

Sonic Icons in *A Song Is Born* (1948): A Model for an Audio History of Film

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The production of film sound forms part of the aesthetics of film. Voice, music, and sound in film production are subject to historical modes and conventions that are in turn in constant interaction with history. These processes do not only produce sound with differing acoustic qualities, but are also marked by periods of large-scale upheaval, such as the introduction of synchronized sound, stereo sound, and sound design. Since the introduction of sync sound, the recording of voice, music, and sound via microphone established a number of procedures for intentionally shaping the sound of film—procedures which continue to be used in today's digital sound design. Historical markers and sound events also found their way into these recordings, including, for example, the voices of actors or known historical personalities, pieces of music, as well as the inevitable artifacts of the recording process itself, which one might refer to as 'the noise of the real;' sounds such as hiss or feedback, i.e., the aspects of the sound production process that emerge at random or unintentionally as a result of the technology used during the recording.¹ At the same time, these noises enable inferences to be made about the time and circumstances of a given film's production as well as about the history of technology, which is both a part of the production history of the film in question as well as a part of history itself. In modern film productions, both of these areas fall under the category of sound design. The reciprocal relationship between media history and history can be observed and investigated by examining the treatment of film sound.

Soundtracks for film are produced by means of the abovementioned procedures along with subsequent processing. The fact that one talks of *soundtracks* here likely has to do with the original placement of sound on the ana-

1 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 14.

logue film strip used for sound film. In order to ensure that the sound was played in sync, an additional track was set up next to the image track which, as well as creating a fixed connection between sound and image on the film strip, also set up a unified gauge—akin to the use of standardized gauges in train tracks—i.e., a fixed distance between the sound and image tracks. Yet the addition of a soundtrack to the film strip during the birth of sound film also changed the temporality of the entire production practice for sound. Until the end of the 1920s, film sound was created by live performances put on during the film screening itself, which made use of a film narrator, sound effects, and musical accompaniment. With the introduction of synchronized sound, this sort of performative sound production became separated from the actual film screening. Since then, the sound for a film (much like the images) is produced in advance at a different location and then scanned from the film strip during screening or, as is the case today, read from digital data packets as the trace of a track left behind by a production process inscribed onto it in the past. The concept of the soundtrack thus expresses this aspect of the temporality of sound (i.e., inscription and scanning).

When microphones, loudspeakers, and sound recording equipment appear in films, their appearance creates a self-reflexive potential which links the reception of the film back to the cultural actions carried out during its production process. This serves to characterize film sound as the product of sounds from the real world, which are recorded and subsequently processed. These forms of self-reflexivity bear historical witness to and provide historical models for the setups and techniques used in film sound production and enable them to be experienced via the film itself. They also verify these cultural actions, that is, the history of the performative process of working with the techniques and various apparatuses used for creating sound. This sort of cinematic self-reflexivity represents the starting point for the following investigation. These analyses are concerned with, on the one hand, the idea that listening is an integral component of film perception. On the other, they emphasize that what is heard can be decoded and reflected upon in view of its historical production, that is, this investigation examines film sound both in terms of the complex aesthetic of film as well as in terms of how it taps into history. This dual perspective on film sound enables an audio history of film to become conceivable. It places a focus on the relationship between aesthetics and history, and while the examples from film and the discourses surrounding them may not allow it to be 'heard' directly, it can certainly be studied, tapped into, and described. In this way, the approach presented here is fundamen-

tally different from the sort of proposals that assume history exists directly and can be accessed just as directly in sound recordings, such as, for example, the approach taken by Gerhard Paul and Ralph Schock in their book *Sound des Jahrhunderts*.²

Rick Altman explicitly points out that film sound cannot simply be reduced to sound events from the outside world.³ Over the course of that discussion, he mounts a fundamental critique of the idea of the indexical film sound. According to Altman, this debate has been marked by the idea that the conception of indexicality employed in photography can be transposed onto the procedures used in film sound without the need for any further reflection. The basic assumption here—which is itself hardly uncontroversial—is that photography is generally accepted as the historical trace of past occurrences and has already become a part of the study of history in the form of visual history.⁴ In photography discourse, the idea of the historical trace of an event has been expressed most pointedly by Roland Barthes's dictum "this has been."⁵ Without wishing to discuss the validity of such postulations here, it should be noted that the presence of microphones, sound recording equipment, etc. represents an obvious analogy to the presence of photographic equipment in film—both shaping an experience of cinematic self-reflexivity. Microphones in particular demonstrate, for example, that a similar quality of inscription or indexicality is attached to sound recording as to the capture of photographic images—if nothing else due to the fact that film sound is produced in advance (and at a different location).

In his critique *Four and a Half Film Fallacies*, Altman emphasizes the broad reach of the conclusions based on this analogy in the section entitled *Halfa Fallacy*.⁶ Altman's fundamental criticism here is aimed at the sort of conceptions of indexicality that are based on a naïve representational realism, conceptions which are then subsequently transposed onto sound. He also brings the theme of digitization into play, which makes actual image and sound recordings increasingly unnecessary, which for him means that the era of indexical inscription via the use of cameras or microphones increasingly belongs to history and thus loses its validity. Yet Altman's criticism is still only presented as

2 Paul and Schock, *Sound des Jahrhunderts*.

3 Altman, "Four and a Half Film Fallacies" 35–45.

4 Paul, "Von der Historischen Bildkunde" 7–36.

5 Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 96.

6 Altman, "Four and a Half Film Fallacies" 42–45.

a 'half fallacy' because it doesn't apply to more complex conceptions of indexicality, which assume that historical events don't simply remain accessible in image and sound recordings like events of the present but can only actually be tapped into in the sense of a difference—as past events that are not directly accessible. Roland Barthes speaks of a 'madness' here in relation to photography in the sense of a dual temporal codification.⁷ When this idea is applied to sound, the resulting implication is that film sound can indeed reveal historical traces under certain circumstances. At such moments, what is heard during film perception is encoded in a dual fashion and thus at once apprehended as a sound in the present and as an (inaccessible) trace. Altman's hypothesis that the use of cameras and microphones loses its relevance in the process of digitization thus also remains a half fallacy; to this day digital sound design hasn't yet bid a full farewell to working with sound recordings. In order to create specific sound effects, sound recordings of the physical world (voices, screams, animal cries, or other sounds) are still made and/or processed further.⁸

Film sound is not regarded in isolation here but rather as one element of the texture of a film, which is what produces the actual experience of viewing. To use a term from the work of Michel Chion, this can be referred to as 'audio-visual'.⁹ Chion's term describes "all the cases that include written and/or spoken language." Chion then goes on to describe the five relations between the said and the shown.¹⁰ In this process, Chion's considerations emphasize the simultaneously unified and hybrid nature of film perception and thus pave the way for the concept of 'sonic icons.'

Brian Currid introduces this concept to describe characteristic sound phenomena that function as acoustic markers for political history or serve to represent it.¹¹ Currid's term essentially adapts an art history approach that draws on political iconography for subsequent use in musicology and cultural history. My focus in the following is to apply the concept of 'sonic icons' to film and film studies. The emphasis here is less on the iconic film quotes that have been taken out of the context of their respective films via repetition and thus left their mark in collective memory as independent aesthetic sound figures,

7 Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 113–16.

8 Flückiger, "Sound Effects" 228–36.

9 Chion, *Film, A Sound Art* 468.

10 Ibid. 473, 489.

11 Currid, *A National Acoustics* 102.

but rather on self-reflexive moments in specific films where the sound comes to the fore and reveals specific historical references.

This perspective also expands on Chion's theoretical concept of film, moving beyond his classifications in order to refer to specific and unique moments in films. Sonic icons can thus be described as unique aesthetic moments. They are aesthetic figures in films and cannot as such be reduced to their sound alone, functioning instead as a hybrid category full of tension, as part of a 'soundimagetext'.¹² They reveal their relationship to history by conjuring up the past or by allowing the recollection of something, becoming themselves a site for the potential transformation of history in the process.¹³ The term refers neither to the restaging of historical sounds nor to the assertion that authentic historical sounds can be made accessible or carried into the present. The defining quality of a sonic icon lies instead in the reference to something from the past, in a trace that enables something absent to be identified.

The investigation of sonic icons is also linked to a particular understanding of modern film, for here too it is possible to identify the autonomy of sound, image, and text as unfolding within a form of tense aesthetic play where sound may be heard out of sync with or independently of the image.¹⁴ The way that modern film makes this aesthetic play visible and audible or even treats it discursively (in certain cases) emphasizes the importance of sound as a part of film aesthetics. The study of sonic icons is thus heavily indebted to an aesthetics of modern film. Sonic icons are therefore grasped as aesthetic figurations first and foremost, albeit ones which are marked or pervaded by historical inscriptions. The investigation of sonic icons thus aims to develop this connection between aesthetic production and historical inscription in order

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- 12 Mitchell grasps the 'imagetext' less as a concept for classifying hybrid aesthetic forms and more as a theoretical figure (analogous to Derrida's 'différance'), as a place of dialectic tension and transformation which connects aesthetics with history. For Mitchell's concept of 'imagetext,' see Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 83–107, for a discussion of this concept and how it can be extended to the idea of 'soundimagetext,' see Nessel and Pauleit, "Constructions of the Digital Film" 219–34.
 - 13 In her book about Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard*, Sylvie Lindeperg refers to Alain Fleischer in describing a similar aesthetic procedure, calling it as an "art of deposition" and explaining it as follows: "because film is a place of absence, of fissure, of distance, it doesn't appear in place of the event, it receives it." Lindeperg, *Nacht und Nebel* 10. (Translation by W.P.)
 - 14 This reference to modern film can, for example, be found in different manifestations in the following: Deleuze, *Cinema 2*; Gregor and Patalas, *Geschichte des modernen Films*; Metz, *Language and Cinema*.

to lay the foundations for an audio history of film—an approach that differs from merely registering and describing iconic film sounds.

From Nightclub to Research Library: A Utopian Encounter with Louis Armstrong

Howard Hawks' *A Song Is Born* (1948) depicts the production of a phonographic music encyclopedia. The film is about an academic project with the goal of creating a music encyclopedia, which has been worked on over a period of nine years by seven professors. The undertaking is being funded by a foundation—it is what would be referred to today as an 'external project'—and headed by Professor Hobart Frisbee (Danny Kaye). What is special about the project is that a considerable part of the encyclopedia is being compiled in the form of phonographic recordings, which the academics—who are also musicians—record themselves. The musical comedy begins—similar to *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)—when the real world intrudes on the isolated academic world in the form of nightclub singer Honey Swanson (Virginia Mayo).

The comedy doesn't just give an account of an attempt to create a revised version of music history that incorporates the popular musical styles of the time—in particular Afro-American gospel, blues, and jazz—but also depicts the innovative practice of creating an encyclopedia by means of the phonograph and music recordings. At times, Hawks' comedy appears like a making-of for this phonographic undertaking. It presents sonic icons in the making, as it were, and not only because Hawks places musical legends such as Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, and many others in front of the microphone and the camera, but rather because it serves as an example of how a phonography of music history (and thus ultimately an audio history of film) can take concrete form.

The musical can be seen as the preferred subject for studies on early sound film, as it is one of the most significant film genres to become established with the introduction of sound. Unlike the western but like the comedy, it is not necessarily regarded as a genre which seeks to grapple with history and is frequently instead relegated to the realm of light entertainment, with a tendency to suppress any references to reality as such. In the following, my initial focus is on investigating several aspects of the historicization of the musical's production contexts in order to then discuss it as more of a media-aesthetic hybrid formation generated by media industries than as a film genre. Film

exhibits very clear references to modern aesthetics in the sense of cinematic self-reflexivity while also revealing connections to history. The specific focus here is on the appearance of Louis Armstrong's singing voice, which features prominently in one of the musical numbers, as well as on the depiction of scat singing that follows it—which basically functions as a tribute to Armstrong. Both of these events receive additional emphasis because they are depicted as specific sound recordings created via phonograph within the film itself.

The film studios' investment in new sound technologies and their attempts to appropriate the record industry (and the licensing rights linked to it) played a significant role in the ascendancy of the musical in Hollywood. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson sketch out the different production strategies of the various studios in this context.¹⁵ While the prestigious MGM studio continued to throw its weight behind stars and production design, Warner Bros. invested in the development of the Vitaphone sound system at an early stage and established itself as one of the big Hollywood players with the success of *The Jazz Singer*. In this case, the initial production idea was to bring vaudeville plays and song numbers to the big screen as revue films, with the studio becoming specialized in the production of gangster films and musicals as a result. By contrast, the RKO studio developed the musical into more of a narrative genre over the course of the 1930s after having bought up the declining vaudeville theatres and converted them into cinemas. In his study *The Sound of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* Jeff Smith shows how Hollywood was concerned with building up its own business models, independent of the music industry, at a very early stage. Motivated by the legal situation governing the use of music in film, Warner began buying up record companies in the 1930s to be able to record the music for their films themselves and market it as the rights holder. MGM followed this trend from the mid-1940s onwards.¹⁶

Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener emphasize both the popularity of the musical with audiences as well as the interest it generated among the theorists of the time. They also point out that the genre already exhibited numerous examples of self-reflexivity at the beginning of the 1930s which reflect the interplay of image and sound.¹⁷ This shows that this genre already contains the qualities of aesthetic play normally attributed to modern cinema.

15 Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art* 472.

16 Smith, *The Sound of Commerce* 28.

17 Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory* 129–48.

Kay Kirchmann also highlights this quality in his investigation of Hawks's comedies by emphasizing the autonomy of the speech acts in this genre (in reference to Gilles Deleuze) as a form of autonomous, aesthetic play on the auditory level.¹⁸ The sort of modern and self-reflexive moments that appear in this genre were, however, also produced as part of an interaction with other media. The rapid pace of the speech acts in the screwball comedy and the design of the song numbers in the musical were also designed to compete with radio, a circumstance to which the numerous references to contemporary radio shows in these films allude.¹⁹

Rick Altman goes one step further and fundamentally questions the entire historical identity of film and cinema during the silent film era against the backdrop of the intertwining of the media industries. With regard to sound, he already confirms the multiple identities of silent-era cinema, which he describes as a series of historically alternating forms: "Cinema as Photography [...] Cinema as Illustrated Music [...] Cinema as Vaudeville [...] Cinema as Opera [...] Cinema as Radio [...] Cinema as Phonography [...] Cinema as Telephony."²⁰ I regard this repeated focus on the qualities and contexts of the film musical of the time as evidence for the idea that these film productions should not be understood first and foremost as a nascent film genre, but rather as media aesthetic hybrid formations against the backdrop of their complex production, economic, and legal history, formations that are as indebted to stage, radio, records, and other entertainment industries as they are to cinema.

In the following, I take a closer look at Howard Hawks's *A Song Is Born* as an example of such a media aesthetic hybrid formation. The film's composite form is particularly evident in how it makes use of its stars. The film's main draw, actor and singer Danny Kaye, doesn't actually sing in this musical—apart from the exaggerated caricature of a non-Western love song at the beginning of the film.²¹ By contrast, large portions of the film are dedicated to musicians like Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, and Louis Armstrong, with singing ultimately left to the latter as well. The film's stridently composite nature, which borders on inner turmoil, might be the reason why it has only received cursory attention from film critics and historians, particularly in comparison to other films by the same director, and is usually discredited

18 Kirchmann, "Der Körper" 255–84.

19 Hagen, *Das Radio*.

20 Altman, "Four and a Half Film Fallacies" 114–21.

21 Exactly which countries are being referenced here remains unclear, Polynesia, Samoa and the West Indies are all mentioned.

as an artistic work. It is referred to, for example, by Peter John Dyer, as superficial, inflated, uninventive, and not made with enough care; by Robin Wood as an obviously weaker remake of Hawks's previous *Ball of Fire* (1941).²² Gerald Mast is one of the few to defend the film's qualities albeit with a few caveats:

"Despite the rancid Mayo (and Kaye) of *A Song Is Born*, the film contains several spectacular musical sequences (a familiar Hawks strength) with Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Louis Armstrong, Tommy Dorsey, Charlie Barnett, Mel Powell, and the Golden Gate Quartet. Hawks delights in documenting the way that musicians make music—in the same way he documents the ways that people fly planes, catch tuna, drive cattle, chase game. No film with all those musicians can be all bad."²³

Mast attempts to explore the specific qualities of the film here, which are linked to the musical sequences staged by Hawks and the specific performances of the musicians—albeit without grasping the stand-out moments as sonic icons. Mast's biography of Hawks also emphasizes the unusual position that the director was in; he tried to secure the greatest degree of independence possible from producers and usually produced his films himself as well. For this reason, *A Song Is Born's* composite nature may well have stemmed from the conflict of interest between Hawks the director and Sam Goldwyn the producer, a conflict that was publicized in interviews with Hawks, which in turn only increased the film's stigmatization as a failed project.²⁴ In his biography of Hawks, Todd MacCarthy also gives an account of the various conflicts during the shooting of the film and emphasizes that Hawks was primarily interested in the musicians and not in the two actual stars Danny Kaye and Virginia Mayo, who had been allocated to him by Goldwyn. At the same time, it is also worth mentioning that the film was regarded as a success with audiences and a box office hit when it was released in theaters, topping the list of most-seen films for a whole week and staying within the top twelve for over two months.²⁵

Yet *A Song Is Born* occupies a different position from the perspective of jazz music and its respective discourses. Krin Gabbard sketches out how the view of jazz music changed radically in the specialist press from the middle of the

22 Dyer, "Sling the Lamps Low" 78–93, 90; Wood, *Howard Hawks* 105.

23 Mast, *Howard Hawks* 353.

24 Blumenberg, *Die Kamera in Augenhöhe* 42.

25 MacCarthy, *Howard Hawks* 433–44.

1940s onwards;²⁶ jazz came to be considered an art form. For a short period in the late 1940s, Hollywood reacted to this trend by accepting the legitimacy of this musical style and ascribing to it a specific aesthetic and history in two films in particular: *New Orleans* (1947) and *A Song Is Born* (1948). As Gabbard however emphasizes, the music historiography in question is a revisionist one in which the history of the slave trade and racial segregation doesn't appear, and jazz greats such as Louis Armstrong are actually being exploited by the film industry as a means of authenticating a sanitized version of history, and the origins of the blues are at most reduced to a sigh.²⁷

A Song Is Born can almost be seen as providing a blueprint for how an audio history of film can be created—not least due to its composite nature and work with sonic icons and in spite of its story, which is not entirely satisfactorily narrated. This leads to at least one chapter in the history of music being revised via the incorporation of contemporary popular music styles such as jazz, bebop, and boogie-woogie. In this part of the film's plot, the two stars then play more of a subordinate role among the 'genuine' musicians invited to the research facility.²⁸

The film also finds ways of depicting this innovative practice of composing an encyclopedia by way of audio recordings. This begins with the *mise-en-scène*. The research project library (just like the neighboring seminar room) is the central plot location and is equipped with a state-of-the-art phonograph, which stands in clear contrast to the room's otherwise venerable, bibliophilic décor. As a technical device (and central figure), the phonograph stands in the middle of the room and also forms the focal point of numerous visual compositions. The color scheme (in Technicolor) also serves to accentuate the black, metallic tones of the phonograph and marks it as an element of media self-reflexivity. The phonograph also vies for attention in the frame with the leading actress (Mayo), who wears a red coat when she appears in the library for the first time. This configuration already reveals an initial difference to Hawks' previous *Ball of Fire*, which tells the story of a similar encyclopedia project (in black and white). There too, the world of academia is contrasted with the

26 Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins* 222.

27 Ibid. 117–20.

28 Most of the jazz musicians appear as themselves under their own names. It is only Benny Goodman who plays the role of Professor Magenbruch, an expert in classical clarinet, who has allegedly never heard of jazz musician Goodman, but quickly develops a passion for jazz when playing with the jazz greats.

language of contemporary slang and similarly shaken up the unexpected appearance of a nightclub singer (Barbara Stanwyck) in the academic setting. In *A Song Is Born*, the figure of the phonograph appears as an additional foreign body alongside the female star, which binds together the desires of the (white) male academics. It shifts and directs their interest onto the ecstasy of jazz music and, by extension, Afro-American music, which with the help of the phonograph can be captured differently than by means of traditional notation—which the professors still repeatedly attempt to use in a futile attempt to capture the melodies and chords.

The presentation and use of the phonograph as a recording device receives explicit emphasis in two scenes. In the first of these (in the seminar room), a history of popular music is delineated on the blackboard with the help of numerous guests and star musicians. Afterwards, the findings are expressed in both words and music and recorded with the phonograph. The recording for the encyclopedia begins like a documentary radio feature on music history headed by Prof. Frisbee—who is also operating the phonograph—and compiled using various illustrative musical examples. The undertaking then quickly becomes an audio essay structured by music, with the nightclub singer taking over from the professor and continuing the historical account as a song. It's at this point that the performance finally becomes a musical number. Yet the lead is passed on one last time, to the jazz musicians themselves. Now the leading voice is that of Louis Armstrong, augmented by his physical performance and his trumpet playing—both of which stand out not just from the film's point of view, but also from musical conventions. In my view, what is relevant here is less that Louis Armstrong is narrating a specific history of jazz, accompanied by his colleagues, and more that the vocal number is revealed to be a model for another historical connection, which is incorporated into the academic, phonographic undertaking that makes up the film's plot. Armstrong's vocal performance is central here, creating a prominent moment hard to put one's finger on and which is seemingly pervaded by Hollywood's ambivalence towards the history of jazz. The scene presents a sonic icon in the making, as it were, as it is also encoded as a specific sound recording on the phonograph. The sonic icon created at this moment is thus particularly complex; having already been accentuated as the material for a phonograph recording and a musical number within a musical, it finally comes to the fore as a sonic icon once again as a specific sound event generated by Armstrong's voice.

It is thus only at a surface level that this scene is about the specific narration of a history of music led by an African-American musical icon, which—as Gabbard rightly comments—is ‘revisionist’ and thus appeared sanitized.²⁹ At the same time, Gabbard comments that Armstrong was portrayed as a serious jazz musician in *A Song Is Born* in a manner previously unseen, a fact that can’t simply be attributed to the film’s documentary qualities, which are emphasized by Gerald Mast. Here too the sonic icon emerges from the interplay of differences between sound, image, and text. As such, Benny Goodman appears with a book by music critic Winthrop Sargeant entitled *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* before the scene described above, which he—in the role of Professor Magenbruch, who knows nothing about jazz—read in order to learn about the musical genre.

What is so special about this scene, however, is that this prominent moment with all its accompanying ambivalence is phonographically recorded for inclusion in a music encyclopedia within the fiction of the film—and has indeed been captured in sound and image for this film and thus preserved in film history. The aesthetic production of this song number is tied to history in the process. As one element of a media aesthetic hybrid, the titular song *A Song Is Born* refers to how the film and recording industries are interconnected and displays this, in model fashion, as the context for a version of history that incorporates the Afro-American experience, regardless of how distorted. The academic seminar and the music recording studio become superimposed on one another in the film as two locations of historical production.

In the second scene with the phonograph (in the library), the other group of professors—all specialists in classical music—conduct a second recording a short time later. It is led by the nightclub singer, with support from vaudeville duo Buck and Bubbles. The duo appears here under their own name, although their unlikely appearance is explained by their being window cleaners who just so happen to be excellent musicians and jazz connoisseurs. They are introduced by the professors as good friends who had already conveyed the different styles of jazz to them. The goal of the exercise is to capture a jam session as it’s being performed. Unlike the first recording session, which takes the form of an audio essay whose ultimate aim is to create a well-ordered (revisionist) historical narrative according to a sanitized ‘it starts here and ends there’

29 Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins* 117–22. Gabbard also claims that Louis Armstrong’s presence seems to have been bought by the film industry as a commodity in order to pass on the necessary authentication to a new generation of white swing musicians.

trajectory, the second recording frustrates this setup via the introduction of narrative nonsense. This is initiated in particular by the fact that the song lyrics are being read from random newspaper snippets. This improvisational procedure, which is known as scat singing, deconstructs the meaning of language and transforms the words and syllables being sung into autonomous, poetic sounds. This performance once again pays tribute to Louis Armstrong as one of the early representatives of this art form (even if he himself is not actually present in this scene). It also depicts the jam session as playing with aesthetic difference, as a utopian space of encounter where racial, class, and gender boundaries can be transcended—and which is transported here from the nightclub (where such borders can traditionally be crossed) to a research library.

This second phonography scene contains another unique feature: although it is branded as excessive and “a prairie fire of orgiastic events” (by housekeeper Miss Bragg) before being immediately reprimanded and ended by Prof. Frisbee (as a responsible historian), it had already been inscribed as a utopian trace in the phonograph recording, and no less one with an excessive physical lust for aesthetic play. Within this context, the phonograph is thus not just a recording device that preserves the traces of this excess and allows it to be accessed later on³⁰ but also changes what happens from the very beginning by virtue of recording it. This is because historiography is now confronted with the non-narrative, tonal elements of language and thus also the body’s entire auditory sensuality and desire within the phonographic recording of the jam session and scat singing. And with the help of the microphone, phonography is able to capture these utterances in a particularly clear fashion. This is where the challenge to classical historiography represented by the media of film and phonography comes into view, which Hollywood imagines in model, utopian fashion.

It took 25 years for a similar fantasy to actually make its way into academic libraries: with the final sentence in Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes bases his “aesthetic of textual pleasure” on precisely the same tonal elements of language, such as the “grain of the voice,” the “patina of consonants,” and the “voluptuousness of the vowels.” Surprisingly, he derives his model from sound film: “it suffices that the cinema capture the sound of speech close up [...] and make us hear in their materiality, their sensuality,

30 It is only the recording of the reprimanded jam session that is actually played again from the record player as a gag.

the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle [...], to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.”³¹

A *Song Is Born*’s unique nature now emerges when the two phonograph scenes in the two opposite rooms are placed in a configuration and related to one another like the two sides of record. While the jam session in the seminar room is tied to a didactic narration, the library scene makes the film’s narrative context splinter into the different song numbers (familiar from vaudeville) or into fragmented sonic images. By setting off what happens in one room from what happens in the other, the film flaunts its own complex hybridity and reflects upon its own nature as part of an entertainment industry that produces stories and history based on two opposing techniques: as the sort of easily narratable, linear, and sanitized version of history that is subject to the specific interests of the industry and its consumers on the one hand, and as a performative expression of aesthetic play of a certain physicality that is interspersed with moments of ecstatic distraction on the other.³²

The phonograph scenes ultimately also juxtapose two different configurations of knowledge. The recording scene in the seminar room represents the production of a narrative work with a beginning and an end, previously symbolized in the film as a tree diagram on the blackboard. By creating an audio essay, the recording session essentially implements this diagram, working in the same classically narrative mode as a history book. The nonsense arrangement that makes up the recording scene in the library is structured in opposing fashion, functioning either as an individual number that others may follow, or as a soundtrack, which, together with others, produces an ensemble, a music album. The jam session, scat singing, and the splitting off of particular quotes in the library scene makes reference to an ordering principle referred to by Roland Barthes as the ‘album’ in *The Preparation of the Novel*, which involves quotes or fragments being collected in such a way that Barthes

31 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* 66–67.

32 The linking of the two rooms is flaunted as a hybrid formation once again and inverted when the gangster plot overlaps with the musical. A shotgun wedding ceremony is conducted in the seminar room, whose speech acts are transformed into a series of slapstick moments and sonic images thanks to the hearing aid worn by the master of ceremonies, while in the library, the professors and musicians of all colors start jamming together, which is successfully able to ward off the threat of violence from the gangsters.

sees as being distinct from a book, which he sees as constituting a work. He does, however, refer to the relationship of mutuality between the work and the album whereby the work tends towards the album and vice versa.³³ Hawks creates a similar connection between the two phonograph scenes by presenting them as artwork and album respectively and displaying them as two interrelated orders of knowledge. These two orders of knowledge employed by Hawks and Barthes can now be drawn on for use in what we have called an “Audio History of Film.”³⁴ On the one hand, the audio history of film takes its orientation from the main historical development of film and its treatment of sound. On the other, it is revealed to be a technique akin to archival work, proceeding from the various singular moments—sonic icons—which emerge from the ‘soundimagetext’ (in this case, the voice of Louis Armstrong and the tribute to him in the scat singing scene).

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