

A Few Notes on the Auditive Layer of the Film ★

Johann Lurf (Artist and filmmaker)

When I was asked to write about my film ★ for this publication, I immediately thought of sharing my considerations regarding the auditive level of the film. But first of all, I would like to give an overview of the work to readers who are unfamiliar with ★.

In 2009, as I watched the film *Stromboli* by Rossellini (1950) during a lecture in Harun Farocki's film class at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, one moment struck me particularly. It was a shot of the clear starry night sky, which appeared to be more like a painting than a photographic reproduction, but in the context of the film the image could easily be accepted as realistic. I wondered how other films depict the starry night sky, so I started to research this image in cinema. My initial expectation was that most scenes of starry skies would be taken from stock footage, imagery that can be bought for use in film and reused over and over again, but instead I found that most starry night sky shots in films are unique. My second assumption was that I could determine on the basis of the constellations if the scene shows a view from the Southern or the Northern Hemisphere, thus revealing the shooting location and maybe even the time of the year, as we see a different sector of the starry sky in different seasons. But I was wrong again. Most starry skies in feature film history actually show an entirely made-up formation of stars—or should I say random white dots on a dark background.

In the context of a narrative film, an obviously constructed starscape is usually accepted by the audience and understood as given or even real. So I focused more on the methods of the filmmakers, on how they show clear starry skies and which audio elements are used in the soundtrack when we see stars, and how this has changed over the decades.

My 2017 film ★ compiles a large number of these scenes in chronological order of their first appearance. The film does not alter the image, duration, or speed of the scene and keeps the soundtrack intact, enabling us to travel

through perceptions of space and clear night skies in cinema over the course of more than a century. The length of each scene is the same as it was in the film it was taken from. To enable comparison of the shots with each other, no object other than stars is shown; when something else enters the frame, the sequence ends and we jump to the next scene.

With this method, the soundtrack proves to be especially revealing, although the segments rarely consist of complete scenes. We hear mostly fragments of dialogue, sentences, or even words, and only parts of musical arrangements and sound effects. Despite the limited time we have to listen to these sound snippets in ★, we can apprehend a lot from the acoustic information provided. Voices can reveal within a split second the emotional state, the approximate age and gender, as well as the intention of the speaker, even in a language unfamiliar to the listener. Languages, dialects, and intonation changes a great deal from decade to decade. We can hear, in the 1930s for example, how choruses sing to the starry skies, expressing the wish for mankind to unite, while in the 1950s more sinister voices convey invisible threats coming from outside. Both decades are strongly influenced by the politics of their times and carry a male, authoritarian tone. The '60s become more playful, especially in the use of music, as the influence of contemporary and pop music increases. Nonetheless, we hear that orchestral arrangements remain predominant in film music. While working on this project, it surprised me that it took until the 1980s for more colloquial language to appear in films, after many years of methodical or formally pronounced dialogue.

I decided not to subtitle my searched-footage-film so that we can experience the excerpts as intended by the filmmakers who created them, and not by the foreign-language audience. Apart from that, the subtitles would draw attention away from the images and sounds and toward the language, or even toward the content of the language or translation. Adding subtitles would result in a reading exercise instead of a sensual experience; the absence of text allows us to focus on the complexity of the sound. The film's title, ★, was chosen to avoid selecting a main language for the film, as the starry skies are universal, and the concept is not bound to any geographical region. In spoken language, I call the film 'Starfilm' in English and 'Sternfilm' in German, but any language may use its own words to name the film.

Viewers are at times overwhelmed by the amount of starry skies but gain a broad insight into how this filmic element is used and the strong emotional effects it has on us. The film gives us an overview, and we gain a better understanding of space in cinema. Each viewer brings her or his personal ex-

perience, knowledge, and state of mind to the theater, which results in a vast variety of perceptions. After the screening of my film at the opening of the *Music–Media–History* conference in March 2019, I was able to learn more about the perspective of musicologists on my film as well as methods of analyzing moving images and sounds. I see ★ as artistic research, but there are elements in it which relate to academic inquiry, especially the field of media history.

After working on the film for some time, I understood that this chronological compilation also show-cases the history of sound in cinema. It starts with the silent film era and then proceeds to the early 1930s, when synchronous sound was added to the moving images, revolutionizing cinema with optical soundtracks—in mono, of course. Soon after, we hear a notable excerpt from Disney’s 1940 film *Fantasia*, which uses an early stereo format called Fanta-sound, which was only used for this film. Since 1955, 6-track magnetic sound has been used in large format 70mm film, which improved the sound quality in cinema significantly, while adding a spatial dimension through the use of multiple speakers behind the screen and a separate surround channel around the audience. The introduction of subwoofers in theaters only began in 1974. Since then, low frequencies have become part of the soundscape of cinemas and are an essential characteristic of many films. Dolby refined multichannel analogue optical sound in cinema over the course of many years before introducing the first digital soundtrack in 1992. The number of audio channels in cinemas has since multiplied but the basics remain constant: the center speaker behind the screen reproduces voices, and music is mostly played from the speakers on the side and rear walls. To remain as close as possible to the original perception of the audience in their respective decade, I incorporated the sound channel layouts of each scene as faithfully as possible in my film. The experience of this film became a journey through the technological developments in cinema. This led to a unique screening at the Cinemateket Copenhagen in 2018, when the Danish Film Institute asked an experienced silent film piano player to provide accompaniment for the silent film excerpts at the beginning of ★. The difference in the impression created by these first few minutes was astounding, and the music smoothly blended the scenes together.

Given the chronological framework of this project, the question of how to end the film came up, and I realized that it would be most appropriate for the project to expand in the future. I started to show the film when it reached a duration of 90 minutes, as this is often considered a standard length for a feature film. Since then, I add scenes every year from contemporary films

as well as newly found excerpts from the past and arrange them according to the timeline. This expands the film not only from its end, but also fills in gaps in the history of cinema as my research continues. I cannot foresee what will happen, but I am very curious about the future scenes that will find their way into in the next edition of my film and the themes they will bring with them—I can't wait to find out!

Related Link (last accessed 16 April 2020)

<http://johannlurf.net/de/>