone announces the crew of the film. The final audio note is the credits of the movie, audible instead of visual. Obviously, this also had to do with budget limitations, but it is Akerman’s awareness that image and sound have equivalent potential. Most importantly, that sound in its abstraction and limitations actu-

32) In *I Don’t Belong Anywhere: The Cinema of Chantal Akerman* (2015).

33) Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 33.

ally allows for expanding plasticity beyond what is contained in the image. Sound is a tool of fiction-making, in its manufacturing core and its “make-believe”³⁴ ability. In all of Akerman’s work, there is a sound moment, a punctuation: from explicit notes to unnoticed choices. *Saute ma ville* is an instance of a whole.

Incidentally, the film comprises the three concepts of *Acousmatic Foley*. Through these, this article exposed Akerman’s first short film as a meticulous exercise in sound storytelling. While these concepts might help us understand the dramaturgic functions of each “audible sound”, these sounds also illustrate the concepts themselves. Whether or not the term “sound design” has been blurred over the years, *Acousmatic Foley* aims at addressing sound in its specificity: beyond dialogue and beyond music, sounds as sounds, in their potential as a tool of fiction, in their performative value. That is, what sound does what, and how it does it.

Sara Pinheiro (1985) is a soundmaker. For film and video-art, she does sound recording, editing, foley and mixing. In her solo practice, she makes acousmatic pieces, usually for multichannel performances, radio broadcasts or installations. She graduated in Cinema (Lisbon, 2008) and holds a Master of Music in Sonology (The Hague, 2012), where she is a guest lecturer. She has been part of the teaching committee at CAS — FAMU since 2013. Her academic work is a practice-based research under the name of “Acousmatic Foley”. She is currently a PhD candidate at the College of Arts, Humanities and Business, in The School of Music and Media at the Bangor University, UK.

Filmography

The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups; François Truffaut, 1959), *Anna Karenina* (Clarence Brown, 1935), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *The Butcher* (Le Boucher; Claude Chabrol, 1970), *Bye Bye Monkey* (Ciao maschio; Marco Ferreri, 1978), *Chantal Akerman, From Here* (Gustavo Beck, Leonardo Luiz Ferreira, 2010), *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990), *I Don’t Belong Anywhere: The Cinema of Chantal Akerman* (I Don’t Belong Anywhere: Le cinéma de Chantal Akerman; Marianne Lambert, 2015), *I’m Hungry, I’m Cold* (J’ai faim, j’ai froid; Chantal Akerman, 1984), *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (Terry Gilliam, 2009), *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), *Jules and Jim* (Jules et Jim; François Truffaut, 1962), *The Meetings of Anna* (Les rendez-vous d’Anna; Chantal Akerman, 1978), *Night and Day* (Nuit et jour; Chantal Akerman, 1991), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (C’era una volta il West; Sergio Leone, 1968), *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock), *The Rain People* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1969), *Saute ma ville* (Chantal Akerman, 1968).

34) “Make-believe” is a core concept of fiction. See Gertrude Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 8, and Robert Stecker, ‘Fiction, Nature of’, in Stephen Davies et al. (eds), *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) p. 276.

SUMMARY

The Sound of *Saute ma ville***Sara Pinheiro**

Saute ma ville (1968) is the first film by Chantal Akerman (1950–2015). Her portfolio includes conventional and experimental approaches, both in fiction and documentary, essays, visual portraits. Every film is a new attempt, searching for an approach that altogether still remains as her individual aesthetics. In this film, most of Akerman's attitude is already shaped: the simplicity, the intentional nativity that distracts the audience for what is to come, the feeling of *vérité*, as much as the feeling of 'nothing happens' so characteristic of hers. Under the scrutiny of Acousmatic Foley's concepts ('sound-prop', 'sound-actor' and 'sound-motif'), this paper proposes a closer look at the author's soundtrack: listening to each choice of the design as intentional and purposeful. If initially the soundtrack seems baffling, matching a general defective period of sound in film history, it is also in the front line of what sound design should be: a storyteller.

keywords: sound, Foley, Acousmatic, *vérité*, fiction