

Scoring Ménéilmontant – new world soundscapes with French impressionist cinema

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This paper examines some of the techniques used by Christopher de Groot to score *Ménéilmontant* (Kirsanoff, France, 1926). In particular, French theorist Michel Chion's idea of sound extension in cinema is applied in the way non-musical sounds are included in the context of a live nineteen-piece ensemble. Two other aspects of the film score are discussed in relation to sound image extension: the use of culturally identifiable music, and the blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic music. Chion contends that music in the absence of dialogue can extend the boundaries of the film's screen by implying a larger sonic soundscape surrounding the vision. The film and its director are associated with the French impressionist cinema movement, or the narrative avant-garde, which favored the use of experimental cinematic effects. Kirsanoff's poetic vision of Paris, shot almost entirely on location, derives much of its potency from its locations – creating a strong focus for de Groot to enhance and extend the audiences experience of the film's setting through music. The music score for *Ménéilmontant* draws upon ideas and theories associated with film sound design and applies them to the composing of music to accompany film.

This paper will use Chion's terms of extension, vast extension, and null extension as well as American sound designer Sonnenschein's terms of active off-screen sound, passive off-screen sound and common fate to discuss elements of music underscore that contribute to a widening of the cinematic experience.

Sound and The Extension of Experience

Chion describes extension in cinema as a phenomenon where sound extends the boundaries of the film screen by allowing the audience to hear sounds whose sources are not visually present.

“Extension of the sound environment is our designation for the degree of openness and breadth of the concrete space suggested by sounds, beyond the borders of the visual field, and also within the visual field around the characters”.

Chion, 1994, p.87.

Extension can vary in intensity – it can be extremely wide as illustrated in a film such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, US, 1982), where the sounds of the city behind the characters in the frame constantly remind the viewer of a vast spatial environment. Chion calls this technique vast extension. When the sonic environment has shrunk to the sounds heard by only one character, it is called null extension. Chion proposes extension uses sound to suggest a larger world than can be provided by vision alone through the integration of a sonic structure for a film to inhabit.

When considering the idea of extension, we need to ask “Where is the sound coming from?” and “Which character, or characters are hearing this sound?” Sonnenschein elaborates on Chion's ideas by referring to such extension as active off-screen

sound, the opposite of which is passive off-screen sound (2001, p. 153). Passive off-screen sound is used to create atmosphere and environment, “enveloping and stabilizing the image across edit cuts to make them seamless” (2001, p. 153). Although active and passive sounds serve different functions in a film, they both extend the boundaries of the visible screen creating a larger context for the visual aspect of the film to inhabit.

The plot, characters and locations of *Ménilmontant* suggest an undercurrent of a sinister, dark and corruptive power that Kirsanoff suggests is an attribute of Paris itself. Combined with the lush and inspired location shooting, the film makes for gripping viewing. Many French Impressionist cinematic techniques have been used, such as non-linear narrative structures, the fusion of objective and subjective imagery, graphic, rhythmic and associative forms of representation, and special effects techniques such as slow motion, rapid editing and superimposition (Able, 1984, p. 396). Kirsanoff has combined these techniques to create an “ambiguous rendering of material reality” (Able, 1984, 397). The ambiguous nature of *Ménilmontant*’s reality and its menacing portrayal of Paris create great opportunities for enhancement through sound using Chion’s idea of extension. De Groot’s score attempts to extend the dramatic context by relating the film’s plot and characters’ to locations, as well as bringing the implied elements of Kirsanoff’s film to the fore. Found sound, culturally specific music and diegetic sound are used to create extension.

Manipulated Found Sound

The acoustic instrumentation used in *Ménilmontant*’s score is augmented by a prerecorded track of manipulated found sounds. The track is used as a specific instrument or instrumental section within the composition and does not run continuously. The sounds do not attempt to faithfully recreate on-screen sounds but rather suggest sounds that might be sourced off-screen. They may also be sounds chosen to exaggerate visual elements. The sounds are manipulated electronically through effects, in order to create sound image relationships that are perceived as unnatural, or unfamiliar, to create what Sonenschein calls active off-screen sound.

There are three main sections within *Ménilmontant* where the prerecorded elements play a pivotal role. The first accompanies a sequence that is among the most ambiguous in the film. Approximately halfway through the film, Kirsanoff leaves the logical progression of the diegesis via a bazaar sequence

implying a sexual act between the main character Sibirskaia and the male protagonist, which could be viewed as an imagined fantasy of Sibirskaia’s sister. Strange descriptive shots of a cat prowling down some stairs, a close up of feet walking along an alley, and turning car wheels, all transform into a series of dissolving multiple superimpositions. They create pointillistic light and shadow patterns, and are mixed in with images of a clock and a naked woman’s torso. The clock provides the main concrete sound element, which at first seems to be emanating from the on-screen clock. As the multiple superimpositions begin, the ticking clock builds to a cascading torrent of noise as it is fed through a tape delay effect and panned from right to left and back again over a dissonant electronic texture. As the superimposed images increase in intensity, a live record player is switched on from within the ensemble, playing a fast-paced original Dixieland jazz tune (influenced Raymond Scotti), the hyped-up hot jazz acting as an aural manifestation of the sinful and dark side of Paris. At the precise moment the montage ends the record player is abruptly turned off and the ticking alarm clock resumes its original, quiet ticking. This sonic sequence is used to exaggerate the sister’s fantasies of the couple’s lovemaking.

Effected and actual sounds of water are used to accompany a scene in which Sibirskaia contemplates suicide. A pinging percussive sound of water droplets in a water tank, the gentle lapping of a river against a shore, and a highly-synthesized, bass-heavy water-like sound designed to emulate submersion are all employed. The camera follows Sibirskaia in close up as she slowly walks, a baby in arms, towards the railing of the Seine River with the quiet pining percussive sound. A slow panning shot of the river sees the introduction of the more subtle lapping sound in combination with an effected guitar noise, hinting at a darker emotion. Here live water sounds are used, created live by pouring two jugs of water into a large bucket. The camera then moves back to a close up of Sibirskaia as the synthesized sound is blended in. When the camera moves again to a pan of the river, all sounds build to a climax and the camera cuts to a close up of Sibirskaia’s face and a large splashing sound rings out. The combination of several distinguishable real and emulated water sounds are deliberately juxtaposed against the comparatively calmer vision of the Seine. The audience is encouraged through the use of sound to see more than they actually do in Kirsanoff’s vision of the Seine. The frenzy that the sound builds to appears to drive Sibirskaia’s panicked state as it is suggested she comes dangerously close to throwing

her baby (and possibly herself) into the river. The deep submersion sound signifies her descent into utter hopelessness. The loud and prominent splash of the climax is visually evocative as well and is a strong example of an active off-screen sound – has Sibirskaia just thrown her baby over the railing? Was the splash part of her imagination, or the city’s angry response to her defiance?

A different approach is used towards the end of the film where Sibirskaia and her sister reunite in a dirty and dilapidated laneway. The optimistic tone of the music used here subsides and a soundscape emerges. This soundscape is built from traffic noise, bar wallaii, the distant sounds of a couple having sex, and a noisy neon sign are run through equalization and tape delay. They build in volume throughout the sister’s reunion and become increasingly disturbing as they merge together in a torrent of noise. Film sound designers refer to this phenomenon as common fate. Common fate occurs when two or more components in a complex sound arrangement undergo the same kinds of changes at the same time, and so then become grouped and perceived as part of the same source (Sonnenschein, 2001, p. 82). Common fate conveys the fact that the sisters, although reunited and happy, were still in dire circumstances – Sibirskaia a homeless single mother, her sister a prostitute working in a slum district of Paris. The sounds reflect the dark side of the city, (seedy nighttime spots, cheap hotels) symbolising the

city’s power and rage.

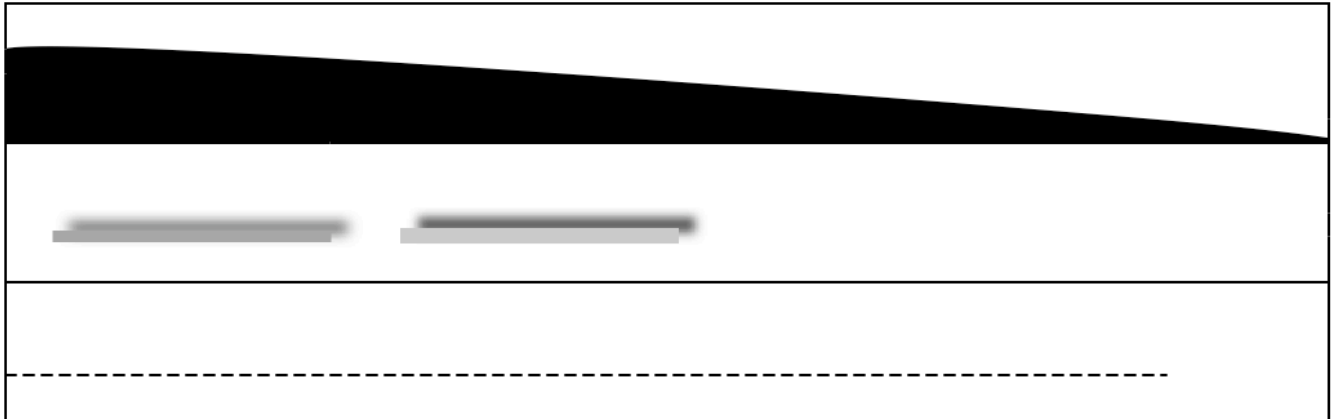
These examples show how sound can alter the audiences perception of what they are seeing. Canadian soundscape artist Claude Schryer suggests that “the successful soundscape composition has the effect of altering the listener’s understanding and attitudes towards the subject, and consequently changing the listener’s relationship to it” (Schryer, 1998, p. 4-5). Sound can be viewed as literal when it accompanies a vision of its possible source, and can be made somewhat unsettling when the types of sounds used do not match, as in the water and clock examples above. This way, extension encompasses both the physical and the metaphysical. In addition, the use of common fate makes the audience aware of a larger power and depth of meaning within a scene.

Stylistic Quotation – Music Representing Culture

The obvious cliché that instantly evokes images of Paris is accordion music. Numerous examples exist such as French Postcards [Huyck, US, 1980] Forget Paris [Crystal, US, 1995], Sabrina [Pollack, US, 1995], Amelie [Jeunet, France 2001], Pink Panther [Levy, US, 2006] and more recently, Ratatouille [Bird & Pinkava, US, 2007]. Whilst an accordion is utilised within the ensemble for Mémilmontant, it is rarely featured as a solo instrument. Rather, it is used with woodwind instruments and strings to add



Figure 1 (extension and null-extension – these stills are from the scenes where the accordion reflects a sense of the city, recalling Sibirskaia’s remembrance [24’ 14”])



weight and colour to chords and melodic lines.

The one appearance of the accordion as a solo instrument is intended to evoke a Parisian atmosphere. The accordion player is instructed to perform the 1867 popular tune *The Daring Young Man On The Flying Trapeze* solo from behind the cinema screen, to create the feeling as if the music comes from off screen, in a distant café or another street. This accordion solo is almost smothered by a vast sonic soundscape created from sounds of a hospital ward and a baby's cries (which accompanies the screen shots shown in figure 1). This recording is affected through the use of audio equalization. The low frequencies of the recording are slowly brought to the fore creating a stirring drone, and the baby's crying becomes increasingly reverberated and distant. This is both an example of extension and null-extension; extension in that the busker reminds us of the ever-present city, of being alone, and of the city overpowering the film's main character (*Sibirskaia*, who has become homeless), and null extension in that the sound of the hospital ward is one that our main character alone is remembering. The sound gives the audience a glimpse into an event that the film does not show, the birth of *Sibirskaia*'s baby onscreen. The music adds this extra window into the past. The accordion solo is in fact a quotation of an earlier piece of music in the film, originally played on a distant-sounding street-side penny piano. The jolly nature of this popular song points out that the now menacing city was once

attractive to *Sibirskaia*, and is now mocking her desperate situation as she stands cold and lonely in the walkway of the hospital building.

Musical minimalism is a style quoted for a purpose in Ménilmontant, when two sisters first move to the bustling city of Paris, creating a "soundtrack of the Machine Age." (MacDonald, 2003) This aural augmentation of Kirsanoff's montage of city traffic, trains, and pedestrian shots is achieved through the audience's recognition of repetition as a mechanical technique (see figure 2 and 3). Although the harmonic and melodic aspects of the music develops much faster than one would find in the early works of the American composers Steve Reich [1936] or Philip Glass [1937], it does align itself quite heavily with the genre through the driving and continuous chordal piano and accordion accompaniment, its incorporation of polyrhythms and its close synchronization with the fast paced montage.ⁱⁱⁱ The use of a musically harmonized train whistle pays a tongue-in-cheek homage to Reich's *Different Trains* (1988). This is an example of how stylistic reference can augment and extend the screen's vision via the audience's recognition of mechanized music to accompany images of mechanization.

The intensity of the musical extension in these two cases relies heavily on the audience's memory and experience of culture. Although connections will most certainly be made between repetition and mechanical reproduction, accordion music and Paris, the extent of its power to widen the boundaries of the

screen will vary from person to person. In the context of M nilmontant, the use of music quotations in extension, although valid, proves less successful than other forms of extension. Music representing culture is less successful than sounds that occur in nature (wind, water), or everyday life (ticking clock) because it is less likely that each audience member has been exposed to the styles of music being referenced by de Groot.

Diegetic Music

Two original Dixieland influenced compositions composed by de Groot were recorded and cut to an 8-inch vinyl record, which is then played live within

the ensemble. To create a more realistic sound of a 1920s phonograph, the record was made of a poor quality, mono playback of the compositions. The mono recording's lack of bass and very high frequencies, and the audible pops and crackles of the record are characteristic qualities of early phonograph recordings. Rejecting established Dixieland recordings in favour of specifically composed material cut to record was used to maintain a stylistic conformity within the film's score. Film theorists Roy M. Prendergast suggests that stylistic conformity within a film that contains set pieces such as folk songs, music for fairs or dance halls, creates better continuity and maintains a musical "colour within the larger framework of the



Figure 2 (Kirsanoff's city montage [4' 37"])

Figure 3 (score excerpt - repetition as a representation of mechanization, as used in the city montage).

score” (1977, p. 214) thus giving the film its own unique sound/voice and place in time.

The use of the record player within the context of a live ensemble blurs the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music. At no time in Kirsanoff’s film do we actually see a record player, a jazz band or even a dance hall. Because of the clear and unmistakable quality of the ‘record’ sound we assume that the record is diegetic – emanating from

Music has the ability to switch from non-diegetic to diegetic at a moment’s notice; Chion refers to this ability as a “spatiotemporal turntable”. Music has the ability to do this “without in the least throwing into question the integrity of the diegesis... no other auditory element can claim this privilege.” (Chion, 1994, p. 81) As a visually startling and disorientating night time montage unfolds, the ensemble plays a fast-paced, almost manic, live Dixieland jazz



Figure 4 (Kirsanoff’s montage of superimposed shots is accompanied by superimposed music – live gramophone played over live ensemble [25’ 56’])

somewhere within the picture (or at least we realise that we are supposed to make this assumption). The record player is used mainly during superimpositions containing shots of the hectic city and fast paced traffic (illustrated in figure 4). Is the music emanating from within the city? Is it a representation of its seductive voice, coaxing us with its exciting modern music? Or is it used as underscore to remind us of the film’s setting and time? The questions that the record player poses is part of its function, through the ambiguity of its source (on-screen, off-screen) it helps to blur the audience’s perception. This blurring engages the audience and encourages them to make their own connections – sound designer Walter Murch puts it this way: “You provoke the audience to complete a circle of which you’ve only drawn a part. Each person being unique, they will complete that in their own way.” (Murch, 2000, p. 8). This use of music and sonic texture draws the audience into the cinematic experience, complicating and enriching it.

composition by de Groot, which is a direct quote of one of the recorded tunes situated on the vinyl record played previously. This technique can also be found in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, US, 1976). American composer Bernard Herrmann’s [1911-1975] main theme, heard as non-diegetic music, crops up as the music on a phonograph to which a couple dance. Music when cross referenced in this way helps to envelop the world of the film – the same music coming at it from two angles, diegetic and non-diegetic, actual and fictitious.

Conclusion

De Groot’s approach to music and sound in the absence of dialogue in *Ménilmontant* shows how it is possible to extend the boundaries of the film’s screen widening the context of the film’s plot. Music has the potential to extend the audience’s cinematic experience by highlighting elements existing within the film and bringing implied elements to the fore

through the use of active off-screen sound, music representing culture, sound image exaggeration and the blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic music. A mixture of original composition, acoustic and electronic instruments, foley techniques and innovative playback mechanisms has created an exciting and engaging sonic cradle to a film that was originally mute. The result is an aural extension of Kirsanoff's original cinematic vision, not a reinvention of it.

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Notes

ⁱ Raymond Scott (born Harry Warnow, 10 September 1908 — 8 February 1994) was an American composer, band-leader, pianist, sound engineer, and electronic instrument inventor. Through his various jazz groups Scott attempted to revitalise Swing music (which he thought stagnant) through tight, busy, sometimes manic arrangements and reduced reliance on improvisation. His music, while popular with the public, was dismissed by jazz critics as novelty music. Scott's style is emulated in *Ménilmontant's* score because of its frenzied sound and comic nature which, when superimposed over the live ensemble, creates a sinister mood.

ⁱⁱ Walla is a sound effect used in early American radio, film and television to imitate the murmur of a crowd in the background. A group of actors brought together in the post-production stage of film production to create this murmur is known as a walla group.

ⁱⁱⁱ American composer George Antheil's [1900-1959] score to *Ballet Mecaunique* [Léger, 1924] is an early example of the use of repetition to accompany vision of mechanised industry, and has influenced the composer's decision to use it within *Ménilmontant's* score.

^{iv} This is in fact the only scene in which the presence of music is implied by vision. In this disorienting nighttime montage Kirsanoff shows a neon sign that reads BAL. Bal in French means *a dance*.