The Address of the Ear: Music and History in *Waltz with Bashir*

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The exploration of film sound as a part of films which make the past experienceable continues to be a new field of research. Gerhard Paul, who had already proclaimed a paradigm shift from the dominance of writing to the dominance of images with the term 'visual history,' dared to make a first attempt on the part of historians. In his rich and comprehensive collection *Sound des Jahrhunderts* (Sound of the Century), together with Ralph Schock, he compiles articles on the cultural history of sound, the historical relevance of the auditive in the 20th century, and the sound of political history.[1] As with visual history, however, the specifics of film are largely excluded here as well. On the other hand, in film studies, interest in the auditive has intensified since the 1980s, generating an added value as a particular level of meaning.[2] Further studies focused on sound design as well as the aesthetics and meaning of film sounds.[3] The article *Audio History of Film* is a first attempt to combine these studies in the intersection of film and history. It opens up a field of research that acts as a missing link between the approaches of film studies, sound studies, and historical science.[4] It aims to "investigate how film sound can generate and shape audiences' experience of history."[5] Here, both the aesthetic dimension and its potential for the production of history, as well as the material, technical, and cultural dimensions of film sound are examined with regard to historical modeling and figuration. Research on film music has, admittedly, taken some tentative steps in this direction: for example, Annette

1 Paul and Schock, *Der Sound des Jahrhunderts*.
2 Chion, *La voix*; —, *Le son*; —, *Audio-Vision*; Altman, *Sound Theory*; Kamensky, *Ton*.
3 Flückiger, *Sound Design*; Butzmann, *Filmgeräusch*.
4 Pauleit, Greiner and Frey, "Audio History of Film." https://film-history.org/approaches/1418
5 Ibid.

Kreuziger-Herr and Rüdiger Jantzen's consideration of Miklós Rózsa's music (and its desire for authenticity) in historical films such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), or Stephen C. Meyer's book *Epic Sound: Music in Postwar Hollywood Biblical Films*.[6] The impact of film music on the production of experiences of the past requires, however, further far-reaching research.

In this article, I will explore how film music enables historical experience by means of film experience. Scholars like Vivian Sobchack understand the experience of film as an embodied process. Adapting her theory, I will show how historical films make palpable the experience of history not simply by means of intensely affective images but also by synaesthetically combining the visual and auditory levels. Though the soundtrack is crucial for establishing the mood of film sequences, it elicits emotional reactions to historical processes, events, and situations. It structures the cinematic narration of history by creating continuities and breaks, connections, conjunctions, and oppositions. Film music, I claim, plays a special role in this process. According to Birger Langkjær, "the music does not refer to an already given meaning but contributes to its creation."[7] This impact can be explained by the special mode of perception to which film music is subject. As the music is inseparably merged with the film images, we both hear and feel it. Cognitive and embodied perception are closely interrelated and lend themselves especially well to reflection in the phenomenology of film.

In order to further develop these claims, I will discuss selected sequences from the animated documentary drama film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). The film's plot draws on director Ari Folman's war memories. Just like Folman himself, the protagonist, an Israeli soldier, witnessed the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which members of the Lebanese Phalange militia tortured and killed large numbers of civilians in the Lebanon War of 1982. However, he has lost his memories of the massacre, and the film tells the story of his quest to recover them. Using interviews, flashbacks, and imaginary visions, it shows "narrative microactivities that the protagonist (and hence the film itself) connects to a macronarrative of the Lebanon War."[8] The soundtrack is dominated by electronic music. The composer, Max Richter, is a late descendant of the renewal movements in both film and music that mainly took place at the beginning of the 1970s. In those years, a revolution began in American film production that

6 Kreuziger-Herr, "Mittelalter in Hollywoods Filmmusik;" Meyer, *Epic Sound*.
7 Langkjær, "Der hörende Zuschauer" 110.
8 Hasebrink, "Das gezeichnete Gedächtnis" 20.

film historians later termed 'New Hollywood.' Inspired by European avant-garde movements such as the French New Wave, a new generation of filmmakers (including George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese) elevated the status of sound design. They shared an enthusiasm for the contemporary music industry's "electronically modified sounds that blurred the boundary between noise and music"[9] and attempted to "develop a similar vocabulary for film soundtracks."[10] The profession of sound designer was born. Sound design was pivotal in turning film sound into an autonomous dimension of expression with a status equal to images by organizing the production of auditory signs and increasing their scope for expression and complexity. Today, film music and sound design merge and one can become part of the other. In the following exploration of the address of the ear, I will therefore include considerations not only regarding film music and the phenomenology of film but also the interaction between the different components of a soundtrack in terms of mood, memory, self-referential structures, and reflection.

The Phenomenology of Film

The image still dominates most of the discourses in film studies. Parts of musicology, in turn, consider film music detached from the other audiovisual elements and structures of the medium. Both approaches are not suitable for a theory of film music as a medium of historical experience. Instead of thinking in hierarchies, the visual and auditory dimensions should be examined in their interaction, which produces specific cinematic experiences. Consequently, in the following reflections, I do not treat the auditory level in isolation, but consider how it interacts with moving images, montage, aesthetics, and narration. In terms of film theory, Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye. A Phenomenology of Film Experience* is crucial.[11] Sobchack understands the experience of film as an embodied process that addresses the synaesthetic structure of our perceptual apparatus. The existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and its projection onto film by Vivian Sobchack provide an explanatory model based on the interrelation between the living body and the

9 Flückiger, *Sound Design* 17.
10 Ibid.
11 Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*.

lived world.[12] This phenomenological framework makes the cinematic figuration of a historical world appear in a new light. In her reflections, Sobchack proceeds from two levels of film perception: as a systematic communicative competence, the primary structures of film are based on conscious experience, while the secondary notion of distortion can be identified as ideology, rhetoric, and poetics.[13] Her approach complements, and contrasts with, popular film analysis techniques. Instead of abstracting the 'wild meaning' of the film into individual codes, it argues for the thesis that the film creates meaning by virtue of its own being as an embodied experience.[14] The film's sensual and meaningful expression of experience becomes an experience for the viewer himself. "A film," Sobchack argues, "is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood."[15] Against this background, the processes of film analysis with their small-scale approaches not only lead to a shortening but also to a misunderstanding: they analyze the film based on its production and design; they make it theoretically writable. Phenomenology, on the other hand, aims at a holistic perception that creates a pre-reflexive, comprehensive impression. Here, the relationship between image and sound comes into play. In film, the visible and the audible can create different meanings, but both senses influence each other in our perception. Hence the title of Michel Chion's book *Audio-Vision*; we do not see and hear a film, we hear/see it.[16] Film music in particular bonds together the soundtrack and the moving images as the latter are very differently perceived if we hear a melody while watching them.

Since Sobchack stresses that seeing "is an act performed by both the film (which sees a world as visible images) and the viewer (who sees the film's visible images both as a world and the seeing of a world),"[17] we may add the word 'hearing' in every place where the word 'seeing' is used: "Seeing/*hearing* is an act performed by both the film (which sees/*hears* a world as visible images *and audible sounds*) and the viewer (who sees/*hears* the film's visible images *and audible sounds* both as a world and the seeing/*hearing* of a world)." Hence, this approach could serve as the basis for a new understanding of the relationship

12 Ibid. 38.
13 Ibid. 8.
14 Ibid. 12.
15 Ibid. 3–4.
16 Chion, *Audio-Vision*.
17 Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* 56.

between film sound and history. Assuming that historical films build a space-time structure that models a historical world and opens it up to embodied experience, I would like to suggest the term 'histosphere' for this purpose.[18] In a histosphere, the spectator's perceptions oscillate between a supposedly objective external view *of* a historical world and the subjective experience *of* the film and its characters *in* this world. Film sound plays a special role in this process. It structures the cinematic narration of history by creating continuities and breaks, connections, conjunctions, and oppositions. The auditory level is also crucial in determining the mood of film sequences, and elicits emotional reactions to historical processes, events, and situations.[19] In order to emphasize the importance of sound in this context, I introduced the notion of a 'sonic histosphere.'[20] Within this framework, film music can be considered a key factor in the intersection of the audience's perception, emotional response, and experience.

The crucial importance of the soundtrack as part of a synaesthetic experience of history can also be derived from the analogies between the embodied film experience and historical experience. The historian Frank R. Ankersmit emphasizes that the moment of historical experience creates the illusion of being able to physically touch the past.[21] Based on Aristotle's epistemology and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of 'tentative seeing,' he assigns the historical experience to the sensory channel of the tactile.[22] Thus, he refers not only to the haptic perception of the physical world, but also to a simultaneous form of self-experience.[23] The 'tentative seeing' makes tangible not only the past in historical experience but also our own embodied existence.[24] Ankersmit therefore describes the characteristics of the sense of touch as immediacy, experience through self-experience, and contiguity

18 Greiner, *Histospheres*.

19 Michel Chion understands film sound as a subtle means of emotional and semantic manipulation that directly influences the spectator's physiology and perceptions. Chion, *Audio-Vision* XXVI.

20 Greiner, "Sonic Histospheres." https://film-history.org/approaches/sonic-histospheres

21 Ankersmit refers to Jo Tollebeek and Tom Verschaffel, who state that historical experience makes the past "palpable and visible," as well as Johan Huizinga, who describes historical experience as "the contact with the essence of things." Ankersmit, *Die Historische Erfahrung* 71; Tollebeek, *De vreugden* 18; Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken* 56.

22 Ankersmit, *Die Historische Erfahrung* 63–68.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid. 68.

of object and subject.[25] He then assigns individual human senses to the different approaches to history: historical experience is like "being touched by the past," while the historical text is more about dominating and structuring the past.[26] Written historiography—as Ankersmit puts it—is therefore allocated the metaphor of seeing.[27] Historical debate in turn testifies to the relativity of all historical insight and is therefore linked to the metaphor of hearing.[28] These allocations make clear that Ankersmit does not want to play the historical text and the historical debate against historical experience.[29] The metaphorical division into different sensory channels points to mutual exchange and to a synaesthetically generated insight in the mode of self-experience.[30] This sheds light on the special connectivity of history to film. In historical films the particular sensory channels of seeing and hearing not only generate meaning, as written historiography does, but also tangible historical worlds. Film music, as I will show below, acts like a catalyst that drives the fusion of these dimensions. In turn, investigating the causes of this phenomenon may be very helpful for our understanding of how film experience creates historical experience.

Mood and Memory

Right from the start, the soundtrack to *Waltz with Bashir* operates on its own level of meaning. The repetitive structures and the sustained, haunting sounds of the score begin creating a trance-like mood even before the opening credits, displayed against a black background, are over. The bass-heavy beat that begins as the picture fades in acts as an auditory paraphrase for the sequence that then ensues, in which an animated pack of dogs rampages through the streets with teeth bared. Hyperrealistic breathing, growling, and panting sounds contribute to creating a sense of danger. A wild race through the city begins until the furiously barking dogs gather below a window. After a hard cut we see Ari's friend Boaz, who recounts this dream in a bar. But then the music resumes, indicating that the dream sequence is not

25 Ibid. 98.
26 Ibid. 74.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.

over. When the film cuts back to the dream, the switch from the on-screen conversation to Boaz's voiceover commentary is not marked by a change in the sound. On the contrary, sounds hinting at his spatial surroundings can still be heard in the voiceover: for example, a faint reverberation and ambient noise. Sound maintains a link to the filmic present even during the dream and memory sequences presented as such by the score. Thus, the filmic present, memory, and imagination are depicted as fundamentally equal elements of historicization that are in a state of constant interchange.

Moreover, the haunting music creates a certain atmosphere of unrest which covers the filmic present with a dark shadow from the past. In order to better understand this function, we should take a closer look at the theoretical background of cinematic atmospheres which surround all forms and structures of the histosphere like a "misty primal substance" or an "exhalation."[31] According to Béla Balázs's concept of an "anthropomorphic world," "every figure […] has an emotional effect (mostly unconscious to us), a pleasant, unpleasant, calming or threatening one—because, however distant, it reminds us of human or animal physiognomy."[32] Baláz's considerations make it clear that cinematic atmospheres can cause emotional reactions in the viewer based on the recognition of human traits. In the spirit of Paul Ricoeur, the atmosphere must therefore be understood as part of the 'configuration' of the cinematic world while a mood is only generated in a specific interaction with the viewer which Ricoeur calls 'refiguration.'[33] Furthermore, as holistic experiences, moods cannot be reduced to their individual parts.[34] The aesthetic figuration of the film, in particular the music in relation to the moving images, forms a constellation which, in the case of historical film, is expanded by imaginary historical references. This also applies to ambient sounds. Composed of different tones and aural elements, these sounds enliven the cinematic image and refer to a continuous historical world that extends far beyond the boundaries of the image. Embedded in an associative network of "memories, thoughts, tendencies to act, physiological reactions, and vocalizations,"[35] ambient sounds in *Waltz with Bashir* evoke emotions and moods that are in a complex interrelation.[36] For example, after

31 Balázs, *Der Geist des Films* 30.
32 Balázs, *Der Film* 89.
33 Ricoeur, *Zeit und Erzählung* 103–14.
34 Balázs, *Der Geist des Films* 33–34.
35 Kappelhoff, "Das Zuschauergefühl" 83.
36 Ibid.

the conversation in the bar, Ari watches Boaz staring at the turbulent sea. The ocean, the drumming of the rain, and the roar of the waves symbolize the release of disordered flows of memory mixed with imaginary visions. The aural dimension of the atmosphere not only reflects the inner mood of the characters in the film, but also creates an emotional reaction in the viewer. In particular the music, composed of elongated melancholic soundscapes, makes this resonance physically perceptible. It partly takes on the role of ambient sounds so that, in the sense of the auditory revolution of New Hollywood, no exact boundary can be drawn between the music and the other elements of the soundtrack. The protagonist's personal, subjective mood is mixed with the film's claim to model an experienceable historical world. Thus, by involving the viewer in reenacted historical events and making them physically experienceable, the film can potentially activate embodied memories and project them onto the historical content, as I will show in the next paragraph.

Reminiscence Triggers

The conversation between Ari and Boaz at the beginning of *Waltz with Bashir* opens up a complex interaction with film-inherent memories, historical knowledge, and the embodied memory of the viewer. When Ari drives away in his car afterwards, this release gives way to a process of reflection. The regular sound of the windscreen wipers functions like a metronome, giving structure to the haunting soundscapes of the score, which now grows in intensity. On the one hand, linking sounds that are audible in the cinematic world to the musical score metaphorically reflects Sobchack's theory of a double experience: I see and hear the pictures and sounds of the movie as both, *as* a world and the seeing and hearing *of* a world.[37] On the other hand, sounds such as those of the windscreen wipers have an even more advanced function, which is especially important to historical films: the world of the film is mixed with auditory elements that can activate the viewer's embodied memories of everyday experiences, including media consumption. The familiar sound facilitates empathy not just in the movie character but in the memory process itself. Auditory impressions such as the regular sound of the windshield wipers relate to filmic figurations that link the world of

37 Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* 56.

the film with the viewer's unconscious embodied memories. I refer to these audiovisual stimulus structures as 'reminiscence triggers.'[38] This particular film experience is enriched by a 'warm familiarity'[39] and tends to be accompanied by positive emotional reactions. In this manner reminiscence triggers help to overcome feelings of strangeness and difference in regard to the world of the film. Audiovisually mediated impressions such as the protagonist's driving in the rain have the potential to generate resonances in the mind of the viewer, or, in Nietzsche's words, to trigger a "resonance of related sensations and moods."[40] The resonances activated here refer to primal experiences such as interpersonal contact, basic sensory impressions, or simple everyday experiences. Again, there is a double perception: the regular sound of the windshield wipers may subconsciously remind us of how our own thoughts once wandered off during a long drive while the music evokes exactly the same reminiscence in this particular moment of film experience. But the function of this reminiscence trigger goes far beyond that: while in the mode of remembering embodied experiences, we are confronted with a figurative historical world which immediately opens up in the mind of the film's protagonist. Through reminiscence triggers, the embodied experience of the historical is combined with a narrative strategy of 'mise-en-histoire,' the process of contextualizing and historicizing.[41] This is also expressed in the present film sequence: in a voiceover, Ari identifies the cause of the fragmented memory for the first time: the war in Lebanon. In the intersection of these levels, the film primarily addresses the processing of traumatic experiences, uncertain memories, and their relationship to concrete historical events. The use of reminiscence triggers, evocative music, and contextualizing voiceover adds a layer of reflection to the 'sonic histosphere.' I will examine this in the following section.

38 Greiner, "Sonic Histospheres." https://film-history.org/approaches/sonic-histospheres

39 Hugo Münsterberg uses the phrase "a certain warm feeling of familiarity" in his theoretical considerations about the effect of texts in product advertising. Although he did not have film in mind, he anticipates a crucial strategy for the emotional involvement of the viewer. Münsterberg, *Grundzüge der Psychotechnik* 423.

40 Nietzsche's metaphor of 'Miterklingen' describes the rapid succession and steady stream of moods to which feelings and memories are linked. Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* 28.

41 Greiner, *Histospheres*.

Self-Referential Structures and Reflection

In some recent historical films, the soundtrack fosters a specific mode of reception that I refer to as 'reflective listening.' Fundamentally, reflective listening is similar to what Michel Chion calls 'semantic listening'[42] in that it arouses spectators' interest in decoding the film sound as if it were a signal. However, reflective listening goes further: it creates connections and associations and develops interpretations. In order to specify more precisely which soundtrack techniques are required to achieve this, I will show how it not only molds the 'sonic histosphere' in individual sequences, but is also capable of creating connections and references that cut across sequences and go beyond linear production of meaning.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, Ari stops at the roadside close to the beach to reflect on the traumatizing events he recalled while driving in the rain. When he gets out of the car and stands on the promenade the texture of the music becomes thicker. The harmony of the sustained bass tones is significantly expanded on and embellished by a repetitive melody on solo violin. The enigmatic playing of the violin, which stands out far more prominently than the rest of the music, clearly delineates the sequence from the film's plot and assigns it a meta-level function. Memories of specific events emerge piecemeal out of the symbolic, imaginary visions. The urgent music creates a sense of unease and makes the spectator want to learn more about the events of the Lebanon War. This piece, Max Richter's "The Haunted Ocean," is used repeatedly from that point on. In memory and dream sequences throughout the film, it connects the filmic present to subjective fragments of memory. Not only the piece of music but the whole sequence is used repeatedly during Ari's conversation with two other friends, at first only partially, then in its full length. The repetition gives spectators the opportunity to reflect while simultaneously laying bare the film's use of repetition. The sequences are framed by information from the people Ari interviews and the memories evoked by this information. Through this process, the background of the enigmatic images is gradually revealed: for example, the fact that Ari himself fired the flares that immerse the scene in a surreal yellow light while the Christian Phalange militia were carrying out the massacre. The information given by Ari's former war comrades is compared with fragments of memory and assembled into a narrative. The repetitive structure of the piece of music, to which additional elements

42 Chion, *Audio-Vision* 28.

such as a solo violin are gradually added, reflects this process of decoding and reassembling.

Multiple sequences in *Waltz with Bashir* can be reciprocally linked through the repeated use of a piece of music like the haunted ocean theme and thus make reference to the constructed nature of the filmic illusion. On this basis, a space for reflection is then created in which the sequences are compared with and related to each other. Another example shows how the repeated use of a piece of music can also be used to question the veracity of memories. While Ari's friend Ori (speaking off-screen) describes a memory experiment that is visualized on-screen, Johann Sebastian Bach's Harpsichord Concerto No. 5 in F minor plays. In the experiment, the test subjects were shown photos from their childhood, one of which (a visit to an amusement park) was a fake. But most of the subjects nonetheless regarded the picture as real and with a little prompting could remember visiting the amusement park too. The soothing classical music—in combination with electrical sound effects and the stalls and visitors that are added to the image one after the other—creates the impression of an experimental setup. This effect is also significant in the second sequence where the piece is used. In another memory sequence, when a boy in an orchard fires an RPG at an Israeli troop transport, Bach plays once again. The sequence unfolds in slow motion, giving the spectator space to reflect. Only when the Israeli soldiers shoot down the boy in a hail of gunfire does the representation of time return to normal. The repeated use of Bach and the manipulation of time make the situation in the orchard seem like an experimental setup too, bringing the reliability of apparent memories into question. It marks and connects the protagonist's enigmatic fragments of memory as a mind map and shows how memories of concrete events are distilled from the flow of imaginary thoughts. Hence, the reflective linking of different sequences by means of film music can be either unifying or deconstructive in terms of the depiction of historical events. While the use of reminiscence triggers enhances the closeness of the viewer to the subject of the film by activating embodied memories, the mode of reflective listening enables a reflective reading, which requires a certain distance from the film.

Conclusion

Film music enables historical experience through film experience. Against the methodological background of Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology of film ex-

perience, this assumption leads to the following results: while seeing/hearing is an act performed by both the film and the viewer, historical films build a space-time structure that models a historical world and opens it up to embodied experience. In the 'histosphere,' the spectator's perceptions oscillate between a supposedly objective external view of a historical world and the subjective experiences of the film and its characters in this world. Film music—inseparably merged with the film images—is crucial for this double perception by determining the mood of film sequences. It elicits emotional reactions to historical processes, events, and situations. As I showed in the analysis of selected sequences of *Waltz with Bashir*, film music is able to create specific atmospheres to evoke both a physical and emotional resonance in the viewer. The resulting mood shapes the viewer's understanding and experience of the depicted past. Moreover, by involving the viewer in reenacted historical events and making them physically experienceable, the film can potentially trigger embodied memories and project them onto the historical content. In doing so, the world of the film is mixed with auditory elements that refer to everyday experiences, such as media consumption. In an experiential mode of viewing/hearing, these 'reminiscence triggers' connect the world of the film to the viewer's own embodied memories and historical references. The same goes for a specific mode of reception that I refer to as 'reflective listening.' Using the example of the repeated use of a piece of music in *Waltz with Bashir*, I have shown that the viewer understands the soundtrack as a signal which creates connections and associations. Hence, reminiscence triggers and reflective listening extend the cinematic experience of a historical world by a 'mise-en-histoire;' a strategy of contextualizing and historicizing. It is precisely this organic combination of embodied experience, mood, semiotics, and signification that makes music in historical film such a powerful agent for the creation of meaning.

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