The Audiovisual *Musique Concrète*:
Towards the Integrated Soundtrack

Danijela Kulezić-Wilson, *Sound Design is the New Score: Theory, Aesthetics, and Erotics of the Integrated Soundtrack* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Sound Design is the New Score offers a refreshing perspective on the film soundtrack, due to a particular interest in *musique concrète* and minimalist music. The book revolves around cases that use diegetic sounds as soundtrack material, blurring the line between sound design and music composition. Danijela Kulezić-Wilson is also the author of *The Musicality of Narrative Film* (2015) and co-editor of *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design* and *Music in Screen Media: Integrated Soundtracks* (2016).

The book proposes the concept of "integrated soundtrack": an understanding of sound design and its elements as equal to the so-called "soundtrack," which usually only considers the music. Thus, the author reckons "the interconnectedness of all soundtrack elements: […] score, speech and sound effects" (3) in a less hierarchical manner. In order to fit this purpose, she refers to films in which the distinction between music and sound design blurs. The exposition departs from well-known examples of *musique concrète* in cinema — such as works of Walter Murch, David Lynch with Alan Splet, or Vangelis with Ridley Scott — to perch on the filmographies of Gus Van Sant or Peter Strickland as examples of the "integrated soundtrack." Along the way, she illustrates her concept both with recent films and past sound design references.

Controversially, Kulezić-Wilson draws attention to sound design precisely through its similitude with the musical soundtrack, proposing to erase the boundaries between them. In doing so, she promises it has more to do with context (of narrative perception, I would add) rather than with the sound sources themselves (33). This appeal brings sound design analysis the closest it ever got to the principles of sampling processing from *musique concrète*. Although *concrète*, electroacoustic, and minimalist music share many principles with sound design, *Sound Design is the New Score* addresses the topic thoroughly for the first time.

Erasing the Boundaries

In "'The Most Beautiful Area': Soundtrack's Liminal Spaces," Kulezić-Wilson introduces the technological developments that led to a departmentalized sound industry in film [namely music, dialogue, and sound effects (29)], and then later on, with the magnetic tape until the digital workstations, to the categories of recording, dubbing, mixing, and remixing (30). In this account, the author refers to ring

modulators [popularly used by Bebe and Louis Barron in *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956)], synthesizers, and the sampling culture in general. In this way, the first boundary to be blurred is addressed — that between sound effects and music effects. At the same time, Kulezić-Wilson contextualizes the theory within the universe of *musique concrète*, as sampling is one of its core concepts. Rightly, she illustrates an electronic approach to the soundtrack by referencing the opening scene of *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972) as well as *The Mirror*'s electroacoustic score (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975).

Furthermore, "in recent decades a similar fusion results from the use of a musical language that can slip into or emulate noise through the employment of various compositional and performing techniques […]," which foreground "the materiality of sound" towards the so-called "haptic music" (36) — a term by Miguel Mera, signifying "a mode of perception and expression through which the body is enacted."[1] To illustrate it, she refers to films by Paul Thomas Anderson, Lynne Ramsay, Denis Villeneuve, and Jonathan Glazer, highlighting the dynamic relationship between director, composer, and sound designer rather than a static (one direction only) and hierarchical (one following the other) arrangement. While the nature of the music in these examples seems to facilitate the author's argument, she proceeds with other, perhaps less obvious examples which expand and direct the analysis to the narrative aspects of sound design that are, strangely enough, seldom in the literature of this kind.

Throughout films such as *The Double* (Richard Ayoade, 2013), *The Trial* (Orson Welles, 1962), and *The Rover* (David Michôd, 2014), *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1978 and 1998), *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1991), and *Lancelot du Lac* (Robert Bresson, 1974), Kulezić-Wilson compares sound effects (or foley) to musical phrases. Arguably, they serve the same purpose: to punctuate the narrative and provoke an emotional response (43). In short, the interest lies in an "interplay between narrative and aesthetic concerns […] where the line between sound design and score is blurred to the point that the differentiation between the two is often impossible" (54). Thus far, the only division the author is yet to blur is between narration and aesthetics.

Aesthetics of Reticence

In "Scoring with Sound, the Aesthetics of Reticence, and Films of Peter Strickland," the author addresses the foundation of her theory: "the aesthetics of reticence" (56). Given that "music is habitually employed in film to ensure that nothing is left unsaid and no truths remain concealed" (62), she explains that "the aesthetics of reticence insist that restraint and a certain level of ambiguity are the basic conditions for" (61) engagement; as Walter Murch posed it, "a perceptual vacuum" for imagination (73).

Withdrawing from early Russian manifestos, the Dogme-95, or the Romanian New Wave, Kulezić-Wilson challenges the traditional function of sound design as a contextual device and argues for an "informed soundtrack." For this purpose, it seems crucial that sound design incorporates musical elements and/or the other way around. The blurred line resides precisely in the lack of distinction: music

---

1)   Here the author refers to a concept by Miguel Mera: Miguel Mera, "Materializing Film Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, eds. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 159. Nevertheless, the term "haptic" is widely used in music and sound studies. For example, Davina Quinlivan borrows Laura Marks' notion of "haptic visuality" and applies it to the sound of breathing. See Davina Quinlivan, "Breath Control: The Sound and Sight of Respiration as Hyperrealist Corporeality in Breaking the Waves," in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, eds. Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 155–161.

may be diegetic, and sound effects may be nondiegetic; these roles may be interchangeable, and the aesthetics of reticence "conceives film as a plural" (67).

In this line, "both *Katalin Varga* and *Berberian Sound Studio* (Peter Strickland, 2009 and 2012) afford great opportunities for exploring the fluidity between soundtrack elements" (56), precisely because "the most interesting aspect of *Katalin Varga*'s sound design is the fact that it is often hard to identify the acoustic or visual origin of the sound" (70). This is possible, of course, due to the use of *concrète* elements in the soundtrack, resembling electroacoustic strategies while connecting to the narrative itself. And while it seems that the sounds result from the fiction itself, in *Katalin Varga* the sound design consists of a series of pre-existing pieces by Nurse with Wound — *Cicoria* and *The Schmürz*; Pál Tóth — *Op. 70110*; Richard Stevens — *Mountain Tone*; and Stapleton and Cox — *Grave and Beautiful Name of Sadness* (71, 75 and 77). By the same token, Luciano Berio's *Visage* is the departing point for the "haunting soundtrack" of *Berberian Sound Studio*, created by the British band Broadcast (83).

At this point, the argument clearly focuses on this "aesthetic of reticence," advocating for ambiguous and complex rather than explicit and redundant strategies. Whether the musical examples cited above fall into the category of *musique concrète* or not, is not pertinent here. Kulezić-Wilson sheds light on the principles of such context and spares no time proving why the crossover is, to say the least, acceptable. Culturally, *musique concrète* carries universal interest in worldly sounds themselves (in opposition to musical instruments), and cinema has a long tradition of recurring to *traditional* scores to convey the emotion of the narrative. Under Bresson's token, "what is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear" (65), *Sound Design is the New Score* vindicates for more refined sonic choices.

The Erotics of Film Sound

Following this thread, the next chapter sheds light on the subtitle of the book — *Theory, Aesthetics, and Erotics of the Integrated Soundtrack* — by acknowledging its theoretical ground: "Vivian Sobchack's notion of film as a body, Laura Marks's work on sensory cinema, and the feminist concept of erotics as theorized by Susan Sontag and Audre Lorde in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively" (90). After a vivid contextualization of erotics and the *sensuous*, the author concludes: "the idea of erotics of cinema, however, should not be confused with film's subject matter but is rather the manner in which cinema approaches its subject and the relationship it establishes with the audioviewer" (95). Therefore, the *sensuousness* resides in this relationship of intimacy and engagement with the audience; its eroticism lies in the passivity, vulnerability, and radical openness of one towards the other.

In other words, "conventional cinema provides very few opportunities for mindful attention to the environment and its songs" (101); thus, *Sound Design is the New Score* defends "the sensuous aspects of the cinematic experience while also facilitating the space for reflexivity" (100), "exploring the musicality of diegetic sounds" (89). In this case, both Van Sant's Death Trilogy [*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005)] and three films by Hungarian director Béla Tarr [*Damnation* (1988), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), *The Man from London* (2007)] are examples of such. These films serve as a basis for a comparative study between Claire Denis's *Beau Travail* (1998) and Anna Rose Holmer's *The Fits* (2015), which, in turn, illustrate the author's perspective on how the diegetic sound can *become* the (music) soundtrack.

On the one hand, *Elephant* "absorbs different types of musicality while establishing the sound design as a core site of interrogation in a seemingly purely observational narrative" (103) because "its il-

lusion of realism is often subverted by the sound design, which frequently transverses the diegetic boundary, mixing diegetic sounds with pre-existing pieces of *musique concrète* and soundscape compositions by Hildegard Westerkamp (*Doors of Perception* and *Beneath the Forest Door*) and Francis White" (101). At the same time, *Gerry*'s "most memorable scene [is] a distinctly sensuous and musical experience" (103): through "sounds of walking, wind and occasional birdcalls" (103) the film offers an "*audiovisual musique concrète*" experience (emphasis in the original, 104). By the same token, "the use of background loops in long takes that feature repetitive diegetic sounds" (108) in Béla Tarr's and Ágnes Hranitzky's films provide the same level of engagement. The point is clear: the term *audiovisual musique concrète* "highlights the fact that the source of musicality in these scenes is a sort of *found* sound" as with *musique concrète*, which "is also inevitably manipulated in the process of postproduction" (emphasis in the original, 104).

On the other hand, in "Denis's film the sensuousness of the medium is indeed explored by focusing on the human body and its acoustic environment" (117), while in Holmer's "the almost mechanical persistence of the [integrated] soundtrack [and] the musicalization of diegetic sounds into sampled phrases" (112) resonates with the main character's journey. In both films, the combination of diegetic sounds with nondiegetic music illustrates the two narrative worlds (the one on screen and the one off screen) because "the relationship between the *actors* and the audience is at the heart of the erotics of cinema" (emphasis in original — 117). Although both films focus on the *embodiment* of their characters, "the erotics of cinema" does not concern sexuality or sex itself, but the interchange of intimacy between the screen and the passive spectator — to which "*the surface-aesthetics*" contributes greatly (emphasis in the original, 111). This corroborates the analogy with Katherine Norman's "concept of *reflexive listening*" (102), which Jordan adapted to the audiovisual context as "reflexive audioviewing" (102). Both concepts are highly indebted to "Eisenstein's dialectic approach to montage as a model of explaining the tension between listening modes that take place when the listener actively engages with a soundscape composition" (102), hereby "manifested in the tension between the image and its soundtrack" (102). In all these films, the tension lies between "realistic convention and free counterpoint" (102).

Finally, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin* (2015) exemplifies this "model of the sensuous" without a "sensual depiction of a human body on screen" (89) because it "does produce an unusual sense of bodily awareness, which is not the result of exploiting the corporeal features of the [martial arts] genre" (122). On the contrary, "the perfection of the sound design is manifested in its ability to match the delicacy of the visual elements" (123). According to the author, this is (once again) an achievement of the use of diegetic sounds and increasingly engaging moments of musicalized sound design; a "rhythmic diversity" (121) that promotes engagement.

The *Reduced* Voice[2]

The final chapter, "The Musicalization of Speech and the Breakdown of the Film Soundtrack Hierarchy," addresses the voice in the soundtrack at last. Generally, it is enlightening that the central topic of most

---

[2]   In analogy to Pierre Schaeffer's "reduced listening," which asserts a listening mode that focuses on the sonic traits of the sound itself, regardless of its source. Pierre Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. John Dack and Christine North (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

film sound analysis is left to the end. From the start, the author promised to break the usual hierarchy of film sound layers, and only now she addresses the "voco-verbocentrism" in film sound (128).[3]

Furthermore, Kulezić-Wilson keeps the "aesthetic engagement" and chooses cases in which the voice "pursuits the sensory" (129) as any other element in the (integrated) soundtrack; that is, the voice itself is *designed*. The author chooses examples in which there is a "musical logic in the presentation of speech" (129) just as much as she has focused on musical logic in the use of diegetic sounds. In other words, this "decentralization of speech" (129) makes use of the voice and words despite or beyond their meaning.

Following a wide number of examples fitting this contextualization (from Christopher Nolan to Terrence Malick, among others), the author proceeds with three analyses to corroborate her proposal: *Breathe In* (Drake Doremus, 2013), *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012), and *Upstream Color* (Shane Carruth, 2013). In these three cases, Kulezić-Wilson focuses on the aspects in the editing or mixing which contribute to a blurred line between speech and other elements. These are the cases of "nonchronological editing, asynchronous use of speech, verbal and visual repetition, verbal *chiaroscuro*, and musicalized sound effects" (142), showing the possibility to use dialogue as any other loopable content. By finishing with *Upstream Color*, the theory completes a full circle, for "presenting the Sampler as a composer and sound artist whose actions affect the protagonists' lives symbolically […] establish[es] sound making and musicality as the film's primary creative principles" (148).

The Politics of Sound Design

Kulezić-Wilson's argument concludes on a generous note, in which she will not excuse herself from often referring to films with polemical topics. While she considers their controversies and ambiguous positions, she argues that the sound design itself shows "their open resistance to rules of convention and audience expectation" (154), in contrast with a tradition of musical "semiotic guidance and emotional support" (152). In other words, she understands every sonic choice not only as an artistic criterion but also, and more importantly, as a political statement. The sonic ambiguity accounted for "insists that we have to take the truth of these scenes undiluted and unresolved" (153).

Through examples of "nondiegetic scores that are employed as diegetic sound" (152), Kulezić-Wilson proposes a structure of the integrated soundtrack that goes from haptic music towards the aesthetics of reticence that allows for ambiguity and, accordingly, engagement. She thinks of diegetic sounds as a necessary mediation of aesthetic experience and, therefore, brings in the heritage of *musique concrète* to frame her theory. At some point, it becomes evident she is mostly referring to a general tradition of sound culture (field recordings and soundwalks) because the "illusion of realism" (101) fits the argument of the subversive boundaries in sound design when mixing "diegetic sounds with pre-existing pieces […] and compositions" (101).

And yet, this transposition of the *musique concrète* context into sound design is appropriate because her claims (about sound design) go in line with those made by Pierre Schaeffer in the early 1950s.[4] Although Kulezić-Wilson insists on validating sound design precisely because it is *almost like*

---

3)   "Vococentrism" is a term popularized by Michel Chion. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen.* Second Edition, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

4)   See Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music.*

music, it must be said that the original claims were to liberate sound from its musical and social constraints: to listen to the sound for what it is. However, there is a common sense of sonic liberation and diversity. As the author states: "the world of contemporary music is sufficiently vast and diverse to produce new ideas and audiovisual relationships that can stimulate new modes of perception and a more engaged spectatorship" (69), for "the purpose of sound is neither to support the image nor to oppose it in order to assert its independence" (123).

In fact, the only unblurred line in *Sound Design is the New Score* is to dismiss this "musical logic," which is clearly and acknowledgedly inherited from Michel Chion's approach (20). The book benefits from her vast knowledge of the field, clearly balancing newer references (both filmic and literary) with references that have been well established amongst scholars and cinephiles. Her writing is effortless: clear while well-informed. It seems that Kulezić-Wilson speaks both from experience (as a practitioner) and from observation (as a scholar), and as such, her discourse is never over-conceptualized or hard to follow. The reader, in turn, benefits from this simplicity because the writing never falls into jargon or condescension. There is just enough contextualization and little redundancy: Kulezić-Wilson analyzes sounds, music, and scenic actions for what they are and without any speculative interpretations. In this way, the book elegantly manages to bring the sound into the soundtrack — a long-overdue accomplishment — and lead beyond *musique concrète* towards the integrated soundtrack.

Sara Pinheiro

Editorial Note:
We regret to announce that, unfortunately, Kulezić-Wilson passed away in April 2021.

Bibliography

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Second Edition, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

Mera, Miguel. "Materializing Film Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, eds. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 157–172.

Quinlivan, Davina. "Breath Control: The Sound and Sight of Respiration as Hyperrealist Corporeality in *Breaking the Waves*," in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, eds. Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 152–163.

Schaeffer, Pierre. *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. John Dack and Christine North (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).