

SILENCE IN THE LOUDSPEAKERS Or - why, with Dolby Sound in films, it is the film which is listening to us
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I'd like to discuss some transformations which have occurred in film sound, and brought about by film sound, since Dolby became the standard for film in the middle of the 1970s. We should remember that previously there were already films we could watch using 'magnetic sound' which had Dolby characteristics (increased frequency range, dynamic enhancement, ie: the possibility of contrasting high intensities and damping background noise; and of course, two, three, four or six tracks instead of just one), but these films - usually David Lean-type adventure movies, special productions like Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (UK, 1968), or musicals like West Side Story (Robert Wise/Jerome Robbins, US, 1961) - represent a very small proportion of general production, and, in order to be seen under ideal acoustic conditions, special set-ups were required, so they were only screened in 'stereophonic sound' in a few prestigious venues. They couldn't have any effect on cinema aesthetics in general.

When Dolby appeared (launched as part of the promotion of Ken Russell's Tommy, UK, 1975), it was initially treated in the same way as Cinemascope: it was seen as a new acoustic space which had to be filled right up in order to enhance it. Films like the first Star Wars (George Lucas, US), which came out in 1977, are good examples of this aesthetic of 'plenitude' and 'sonic density'. Yet, this latter was not invented in every respect by Dolby. Some earlier films, like George Lucas' THX 1138 (US, 1971), which owes a lot to Walter Murch as both co-writer and editor, already had enormous richness of sound.

At the same time, in a dialectical movement, it became increasingly clear that Cinemascope's creation of a new cinematic space to be filled, also created a larger space to be emptied (compare the 'full' image of The Robe (Henry Koster, US, 1953), the first official Cinemascope film, with the 'empty' image of A Star is Born (George Cukor, US, 1954). Equally quickly it became clear that this newly created sonic space also needed to be emptied, a new silence had been created. The new silence which envelopes and dominates certain words and isolated noises gives a new and singular intensity to particular scenes. It was there in any case in certain films from the beginning of Dolby, or earlier in some 'magnetic sound' films.

II

Let us take as an example Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now (US, 1979), where Walter Murch did the sound design. The most famous sequence is based on a 'full' effect, the bombardment of the Vietnamese village with the noise of helicopters and explosions. But here already one can find minimalist sequences, where the loudspeakers 'suspend' their noise, like an orchestra which is there but is not playing, to allow a solo sound to 'speak', for example the voice of Marlon Brando in the monologues at the end of the film.

So Dolby sound introduces a new expressive element, the silence of the loudspeakers, and, to complete it, the attentive silence of the audience which is its reflection. All silence exposes us by way of stripping bare our hearing, but it is also as if a huge ear opened to pick up our slightest noises. While we are listening to the film, we are, as it were, being listened to by it.

In another scene edited by Walter Murch and sound-designed by Alan Splet, the photographic shoot sequence in Phil Kaufman's adaptation of Milan Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being (US, 1987), the quality of the silence surrounding the noises (the clicking of the camera Juliette Binoche is using), and the music (taken from a Janacek sonata) as well as discrete natural sounds (thunder) created, by way of reflection, a certain silence in the audience which underscored the density of the silence between the two women, a silence with an obvious erotic meaning.

In Theo Angelopoulos' Ulysses' Gaze (Greece/It/Fr, 1995) the movie director played by Harvey Keitel arrives in Sarajevo at the time the city was being bombed. The sound of explosions, footsteps, and the voice of Keitel is distant and muffled, which produces the unusual impression of life held in abeyance, because of the clarity of the sounds and what one might call the 'silence of the loudspeakers'. In Krzysztof Kieslowski's La Double Vie de Veronique (Poland, 1991), a music teacher (Irène Jacob) takes a class of schoolchildren to see a puppet show. Because of the digital sound one can hear not only the sound of the piano accompanying the show, but also the very faint noises made by a group of children even when it is silent and attentive. Here the sound of the audience is, in its discretion, particularly moving, and it holds up a mirror to our own concentration.

The last scene of Children of a Lesser God (US, 1986), directed by Randa Haines [1], shows Marlee Matlin and William Hurt on the bank of some kind of lake at night. Marlee Matlin's 'silence' (she plays Sarah, a deaf woman who refuses orality, or rather, vocalisation) is felt all the more because we can hear the delicate noises of her movements and the delicate nocturnal ambience which surrounds them. In addition there is the specific cinematic effect which I have called suspension: we stop hearing the 'disco' music which people are still dancing to in the building they have just left. Suspension - or in other words the mysterious disappearance of a natural ambient sound which is presupposed by the situation, while other sounds, for example the characters' voices or the noise of their footsteps, continue to be heard - is a very long-standing cinematic procedure. It occurs most notably, for instance, in Fellini's Le Notti di Cabiria/Nights of Cabiria (Italy, 1956) or in some dream sequences ... But Dolby is used to give it a new presence. In general Dolby enhances intimate scenes where characters exchange confidences. Here again, such scenes have existed for a long time, but they did not have the same physical effect.

III

I said earlier that the force of silence had already been used in films produced with magnetic sound in the sixties. But at the time people couldn't appreciate this effect if they couldn't get to listen to it in a cinema specially set up for magnetic sound. Let me give three examples. First, the beginning of West Side Story: the tiny noise of the clicking fingers of Jerome Robbins' dancers produces a magical effect in magnetic sound because it underscores the menacing silence hovering between the two gangs, the Jets and the Sharks.

In 2001: A Space Odyssey Stanley Kubrick often uses very rarefied sound environments which underscores the silence between the characters, and sometimes he even risks an absolute silence, for instance when Hal 'telecommands' the murder of Frank Poole. Even then, at that time, absolute silence was clearly more marked in cinemas equipped for magnetic sound. These silent moments, in the case of Kubrick's film, can be interpreted, I would suggest, as the translation of another silence: thought. Thoughts are not heard. As I was studying 2001 for a book I am writing about it, it occurred to me that this masterpiece is among other things a film about the power of dissimulation and lying. Hal hides the aim of the mission to Jupiter from the humans he knows, Dave and Frank hide from him the fact that they plan to put him out of action, Heywood Floyd hides from the Russians the existence of the monolith. All the human or mechanical characters in the film are dissimulating things from one another, and the language embodies the power of dissimulation and falsehood in parallel with the crushing silence of thoughts.

Finally, in Playtime, produced in France in 1967 on 70mm with 6 track magnetic sound, the director, Jacques Tati frequently uses the minimum of sound and the maximum of silence. This, by the way, is a director who often shows his characters as not being able to speak easily to each other about their feelings: a father in Mon Oncle (France, 1958) who doesn't know how to talk to his son, an old couple in Les Vacances de M. Hulot (France, 1952) who no longer talk, etc.

If a director like David Lynch is often seen as being noisy, this is not because he is constantly making the sound blare out. On the contrary, it is because he decides to use violent contrasts of intensity which modern sound allows for in the cinema. Often Lynch's characters talk as if there were someone other than themselves listening, a third party there in the dark, which is indeed the case, since we are listening to them. But this also means that they are listening to us listen to them.

IV

There is another Dolby technique which has created its opposite number, an inverted double: this is the precision of Dolby sound, its richness in treble and bass. Because one has the capacity to produce sounds very rich in harmonics, the use of dull and weak sounds leads to a very specific expressive and aesthetic effect. For instance it seems to me that certain passages of Ridley Scott's Alien (UK, 1979) have weak, sketchy, anaemic sound. Because we know we could have had very rich and precise sound, we are struck by sounds which are weak and confused. Few films, to my knowledge, have capitalised on this effect. True, in Alien, this is often justified by the story itself. We are supposed to think that the telephonic links are working badly, that the ship is an old one ... An aesthetic of imprecise sound becomes possible, yet up to now this imprecision was a consequence of technique.

But one of the consequences of this importance of silence in Dolby cinema is that it is more difficult than ever to bring about the dream of fusing different sonic elements. In monaural cinema of the beginning of the thirties, they often tried to bring about a continuum among words, music and noises, for example, in certain

musical tap-dance numbers, or in some sort of meal and group talk sequence, and so on, ... and in the whole of Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (France, 1934), the directors are often trying to create the impression that all the sounds belong to the one and the same universe. They were helped by the fact that background noise in the movies at that time, even to the point of the audience being more or less aware of it, played the role of 'bass continuum'.

Today, by contrast, everything tends to separate sounds from each other: their distribution on several tracks, their precision, the contrastive gaps and the silent holes between them, etc. In any case, we no longer believe in a rhythmic unity of the world. We live in a world where the rhythms are superimposed without dissolving, in the same way that music listened to in a moving car is superimposed on the rhythms of the world without being confused with them.

Sometimes a film appears which tries to recover this idea of an organic unity of all sounds. In my opinion, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, US, 1982) is one rare recent film which tried to do this and which succeeded because of an analogical content relation between the electronic sounds as noise and Vangelis' synthesised music, and also because of the rhythmic conception of the film as a whole. This is a kind of rhythmic pyramid which goes from broad rhythms on the deep notes, electronic 'drones', to quicker rhythms in the ultrahigh notes, and also because of the 'symphonic' conceptualisation, the admirable organic mix achieved by Graham Hartstone.

But very good films can be made with the opposite idea: that of juxtaposition without fusion, as in certain scenes in David Lynch's movies. But also in the *Star Wars* series where the world of sound effects (for example the high bips for the little robot or the humming of the laser-swords) created by Ben Burt is deliberately and radically different from John Williams' symphonic music, and vice versa.

In a *Cahiers du Cinéma* article translated for the journal *October* by Ben Brewster, 'Quiet Revolution and Rigid Stagnation' [2], I spoke of other effects created by Dolby. What I would like to add now is that these effects are necessarily unforeseeable. They are, in effect, the qualitative and aesthetic consequences of quantitative technical changes. Now, all consequences of this type are necessarily dialectical and unforeseeable. They can only be noted as we go along, and in any case, they are always contradictory. And thirdly, one has to factor in human invention. Dolby will become what we decide to make of it; it is not Dolby which should dictate what we should do with it.

Translated by Stephen Muecke, with Noel King.

Notes

1. Based on a play by Mark Medloff
2. 'Quiet Revolution and Rigid Stagnation' appeared in *October* No 58 Fall 1991.