

# **Film Sound**

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## **THEORY AND PRACTICE**

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filmmakers of the twenties and, like those directors, an advocate of "pure cinema," also emphasizes the nonliteral aspects of sound. Less interested in speech than in the sounds of nature and objects, Epstein seeks, through slow-motion processes, to reduce sounds to their essences. By discovering a common denominator among all sounds that enables them to "speak" equally, Epstein thus erases the hierarchy of sounds, in which speech has a more prominent "voice" than objects, a hierarchy that earlier had disturbed Arnheim.

What binds all these classical theorists together is neither their acceptance of sound nor their championing of a certain sound style, such as asynchronism, but rather their approach to speech, which they view with hostility. Perhaps, as Christian Metz suggests in "The Cinema: Language or Language System?" (*Film Language*), the presence of verbal language threatens their notion of cinema as a kind of language. Concrete verbal structures call into question the figurative, pseudo-verbal systems in which classical theorists sought to ground the cinema as an art. Avoiding the bias of their predecessors, contemporary sound theorists, as we shall see in the next section, embrace speech as an essential element of the sound track. If classical theory legitimizes the sound film, then modern sound theory might be said to have discovered that the sound film talks. Speech is reintegrated into our notion of what the sound track is.

## A Statement

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and G. V. ALEXANDROV

The dream of a sound film has come true. With the invention of a practical sound film, the Americans have placed it on the first step of substantial and rapid realization. Germany is working intensively in the same direction. The whole world is talking about the silent thing that has learned to talk.

We who work in the U.S.S.R. are aware that with our technical potential we shall not move ahead to a practical realization of the sound film in the near future. At the same time we consider it opportune to state a number of principal premises of a theoretical nature, for in the accounts of the invention it appears that this advance in films is being employed in an incorrect direction. Meanwhile, a misconception of the potentialities within this new technical discovery may not only hinder the development and perfection of the cinema as an art but also threaten to destroy all its present formal achievements.

At present, the film, working with visual images, has a powerful effect on a person and has rightfully taken one of the first places among the arts.

It is known that the basic (and only) means that has brought the cinema to such a powerfully effective strength is MONTAGE. The affirmation of montage, as the chief means of effect, has become the indisputable axiom on which the worldwide culture of the cinema has been built.

The success of Soviet films on the world's screens is due, to a significant degree, to those methods of montage which they first revealed and consolidated.

Therefore, for the further development of the cinema, the important moments will be only those that strengthen and broaden the montage methods of affecting the spectator. Examining each new discovery from this viewpoint, it is easy to show the insignificance of the color and the stereoscopic film in comparison with the vast significance of SOUND.

Sound recording is a two-edged invention, and it is most probable that its use will proceed along the line of least resistance, i.e., along the line of *satisfying simple curiosity*.

In the first place there will be commercial exploitation of the most salable merchandise, TALKING FILMS. Those in which sound recording will proceed on a naturalistic level, exactly corresponding with the movement on the screen, and providing a certain "illusion" of talking people, of audible objects, etc.

A first period of sensations does not injure the development of a new art, but it is the second period that is fearful in this case, a second period that will take the place of the fading virginity and purity of this first perception of new technical possibilities, and will assert an epoch of its automatic utilization for "highly cultured dramas" and other photographed performances of a theatrical sort.

To use sound in this way will destroy the culture of montage, for every ADHESION of sound to a visual montage piece increases its inertia as a montage piece, and increases the independence of its meaning—and this will undoubtedly be to the detriment of montage, operating in the first place not on the montage pieces but on their JUXTAPOSITION.

ONLY A CONTRAPUNTAL USE of sound in relation to the visual montage piece will afford a new potentiality of montage development and perfection.

THE FIRST EXPERIMENTAL WORK WITH SOUND MUST BE DIRECTED ALONG THE LINE OF ITS DISTINCT NONSYNCHRONIZATION WITH THE VISUAL IMAGES. And only such an attack will give the necessary palpability which will later lead to the creation of an ORCHESTRAL COUNTERPOINT of visual and aural images.

This new technical discovery is not an accidental moment in film history but an organic way out of a whole series of impasses that have seemed hopeless to the cultured cinematic avant-garde.

The FIRST IMPASSE is the subtitle and all the unavailing attempts to tie it into the montage composition, as a montage piece (such as breaking it up into phrases and even words, increasing and decreasing the size of type used, employing camera movement, animation, and so on).

The SECOND IMPASSE is the EXPLANATORY pieces (for example, certain inserted close-ups) that burden the montage composition and retard the tempo.

The tasks of theme and story grow more complicated every day; attempts to solve these by methods of "visual" montage alone either lead to unsolved problems or force the director to resort to fanciful montage structures, arousing the fearsome eventuality of meaninglessness and reactionary decadence.

Sound, treated as a new montage element (as a factor divorced from the visual image), will inevitably introduce new means of enormous power to the expression and solution of the most complicated tasks that now

oppress us with the impossibility of overcoming them by means of an imperfect film method, working only with visual images.

The CONTRAPUNTAL METHOD of constructing the sound film will not only not weaken the INTERNATIONAL CINEMA but will bring its significance to unprecedented power and cultural height.

Such a method for constructing the sound film will not confine it to a national market, as must happen with the photographing of plays, but will give a greater possibility than ever before for the circulation throughout the world of a filmically expressed idea.

(signed by)

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(Translated by Jay Leyda)

## Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film

V. I. PUDOVKIN

The technical invention of sound has long been accomplished, and brilliant experiments have been made in the field of recording. This technical side of sound filmmaking may be regarded as already relatively perfected, at least in America. But there is a great difference between the technical development of sound and its development as a means of *expression*. The expressive achievements of sound still lie far behind its technical possibilities. I assert that many theoretical questions whose answers are clear to us are still provided in practice only with the most primitive solutions. Theoretically, we in the Soviet Union are in advance of Western Europe and [the] U.S.A.

Our first question is: What new content can be brought into the cinema by the use of sound? It would be entirely false to consider sound merely as a mechanical device enabling us to enhance the naturalness of the image. Examples of such most primitive sound effects: in the silent cinema we were able to show a car, now in sound film we can add to its image a record of its natural sound; or again, in silent film a speaking man was associated with a title, now we hear his voice. The role which sound is to play in film is much more significant than a slavish imitation of naturalism on these lines; the first function of sound is to *augment the potential expressiveness of the film's content*.

If we compare the sound to the silent film, we find that it is possible to explain the content more deeply to the spectator with relatively the same expenditure of time. It is clear that this deeper insight into the content of the film cannot be given to the spectator simply by adding an accompaniment of naturalistic sound; we must do something more. This something more is the development of the image and the sound strip each along a separate rhythmic course. They must not be tied to one another by naturalistic imitation but connected as the result of the interplay of action. Only by this method can we find a new and richer form than that available in the silent film. Unity of sound and image is realized by an interplay of meanings which results, as we shall presently show, in a more exact rendering of nature than its superficial copying. In silent film, by our editing of a variety of images, we began to attain the unity and freedom that is realized in nature only in

its abstraction by the human mind. Now in sound film we can, within the same strip of celluloid, not only edit different points in space, but can cut into association with the image selected sounds that reveal and heighten the character of each—wherever in silent film we had a conflict of but two opposing elements, now we can have four.

A primitive example of the use of sound to reveal an inner content can be cited in the expression of the stranding of a town-bred man in the midst of the desert. In silent film we should have had to cut in a shot of the town; now in sound film we can carry town-associated sounds into the desert and edit them there in place of the natural desert sounds. Uses of this kind are already familiar to film directors in Western Europe, but it is not generally recognized that the principal elements in sound film are the asynchronous and not the synchronous; moreover, that the synchronous use is, in actual fact, only exceptionally correspondent to natural perception. This is not, as may first appear, a theoretical figment, but a conclusion from observation.

For example, in actual life you, the reader, may suddenly hear a cry for help; you see only the window; you then look out and at first see nothing but the moving traffic. But *you do not hear the sound natural to these cars and buses*; instead you hear still only the cry that first startled you. At last you find with your eyes the point from which the sound came; there is a crowd, and someone is lifting the injured man, *who is now quiet*. But, now watching the man, you become aware of the din of traffic passing, and in the midst of its noise there gradually grows the piercing signal of the ambulance. At this your attention is caught by the clothes of the injured man: his suit is like that of your brother, who, you now recall, was due to visit you at two o'clock. In the tremendous tension that follows, the anxiety and uncertainty whether this possibly dying man may not indeed be your brother himself, *all sound ceases* and there exists for your perceptions total silence. Can it be two o'clock? You look at the clock and at the same time you hear its ticking. *This is the first synchronized moment* of an image and its caused sound since first you heard the cry.

Always there exist two rhythms, the rhythmic course of the objective world and the tempo and rhythm with which man observes this world. The world is a whole rhythm, while man receives only partial impressions of this world through his eyes and ears and to a lesser extent through his very skin. The tempo of his impressions varies with the rousing and calming of his emotions, while the rhythm of the objective world he perceives continues in unchanged tempo.

The course of man's perceptions is like editing, the arrangement of which can make corresponding variations in speed, with sound just as with image. It is possible therefore for sound film to be made correspondent

to the objective world and man's perception of it together. The image may retain the tempo of the world, while the sound strip follows the changing rhythm of the course of man's perceptions, or vice versa. This is a simple and obvious form for counterpoint of sound and image.

Consider now the question of straightforward dialogue in sound film. In all the films I have seen, persons speaking have been represented in one of two ways. Either the director was thinking entirely in terms of theater, shooting his whole speaking group through in one shot with a moving camera, using thus the screen only as a primitive means of recording a natural phenomenon, exactly as it was used in early silent films before the discovery of the technical possibilities of the cinema had made it an art form. Or else, on the other hand, the director had tried to use the experience of silent film, the art of montage in fact, composing the dialogue from separate shots that he was free to edit. But in this latter case the effect he gained was just as limited as that of the single shots taken with a moving camera, because he simply gave a series of close-ups of a man speaking, allowed him to finish the given phrase on his image, and then followed that shot with one of the man answering. In doing so the director made of montage and editing no more than a cold verbatim report, and switched the spectator's attention from one speaker to another without any adequate emotional or intellectual justification.

Now, by means of editing, a scene in which three or more persons speak can be treated in a number of different ways. For example, the spectator's interest may be held by the speech of the first, and—with the spectator's attention—we hold the close-up of the first person lingering with him when his speech is finished and *hearing* the voice of the commenced answer of the next speaker before passing on to the latter's image. We see the image of the second speaker only *after* becoming acquainted with his voice. Here sound has preceded image.

Or, alternatively, we can arrange the dialogue so that when a question occurs at the end of the given speech, and the spectator is interested in the answer, he can immediately be shown the person addressed, only presently hearing the answer. Here the sound follows the image.

Or, yet again, the spectator having grasped the import of a speech may be interested in its *effect*. Accordingly, while the speech is still in progress, he can be shown a given listener, or indeed given a review of all those present and mark their reactions toward it.

These examples show clearly how the director, by means of editing, can move his audience emotionally or intellectually, so that it experiences a special rhythm in respect to the sequence presented on the screen.

But such a relationship between the director in his cutting room and his future audience can be established only if he has a psychological

insight into the nature of his audience and its consequent relationship to the content of the given material.

For instance, if the first speaker in a dialogue grips the attention of the audience, the second speaker will have to utter a number of words before they will so affect the consciousness of the audience that it will adjust its full attention to him. And, contrariwise, if the intervention of the second speaker is more vital to the scene at the moment than the impression made by the first speaker, then the audience's full attention will at once be riveted on him. I am sure, even, that it is possible to build up a dramatic incident with the recorded sound of a speech and the image of the unspeaking listener where the latter's reaction is the most urgent emotion in the scene. Would a director of any imagination handle a scene in a court of justice where a sentence of death is being passed by filming the judge pronouncing sentence in preference to recording visually the immediate reactions of the condemned?

In the final scenes of my first sound film, *Deserter*, my hero tells an audience of the forces that brought him to the Soviet Union. During the whole of the film his worst nature has been trying to stifle his desire to escape these forces; therefore this moment, when he at last succeeds in escaping them and himself desires to recount his cowardice to his fellow workers is the high spot of his emotional life. Being unable to speak Russian, his speech has to be translated.

At the beginning of this scene we see and hear shots longish in duration, first of the speaking hero, then of his translator. In the process of development of the episode the images of the translator become shorter and the majority of his words accompany the images of the hero, according as the interest of the audience automatically fixes on the latter's psychological position. We can consider the composition of sound in this example as similar to the objective rhythm and dependent on the actual time relationships existing between the speakers. Longer or shorter pauses between the voices are conditioned solely by the readiness or hesitation of the next speaker in what he wishes to say. But the image introduces to the screen a new element, the subjective emotion of the spectator and its length of duration; in the image longer or shorter does not depend upon the identity of the speaking man but upon the desire of the spectator to look for a longer or shorter period. Here the sound has an objective character, while the image is conditioned by subjective appreciation; equally we may have the contrary—a subjective sound and an objective image. As illustration of this latter combination I cite a demonstration in the second part of *Deserter*; here my sound is purely musical. Music, I maintain, must in sound film *never be the accompaniment*. It must retain its own line.

In the second part of *Deserter* the image shows at first the broad

streets of a Western capital; suave police direct the progress of luxurious cars; everything is decorous, the ebb and flow of an established life. The characteristic of this opening is quietness, until the calm surface is broken by the approach of the workers' demonstration bearing aloft their flag. The streets clear rapidly before the approaching demonstration, its ranks swell with every moment. The spirit of the demonstrators is firm, and their hopes rise as they advance. Our attention is turned to the preparations of the police; their horses and motor vehicles gather as their intervention grows imminent; now their champing horses charge the demonstrators to break their ranks with flying hoofs, the demonstrators resist with all their might, and the struggle rages fiercest round the workers' flag. It is a battle in which all the physical strength is marshaled on the side of the police, sometimes it prevails and the spirit of the demonstrators seems about to be quelled, then the tide turns and the demonstrators rise again on the crest of the wave; at last their flag is flung down into the dust of the streets and trampled to a rag beneath the horses' hoofs. The police are arresting the workers; their whole cause seems lost, suppressed never to rearise—the welter of the fighting dies down—against the background of the defeated despair of the workers we return to the cool decorum of the opening of the scene. There is no fight left in the workers. Suddenly, unexpectedly, before the eyes of the police inspector, the workers' flag appears hoisted anew and the crowd is re-formed at the end of the street.

The course of the image twists and curves, as the emotion within the action rises and falls. Now, if we used music as an *accompaniment* to this image we should open with a quiet melody, appropriate to the soberly guided traffic; at the appearance of the demonstration the music would alter to a march; another change would come at the police preparations, menacing the workers—here the music would assume a threatening character; and when the clash came between workers and police—a tragic moment for the demonstrators—the music would follow this visual mood, descending ever further into themes of despair. Only at the resurrection of the flag could the music turn hopeful. A development of this type would give only the superficial aspect of the scene, the undertones of meaning would be ignored: accordingly I suggested to the composer (Shaporin) the creation of a music the dominating emotional theme of which should *throughout* be courage and the certainty of ultimate victory. From beginning to end the music must develop in a gradual growth of power. This direct, unbroken theme I connected with the complex curves of the image. The image succession gives us in its progress first the emotion of hope, its replacement by danger, then the rousing of the workers' spirit of resistance, at first successful, at last defeated, then finally the gathering and reassembly of their inherent power and the hoisting of their flag. The image's progress curves like a sick man's tem-

perature chart: while the music in direct contrast is firm and steady. When the scene opens peacefully the music is militant; when the demonstration appears the music carries the spectators right into its ranks. With its batoning by the police, the audience feels the rousing of the workers, wrapped in their emotions the audience is itself emotionally receptive to the kicks and blows of the police. As the workers lose ground to the police, the insistent victory of the music grows; yet again, when the workers are defeated and disbanded, the music becomes yet more powerful still in its spirit of victorious exaltation; and when the workers hoist the flag at the end the music at last reaches its climax, and only now, at its conclusion, does its spirit coincide with that of the image.

What role does the music play here? Just as the image is an objective perception of events, so the music expresses the subjective appreciation of this objectivity. The sound reminds the audience that with every defeat the fighting spirit only receives new impetus to the struggle for final victory in the future.

It will be appreciated that this instance, where the sound plays the subjective part in the film, and the image the objective, is only one of many diverse ways in which the medium of sound film allows us to build a counterpoint, and I maintain that only by such counterpoint can primitive naturalism be surpassed and the rich deeps of meaning potential in sound film creatively handled be discovered and plumbed.

(Translated by Marie Seton and Ivor Montagu)

## The Art of Sound

RENÉ CLAIR

*London, May 1929.* Today there is no individual, no company, no financial coalition capable of stopping the triumphant march of the talking film. The industrialists of the American cinema maintain that the public has clearly manifested its liking for talkies, and that they have done no more than meet the public's wishes.

But if the public suddenly got tired of its new toy, the same docile industrialists would certainly refuse to pander further to its whims. For meanwhile the talkies have become one of the biggest business undertakings of our age, to which banks and public utility companies with interests on an imperial scale have linked their fate. So many thousand million dollars have been invested in this enterprise that from now on any and every means will be used to ensure its success. The talking film exists, and those skeptics who prophesy a short reign for it will die themselves long before it's over.

It is too late for those who love the art of moving pictures to deplore the effects of this barbaric invasion. All they can do is try to cut their losses.

The talking film is not everything. There is also the sound film—on which the last hopes of the advocates of the silent film are pinned. They count on the sound film to ward off the danger represented by the advent of talkies, in an effort to convince themselves that the sounds and noises accompanying the moving picture may prove sufficiently entertaining for the audience to prevent it from demanding dialogue, and may create an illusion of "reality" less harmful for the art than the talking film.

However, we have grounds to fear that this solution will only half-satisfy the public. If there is almost universal agreement about the advantages of a mechanical musical accompaniment over the improvisations of a cinema orchestra, opinions vary as far as noises accompanying the action are concerned. The usefulness of such noises is often questionable. If at first hearing they are surprising and amusing, very soon they become tiresome. After we have heard a certain number of sound films, and the first element of surprise has worn off, we are led to the unexpected discovery that the world of noises seems far more limited than we had thought. . . .

. . . Although the talkies are still in their first, experimental stage, they have already, surprisingly enough, produced stereotyped patterns. We have barely "heard" about two dozen of these films, and yet we already feel that the sound effects are hackneyed and that it is high time to find new ones. Jazz, stirring songs, the ticking of a clock, a cuckoo singing the hours, dance-hall applause, a motorcar engine, or breaking crockery—all these are no doubt very nice, but become somewhat tiresome after we have heard them a dozen times in a dozen different films.

We must draw a distinction here between those sound effects which are amusing only by virtue of their novelty (which soon wears off), and those that help one to understand the action, and which excite emotions which could not have been roused by the sight of the pictures alone. The visual world at the birth of the cinema seemed to hold immeasurably richer promise. . . . However, if *imitation* of real noises seems limited and disappointing, it is possible that an *interpretation* of noises may have more of a future in it. Sound cartoons, using "real" noises, seem to point to interesting possibilities.

Unless new sound effects are soon discovered and judiciously employed, it is to be feared that the champions of the sound film may be heading for a disappointment. We shall find ourselves left with the "hundred per cent talkie," as they say here, and that is not a very exhilarating prospect. . . .

. . . Of all the films now showing in London, *Broadway Melody* is having the greatest success. This new American film represents the sum total of all the progress achieved in sound films since the appearance of *The Jazz Singer* two years ago. For anyone who has some knowledge of the complicated technique of sound recording, this film is a marvel. Harry Beaumont, the director, and his collaborators (of whom there are about fifteen, mentioned by name in the credit titles, quite apart from the actors) seem to delight in playing with all the difficulties of visual and sound recording. The actors move, walk, run, talk, shout, and whisper, and their movements and voices are reproduced with a flexibility which would seem miraculous if we did not know that science and meticulous organization have many other miracles in store for us. In this film, nothing is left to chance. Its makers have worked with the precision of engineers, and their achievement is a lesson to those who still imagine that the creation of a film can take place under conditions of chaos known as inspiration.

In *Broadway Melody*, the talking film has for the first time found an appropriate form: it is neither theater nor cinema, but something altogether new. The immobility of planes, that curse of talking films, has gone.

The camera is as mobile, the angles are as varied as in a good silent film. The acting is first-rate, and Bessie Love talking manages to surpass the silent Bessie Love whom we so loved in the past. The sound effects are used with great intelligence, and if some of them still seem superfluous, others deserve to be cited as examples.

For instance, we hear the noise of a door being slammed and a car driving off while we are shown Bessie Love's anguished face watching from a window the departure which we do not see. This short scene in which the whole effect is concentrated on the actress's face, and which the silent cinema would have had to break up in several visual fragments, owes its excellence to the "unity of place" achieved through sound. In another scene we see Bessie Love lying thoughtful and sad; we feel that she is on the verge of tears; but her face disappears in the shadow of a fade-out, and from the screen, now black, emerges a single sob.

In these two instances the sound, at an opportune moment, has replaced the shot. It is by this economy of means that the sound film will most probably secure original effects.

We do not need to *hear* the sound of clapping if we can see the clapping hands. When the time of these obvious and unnecessary effects will have passed, the more gifted filmmakers will probably apply to sound films the lesson Chaplin taught in the silent films, when, for example, he suggested the arrival of a train by the shadows of carriages passing across a face. (But will the public, and, above all, the filmmakers, be satisfied with such a discreet use of sound? Will they not prefer an imitation of *all* the noises to an intelligent selection of a few useful ones?)

Already in the films we are shown at present, we often feel that in a conversation it is more interesting to watch the listener's rather than the speaker's face. In all likelihood American directors are aware of this, for many of them have used the device quite often and not unskillfully. This is important, for it shows that the sound film has outgrown its first stage, during which directors were intent on demonstrating, with childish persistence, that the actor's lips opened at exactly the same moment as the sound was heard—in short, that their mechanical toy worked beautifully.

It is the *alternate*, not the simultaneous, use of the visual subject and of the sound produced by it that creates the best effects. It may well be that this first lesson taught us by the birth pangs of a new technique will tomorrow become this same technique's law. . . .

. . . Whenever the most faithful devotees of the silent cinema undertake an impartial study of talking films, they inevitably lose some of their assurance right at the start, for, at its best, the talkie is no longer photographed theater. It is itself. Indeed, by its variety of sounds, its orchestra

of human voices, it does give an impression of greater richness than the silent cinema. But are such riches not in fact quite ruinous to it? Through such "progressive" means the screen has lost more than it has gained. It has conquered the world of voices, but it has lost the world of dreams. I have observed people leaving the cinema after seeing a talking film. They might have been leaving a music hall, for they showed no sign of the delightful numbness which used to overcome us after a passage through the silent land of pure images. They talked and laughed, and hummed the tunes they had just heard. *They had not lost their sense of reality.*

(Translated by Vera Traill)