

CONNECTING AND DISCONNECTING SOUND AND CINEMA IN BALÁZS'S FILM AESTHETICS

IZABELLA FÜZI

I. SOUND AS CONNECTION: IMMEDIACY AND DISTANCIATION

It is a recurrent image of our worst nightmares that in life threatening situations when help or rescue is needed no sound issues from our throat; or we see someone's moving lips, but we cannot hear a sound because everything is covered by noise and confusion. Characteristic of both situations is that although connection through sound is desperately needed, there is no possibility to reach to the other. Movies often display similar scenes to render characters' deepest fears and anxieties — in dream sequences, for example, or in real situations to emphasize danger. The archetypical character of these phenomena — sound effects generating fear and anxiety — is evinced by the etymology of the word "panic" which derives from the name of the ancient Greek god, Pan, who could induce a state of confusion and irrational terror by creating terrible sounds without any visible cause. Sounds without a visible or a known source

This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. For their valuable remarks and suggestions I thank Samuel Weber, Erica Carter, Eszter Polónyi and Ronan McKinney.

(who/what emits the sound?), the difficulty to locate the sound in space (where does the sound come from?), the dissociation between the senses (ventriloquism), the “pregnant moment” of silence are all experienced as troubling moments of sound perception. What interests me in these archetypical scenes is the possibility of sound as connection (as an umbilical cord, if we can put it this way) in its relation to silence and noise. The relationships between sound and silence and sound and noise give us two different frames to theorize the concept of sound. While the difference between sound and noise rests in the positing or legibility of meaning and its lack respectively, silence implies the absence of sound altogether, a vacuum which encircles subjects involved in hearing, whereas sound denotes the sensory plenitude of hearing. I would like to illustrate these claims through a recent cinematic example on the role and work of the senses.

Perfect Sense (David Mackenzie, 2011) recounts a love story framed by an apocalyptic vision of humanity’s gradual loss of all senses. Following the receipt of (post)classical narrative cinema we have two juxtaposed stories. (In classical Hollywood double plotline serves, first of all, economic purposes: the two intertwined plotlines offer more narrative events with fewer characters: every event can be accounted for in the transactions of both stories, while they mutually reinforce and motivate each other.) Settled in near-future urban Ireland the two plotlines of *Perfect Sense* differ in their conflicts and resolutions, as well as in the scale of events. One of the plotlines is an intimate story of two young professionals: the female character (Eva Green), an epidemiologist, and the male character (Ewan McGregor), a chef, both having problems with commitment in their previous relationships. The other plotline recounts how, due to an epidemic, people all over the world are gradually robbed of their sensory perceptions, first of their smell, then of their taste, hearing and sight.

The two stories unfold in opposite directions:¹ while in the plotline involving the fate of humanity we are heading towards a full catastrophe, a gradual deprivation of

¹ This opposite movement between the double plotline (i.e., intertwining of an apocalyptic and a private story) is a recurrent procedure in recent feature films. Other examples include: *Another Earth* (Mike Cahill, 2011), *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011) and in some ways *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick, 2011). While in the interlacing characteristic to sci-fi-action movies (*Terminator*, *Independence Day*, *Godzilla*, to name just a few), the relation between the grand scale narrative (saving the Earth, or avoiding catastrophe) and the private narrative is a mutually reinforcing one by their parallel resolution, in the films cited earlier this relation is more problematic, as I will try to show it in the case of *Perfect*

the senses, consequently alienation and loss, in the romance story the two characters get closer and closer to each other (even if at first they do not admit it). The resolutions of the two plotlines are highly ambivalent: it is not clear whether the growing affection and closeness between the two characters previously incapable of commitment is an effort of compensation in the face of imminent loss or a genuine feeling. Hedonism at the verge of losing one's senses is emphasized, as well as an effort to compensate for the loss through the saturation of other senses. The "Life goes on" maxim is repeated over again and applies to both story lines; the romantic story develops through ups and downs itself. If the protagonists' final catching sight of each other and walking towards each other (in slow motion) is a fulfillment of their relationship, it is ironic that this moment is synchronized with the loss of their sight, suggesting that closeness to the other arrives when almost all contact with the exterior world and the other through the senses is lost. But not all the senses are lost: the final words "uttered" (or shared by a narrator unaffected by the loss), while the screen goes black, are of a terrible waiting for the disappearance of their last organ of sense, touching: "bodies closed together, eyes closed, oblivious to the world around them, because that is how life goes on."

Perfect Sense resembles the process described by Condillac's *Treatise on the Sensations* in which he gives a detailed account of how each of our senses gives us information on the world and contributes to the formation of consciousness. In order to separate the senses and assign their place, he posits a "statue" with no consciousness of itself or of other objects and he endows the statue with the capacity of perceiving, adding a sense of organ one by one.² When the statue smells something for the first time, for example, it appears to itself as the existence of that smell. When the same smell appears again, remembering occurs and with it the split between object and subject. Attention, imagination, remembering are derived categories from the pain or pleasure experienced through the senses. Animating the statue — making it sensible in Condillac's manner — means endowing it with different types of mediations which

Sense. Usually the grand scale, catastrophic narrative is used as a background against which deepest individual anxieties and tensions are exposed. If the catastrophic ending has nevertheless a positive note, this is possible because these films celebrate catastrophe as the sole possibility of catharsis.

² Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Condillac's Treatise on the Sensations*, transl. by Geraldine Carr (London: Faval Press, 1930).

distanciate the statue from the world and from itself. Without them the statue remains senseless and thoughtless matter. Contrarily, in *Perfect Sense* the naturalness of our everyday connections and relays to the world is gradually lost, threatening with the total disappearance of distance (or nearness), with a world without any connection, contact, or relation(ship). In this way Condillac's *Treatise on the Sensations* and *Perfect Sense* both present us through the fictional stories of acquiring/losing the senses — although on very different levels and from two opposite end points — how subjectivity emerges/disappears by the establishment/cessation of distance and nearness.

Perfect Sense addresses the fear of being enclosed in one's own body as in a statue, a catastrophe threatening humanity, but presented mainly in terms of individual responses and reactions. Apocalyptic narratives — within the genre of science-fiction — offer a protected space (that of the movie theatre and of fiction) for the spectator to “experience” and deal with the fear of an imminent danger. In *Perfect Sense*, however, it is the possibility of perceiving and experiencing itself which is threatened, not only for the characters, but for the viewers, too, through a self-reflective moment and the technique of deep focalization. In the story the characters facing the gradual loss of the senses elaborate ways to compensate the lost senses by synaesthetic translations: the sense of smelling is evoked by a violin player, while the sensations of taste are substituted by the texture and look of the food. This process of delaying and working through serves as a means for gradation, climax is reached when hearing and sight — the two senses involved in the cinematic situation — are lost. First silence, then darkness envelops the viewer, which marks the moment when negotiations of losses and gains are no more possible, leaving the characters suspended in their terrible waiting for the full catastrophe, losing their last organ of sense, touching, and the viewer with a post-apocalyptic voice of the female character-narrator, a seemingly unmediated, faceless and bodiless sound promising redemption or illumination.

Sound and hearing, as one sensory dimension among the others, can be viewed as a form of being in contact by “resonating” to the sounds enveloping us or reaching us and by issuing sounds with which we are reaching others. I am interested in sound not primarily as a vehicle of speech and meaning, but as an almost physical tool, an extension of our body and its ability to make contact. Similarly to the other senses, hearing becomes a medium of the body insofar as it inscribes a distance, establishing a spatial relation which presupposes a shared space enveloping the sound issuer and the lis-

tener. Sound has a special function in establishing the space of the subject: distance, scale, volume, reverberation give different accounts of space from the visually perceived space. However, as suggested by the examples above, hearing — as the other senses — not only connects us, but at the same time inscribes distance and otherness. This double bind will be all the more emphasized by the discourse concerning the technical mediation of sound. With the advent of sound transmission and recording, the invention of the telephone, phonograph and later radio problems regarding the (dis)connective function of sound and hearing are formulated more pungently.

II. REPRESENTATION AND TECHNICAL MEDIATION OF SOUND

The introduction of sound in cinema was perceived as a challenge for silent film conceived mainly as a visually channeled medium. It is a well known fact that sound film was met by resistance and fears from the part of actors, directors and aestheticians of cinema. They feared that sound would crush the power of the image and destroy cinema's purely visual character. One of the most often cited reaction is Chaplin's who stated that "Talkies are spoiling the oldest art in the world — the art of pantomime. They are ruining the great beauty of silence. They are defeating the meaning of the screen."³ The most powerful argument against the talking film was the newly acquired autonomy of cinema from theatrical influences. It was feared that, once again, moving pictures will prove to be nothing more than photographed theatre. Silent film would have to renounce its boundless liberty to move freely in time and space, its methods to summarize and compress longer processes and its simultaneity.⁴ Most film aestheticians predicted that the arrival of sound will kill the art of silent films.⁵ (It is equally worth of attention that many early sound films employed recorded sound in a non natural way, as an instance of ventriloquism [*The Great Gabbo*, 1929], as acousmatic

³ "Interview with Gladys Hall," *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1929.

⁴ See for example Iván Hevesy, "Színes film, beszélő film," in *Az új művészetért*, ed. Katalin Krén (Budapest: Gondolat, 1978), 264-69.

⁵ It merits consideration that "the most eloquent and impassioned opponents of sound were filmmakers and film intellectuals closely associated with modernist visual culture, and with the ambitions of European avant-garde movements." Des O'Rawe, "The Great Secret: Silence, Cinema and Modernism," *Screen* 47/4 (Winter 2006): 395-405.

sound [*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933], or as a symphony of noises [*Enthusiasm*, 1930]). These more or less legitimate concerns or anxieties were formulated mostly from an aesthetic point of view: introduction of sound in cinema frustrated the former regime of the senses established by the silent film. Although screenings were accompanied by music or voice commentary most of the time in the silent film period, in sound film a new type of sound emerged: diegetic sound — the audible sound issuing from the space of the story — creating new connections between characters and most importantly between characters and spectators. If the use of nondiegetic (accompanying) music was regular practice in silent films' screening, this new type of sound posited a connection with the story world perhaps unaccountable by the visual dimensions of the image. Diegetic sound designed a new form of presence and with that a new type of distance, too.

Béla Balázs was one of the few aestheticians of cinema who did not dismiss the advent of sound. Eventually, later he deplored the condition of the sound film and expressed a nostalgic attitude towards the lost art of the silent film in *Filmkultúra* (1948). However, in his second book on film aesthetics, entitled *The Spirit of Film* (1930), he devotes an entire and important chapter to the question of the sound. He viewed the transition to sound as a moment of "crisis" and not a "catastrophe," even if the "catastrophic force" with which sound burst on the scene of the silents could represent a "grave danger" for visual expression.⁶ He sought for new cinematic uses of sound like the discovery of noise, the acoustic character of sounds, acoustic perspective or spatiality of sounds, asynchronous speech and so forth. Nevertheless, when defining the material properties and the signifying potential of sound, Balázs stumbles on a moment which he cannot encompass in his broader aesthetic project.

The passages I will examine at length below are the following:

Recorded sound is, indeed, not even representation. No doubt, what we see on the screen is the image of the actor, but we do not see the image of his voice. His voice is not represented but reproduced. It may sound somewhat altered, but it does have the same reality." [200]

⁶ Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, transl. Rodney Livingston, ed. Erica Carter (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 191. Further references to this edition are indicated by page numbers only.

We can imagine creatures of fable; we can even draw fairy-tale figures we have never seen. But fairy-tale voices? Fairy-tale sounds? What do they sound like? Our imagination may conjure figures that are impossible in reality, but we cannot imagine sounds that could not actually be uttered. We can draw something that does not exist. For the image is a representation and can therefore be invented. However, we do not hear the representation of sound but the sound itself. So, if we hear it, it exists. [216]

The intuition on (recorded) sound points to the contradictory nature and tensions underlying Balázs's thinking and aesthetics. The assertion that sound is not representation is a blind spot which cannot be accounted for by the aesthetic project set forth in both aesthetics, *Visible Man* (1924) and *The Spirit of Film* (1930) — that is to view cinema as a new site of articulation, a negotiation between subject and object, body and spirit, flesh and soul, surface and depth, inside and outside. *Visible Man* and *The Spirit of Film* proposed to define the novelty of the new cinematic medium in the context of a visual culture which promised to make man visible again. The token of this visibility is the body and its movements, opposed to the conceptual culture which “buried [human beings] under mountains of words and concepts” (11). The key terms of both aesthetics — physiognomy, face, the body, gestures, the close-up or the set-up — are valued in terms of their expressive function. The model of expression in Balázs, however, does not relate to an already existing referent waiting to be expressed, rather alludes to a process of mediation between realms accessible and non accessible to perception. Sound can be included in this model based on Balázs's view that “everything speaks”: sports, dance, cinema, even walking offer ways for the body to become a more or less “sensitive medium of the soul” (12). Silent cinema is valued by making the visible (and invisible) world a deeply semiotic image — through the “language”⁷ of cinema: the isolating technique of the close-up, montage, the choice of viewpoint, etc.

⁷ The choice of the term “language” is not without shortfalls: arguing against verbal culture which abstracted and drained out the human soul, “atrophied” the body, the expressive, immediate and universal language of the body or of cinema cannot escape abstraction, and standardization. Since bodily gestures must be comprehensible for everyone, all individual and national varieties are to be eliminated (“We may say that the language of gestures has become standardized in film” (14)). But this standardization does not diminish Balázs' exaltation over the expressive qualities of gestures realized in film;

In the case of sound, however, this expressive character is not given already: recorded sounds are “not even representation.” Sound does not stand for something else hidden beneath its image and does not leave space for imaginary supplement: the flight of imagination is always anchored by perception — “if we hear it [the sound], it exists.” (Which would imply that hallucinatory sounds are heard as real, too: the gap between the real and the imaginary collapses.) Balázs in his later writings recollects nostalgically how the sound effects of the silent film were based on an imaginary investment from the part of the viewer — triggered by the lack of diegetic sounds, a lack which could not be filled in by any physically real sound. Balázs’s intuition on the ontological status of recorded sound, as something which testifies to the real has produced lively discussions ever since. I will summarize the afterlife of this question through a present-day debate on sound reproduction and representation.

It is easy to come up with a number of arguments which refute Balázs’s thesis that (recorded) sound is not representation. Everybody experienced the strange feeling that hearing his own recorded voice triggers when coming back to his own ears as something unfamiliar, alien. The range of sensibility of the microphone distorts the voice by emphasizing certain traits and neglecting others, in this way recorded voice can seem both familiar and strange. Taking into account all the possibilities and limitations of the recording process, there is a huge number of variables on the basis of which we can assert that recorded sound is representation. Leaving aside sound mixing and postproduction (the very operations which literally manipulate sound) the recording and hearing situations themselves present us multiple parameters which not only reproduce, but represent and interpret sounds. Film sound analysis has taken into account these manipulations, but it was Rick Altman’s seminal study, *The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound*,⁸ which pointed out accurately the many levels of

physiognomy is regarded instead as an organic potentiality which will evolve in “a living, concrete internationalism” (14), surpassing the frontiers between different peoples. The final question, the stake of Balázs’s aesthetics remains how film can guarantee the passage between or the conjunction of soul and flesh, body and spirit, and not reproduce the shortcomings of verbal language which crystallized the soul through words, but left the body soulless and empty. For more on these inner tensions, the subject-object relations involved in reading the image, see Izabella Füzi, “The Face of the Landscape in Balázs,” in *Raum und Identität im Film: Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven*, ed. Irma Duraković, Michael Lommel, and Joachim Paech (Marburg: Schüren-Verlag, 2012), 29-42.

⁸ Rick Altman, “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound,” in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15-34.

intervention and interpretation in dealing with sound. Altman challenges the textual model of cinematic analysis (exemplified through the musical notation system which is “tuned” only to a few acoustic properties of sound, most of all pitch and duration). Instead he opts for a material model which asserts that sound is essentially discursive, i.e. “multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and three-dimensional” (16). From this abundance of material traits which Altman labels “sound as event,” recording and hearing selects, reduces, amplifies traits on the basis of technical limitations and possibilities and actuality of the hearing situation. In this way the location of the microphone (distance, directionality), its type (its sensitivity to the direct or reflected sounds, its omnidirectional or narrowly focused character, the range of sound frequencies, “unwanted sounds”) together with the spatiality of the listening situation — all point to the direction that sound as event is only graspable through representation and interpretation: sound becomes a “narrative.” “For what the record contains is not the sound event as such but a record of a particular hearing, a specific version of the *story* of the sound event” (24, emphases added).

In Altman’s account, then, we have a two-folded structure: on the one hand he posits the sound as an original event with its heterogeneous material traits, and on the other hand there is the narrative of sound of which we have access — given the partiality of representation and interpretation. The relation between the fullness of the event and the partiality of narrative is regulated by losses and gains, as much the same way as implied by the concept of the technical medium as an “enabling impediment.”⁹ However, as James Lastra¹⁰ points out, Altman’s representational model is based on the problematic dichotomy between the original and the copy. Although Lastra agrees with Altman in equating reproduction with representation, he bases this insight on a completely other argument. Lastra challenges Altman’s model by asserting that both the original sound (“sound as event” in Altman) and recorded copy (“sound as narrative”) are effects of representation. There is no loss or gain in representation because “there is no thing-to-be-represented outside of the goals of the very act of represent-

⁹ “The juxtaposition of negativity and productivity is crucial here. A medium is a medium by virtue of both its positive qualities (the visibility, color, texture of paint, for instance) and its limitations, gaps, incompletions (the flatness of the canvas, the finite enclosure insured by the frame).” Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” *Differences* 18/1 (2007): 130.

¹⁰ James Lastra, “Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound,” in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 65-86.

ing” (75).¹¹ Lastra incorporates Altman’s sound event and sound narrative as the effects of representation itself differentiating between “two implicit models of the sound apparatus” (76): the “fidelity” model and the “telephone” model. While the first one is designed to capture specific traits of sound related to its concrete, spatio-temporally determined realization, the second recording method emphasizes intelligibility and legibility of sound and sacrifices specificity. The two conflicting models of sound contrast “uniqueness versus recognizability, or event versus structure” (76).¹²

Considering the difference between Lastra’s and Altman’s position, we can interpret Balázs’s argument that “sound is not representation” as the approximation of another concept of sound by extracting sound reproduction from its relation or correspondence to the original sound. It is the singularity of sound as event (a relation without transactions) why he insists that “sound exists,” in the sense that it takes place. Reproduced sound is an event, too, which does not stand under the authority of an original. Sound in this way is without agency, a simulacrum which erased its origin. Every sound is reproduced, but reproduction cannot be recounted for by “the goals of the very act of representing.” Sound in this way “is not even representation,” it is rather the inscription of a relation, a “distanciation”¹³ creating a (spatio-temporal) distance in order

¹¹ Altman does not address Lastra’s critique of his position, but in his article entitled *Sound Space* (and included in the same volume) he incorporates the critique formulated by Lastra, identifying it with his own former theoretical position which needs revision: “‘The real can never be represented; representation alone can be represented. For in order to be represented, the real must be known, and knowledge is always already a form of representation.’ From this claim, which I made in an earlier article on the role of technology in the history of representation (1984), we can deduce several essential principles for the writing of cinema history [...] Such a theory is hardly devoid of problems however. While it helps us to understand how a nascent technology leans on preexisting forms, it remains all too static, offering little insight into the processes whereby a new form of representation is liberated from its models, eventually offering to subsequent technologies its own representational norm.” (Rick Altman, “Sound Space,” in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.) Altman’s argument — embedded in the frame of old and new technologies — formulates the critique of Lastra’s position, emphasizing that representation itself is framed by conditions beyond representation.

¹² Michel Chion makes similar distinctions by differentiating between space sound and source sound, as the two poles of sound perception indicated mainly by the presence or absence of reverberation. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, transl. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 79.

¹³ Here I am drawing on the concept of *medium* and *mediation* elaborated by John Guillory arguing for a historical relation between representation and mediation, see John Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept,” *Critical Inquiry* 36/2 (Winter 2010): 357.

to mediate it. Media in this sense are “means” both of interposing and mediating distances.

However, Balázs’s intuition is not fully elaborated, but it has a subversive potential regarding the understanding of sound and his entire aesthetic project. In fact, Balázs’s sound aesthetics is torn apart by two irreconcilable desires. On the one hand he celebrates the reproduction of sound as a site of articulation, the depository of a new acoustic culture which will teach us to hear and listen through selection and differentiation:

The sound film will teach us to listen more attentively. It will teach us to read the score of the many-voiced orchestra of life. We shall learn to distinguish the voices of individual phenomena and to understand them as the revelations of particular forms of life. [199]

This can be accomplished by turning sounds previously perceived as noise into expression and meaning: “the sound film will bring us salvation from the chaos of noise because it will interpret it as expression: as sense and meaning” (ibid.). Noise can be made to “speak” by breaking it down to its elements, by dissecting and analyzing it — the future task of cinema is to develop a language made up by transactions: selecting, highlighting, emphasizing, isolating and combining, all these techniques point ahead to the later practice of sound mixing.¹⁴ However, contemporary shooting techniques characterized by the simultaneous recording of sound and image for their better synchronization made possible only the manipulation of distance between the microphone and source of sound. Compared to the image, sound proved to be a material which resists shaping. Sounds, Balázs laments, do not have clear cut edges, if “heard simultaneously, they blend into one total, composite sound” (195); unaccompanied by the image the auditor cannot locate sound in space. “Sound has no sides, nor is the

¹⁴ „Only when the sound film can dissect noise into its elements; only when it can foreground single, intimate sounds and use *sound close-ups* to make them speak; only when it can orchestrate all these elements in the montage and combine them in deliberate fashion into a cumulative unity will the sound film prove itself as a new art. Only when the director is able to lead our ears as he led our eyes in the silent film, only when he has learned to emphasize, to detail, to highlight will he cease to be overwhelmed by the clamour of a world that passes over him as a dead mass of sound. Instead he will intervene in that world and give it form, and the voices of things themselves will begin to speak through the sound camera-operator.” (193-94)

direction from which a recorded sound was initially heard indicated" (196), consequently the set-up of the sound recording is untrackable. Sound cannot be framed or edited as in the case of a montage sequence. So, all the known parameters trusted in the case of the image to create a surface of articulation, relays and substitutions between inside and outside, surface and depth are found to be missing. The resistance to shaping in case of sound is sometimes attributed to the undeveloped level of sound recording techniques, but these material properties of sound make possible an insight into its disruptive function within the system of representation. In what follows I would like to highlight and intensify the inner tensions in the discussion of sound in Balázs by foregrounding three uses of sound which not only reinforce, but also disrupt the model of representation.

III. SOUND CONNECTIONS IN CINEMA

I propose three cinematic "interfaces," three connections, based on Balázs's treatment of sound, which display the unstable character of the representational model. Balázs looks for those uses of sound which relegate it under the terrain of aesthetic expressivity and invest it with an agency — sound anchored in the image, sound as the medium of space and the experience of silence. The statement that "sound is not representation," however, hovers around these interfaces and puts forward a concept of sound which differs from the semiotic notion of sound derived from its sign character (i.e. through sound we come to know the world).

To make sound "speak," to make it legible as a "voice" (193) and an "expressive and representational instrument" (217) means to assign contexts and references in the foreground of which sound can be read. One of these references in the case of cinema is the image, and contrary to early theoreticians who were concerned for the sovereignty of the image in silent film threatened by sound, the contemporary point of view on film sound deplores the continuous subordination of sound to the image. But can image and sound meet, do they have common denominators? Balázs celebrates sound film as the unique medium of connecting sound and image and in the first step he proposes "cultivating" our ears and developing a selective hearing by listening to the world as an "acoustic experience." One way of realizing this is by the mediating function of the image, by interpreting sounds through the image. The image functions as a

filter through which noise can be made intelligible, and the empire of (intelligible) sounds can be expanded. But sound anchored in the image threatens with a use of sound labeled by Balázs pure “illustration” when sound is mediated through the image or words, as in radio plays (194). Sound in this way becomes a “figure” of its source rendered visually. (In the advent of sound film, for example, many silent film stars were dismissed because their voice was not “phonogenic” enough: producers felt that it did not correspond to the bodily qualities of their star persona built on the cinematic image.)

Connecting sound to its source leads away from the terrain of sounds and substitutes sound with a concept or an image. Labeled “causal listening” by Chion, this is the most common way of using sound in cinema, based on a question-answer model (‘who speaks?’ or ‘what is the source of the sound?’). Through linking sound and image, in cinema even the inanimate objects are invested or acquire a “voice” of their own. Balázs draws attention to the construed nature of this connection by foregrounding “the irrational links between our visual and auditory conceptions” (216). The unbridgeable gap between seeing and hearing (“No doubt, what we see on the screen is the image of the actor, but we do not see the image of his voice.”) is resolved by the synchronous use of sound in cinema which creates a temporal coincidence of visual and aural perception, rendering a sense of immediacy and the enforcement of the “real time” of story, in sum, a scenic presentation of the story embedded in the psychological time of characters. But because the relation between sound and its visually rendered source is not “natural,” but constructed, sound can be disconnected from its source: the “acousmatic” sound (the term is again drawn from Chion¹⁵), the “uncomfortable dissolution of the unity of optical and acoustic perception” is named by Balázs ventriloquism (196). Cinema in this way operates as a system of relays, a switchboard for connecting and disconnecting sounds and images endowing or depriving images with sounds (voices) and vice versa.

While the sound/image interface makes perceptible the distance between the sound and its source (by surpassing/concealing it through synchronous sound), sound as a medium of space is conditioned by distance. Every sound is bathed in space, im-

¹⁵ Acousmatic sound is a sound without a visible cause or source. See Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, transl. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

pregnated by a spatial character which cannot be accounted for by visual terms. The acoustic space does not have privileged points like the point of view¹⁶ or the place of its source (we cannot localize sound in space exactly by relying only on sound perception). Reverberation modulates every sound uttered in space, and the sound experience cannot be cut down from the body of its listener on which sound resonates. Balázs stresses the essential interconnection of sound and space: “it is impossible to abstract sound from space. Sound always possesses a particular spatial character, which derives in turn from its point of origin. And if our ear were better tutored, we would soon be able to identify in every sound the space it inhabits” (197). The space of the sound cannot be limited rigorously, sound cannot be framed, located or divided up into sections.¹⁷ When the source of the sound is invisible, the listener perceives not the source of the sound, but space itself: the sound becomes a figure, a “face” for the space which is unperceivable in itself, and can be grasped only through this signification.

On the other hand, sound is modulated by space, too: sound is the perceptible figure of space, but in acoustical terms sound needs space and distance to travel — this structure, resembling that of the sense of touch, inasmuch perceiver and perceived, subject and object in touching are indistinguishable, troubles the model of agency, and does not take into account expressivity, intention, neither meaning. Sound cannot be termed therefore as “speech.” Sound interacting with space, performed in its singularity every time, is not a manifestation or an act of a known agency. This type of sound

¹⁶ The existence of a „point of audition” in cinema — on the model of the „point of view” — is debated by many. Chion (*Audio-Vision*, 89-92) argues that due to sound’s omni-directionality inferring a point of audition is difficult, a “place of audition or a zone of audition” is a more appropriate term; when point of audition corresponds to the subjective hearing of a character, it is the image which serves as a reference point orienting in space. Altman in *Sound Space* examines closely the sound practices of Hollywood and formulates the conclusion that the mainstream sound practice discarded matching sound scale to the image scale (tying sound with image regarding distance, volume, reverberation, direction, etc.), although it was urged at the beginning of the thirties, and opted for a continuous and uniform sound track in order to preserve maximum intelligibility of dialogues. By placing the microphone close to the speakers, the soundtrack maintains clarity, narrative continuity, and most of all, Altman further argues, anchors the spectator faced with continuously moving images (Altman, *The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound*, 58-62).

¹⁷ This statement formulated by Balázs is shared in part by Chion, too, who emphasizes that even if sounds are editable, sound editing „has not created a specific unit” which could be compared to shots, for example (Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 40-41).

which is not anchored to its source touches the body and envelops it. We are always surrounded by sounds, shutting them out is impossible — the physical sensation of sounds is what gives the sense of presence of the surrounding environment. (Silence, in its perceptual sense, does not exist — it is a fiction of language.) Sound as physical contact, as touching¹⁸ (a connection between a vibrating object and its receptive, sensory membrane) invites for a reinterpretation of the indexical character of sound, meaning that indexicality does not testify to the reality of the profilmic situation, but the reality of something that took place. The resonating body immersed in space which modulates sound itself is the interface of silence, too, which entails a special relation between the subject and space.

The third context through which we can understand sound, according to Balázs, paradoxically enough is silence. The experience of silence has a special role in the entire work of Balázs. The metaphors through which silence is described in *The Spirit of Film* appear in his journal entries as early as 1905 and later in his *Der Phantasie-Reiseführer (The Fantasy Guide)* published in 1925 in Berlin. In a short essay included in this collection and entitled “Silence,”¹⁹ Balázs takes his starting point from the sensory perception of the man in a forest. The silence of the forest can bring about stillness and calm, but only through the numbing of the human senses — and with that “he can leave in peace, because he does not live through anything any more.” The real silence of the forest is in fact a booming or a roaring which assaults man and at the same time excludes him from the “community of objects” which all “speak” a shared language. The essay is linked through many threads to Baudelaire’s “Correspondances”: the inhumanity of nature with its secret relations, silence which covers “heated debates, agreements and conspiracies,” all are experiences within and beyond perception, and hence language.

Considering cinema, Balázs points out that “Of all the arts, sound film was also the first to discover how to represent silence” (198). The silence of the silent films, i.e. the

¹⁸ This property of sound as a physical object was used by U.S. Military and British intelligence during the 60’s and 70’s in torture procedures named „acoustical bombardments,” in the course of which prisoners were subjected to increasingly amplified sounds or music in order to break their resistance. Ironically enough, this type of assault was termed „no touch” torture. (See Brandon W. Joseph, “Biomusic,” *Grey Room* 45 (Fall 2011): 128-50.

¹⁹ Béla Balázs, *Der Phantasie-Reiseführer: das ist ein Baedeker der Seele für Sommerfrischler* (Berlin: Zsolnay, 1925), 52-54.

absence of diegetic sound, as we have seen, triggered an imaginary investment and a narrowing down to the medium of sight, resulting in a “visible speech” destined to the eyes. The “silence” of the characters made their body talkative.²⁰ This quality is not a chosen silence, but a condition inherent in the medium which deprives the diegetic world of its sounds. In sound film silence is remediated, it is “not a condition but an event,” “an encounter” which is “intended” (198). This encounter is described by Balázs in unsettling terms: silence is “a great dramatic event, a cry turned inwards, a screaming hush” (ibid.), a “negative detonation” (199).²¹ The falling of silence is compared to the moment in circus production when music is silenced “at the moment of a death-defying leap” (199). Silence in these terms, is not a refusal to speak as in modern aesthetics, nor a void or emptiness, not even an unproblematic plenitude, but a shock experience described in terms of crying, screaming or a bomb explosion. More precisely, it is a negative shock, a dramatic happening without an appropriate expression, or a holding back of its ex-pression (an im-pression without a corresponding expression). The failure of expressivity, a holding back of breath in the face of an imminent and violent event, silence implies an accumulation of vital energies, an attentiveness and alertness to an unknown “call and response, an inaudible communication” (199).

Another context in which silence is defined is in less violent, spatial terms, but still haunted by anxieties. The related very dense passage runs as follows:

Silence occurs when what I hear is distance. And the space that falls within the range of my hearing becomes my own, a space that belongs to me.

Where there is noise, in contrast, I feel surrounded by walls of sound, a prison cell of noise. Life beyond noise is drowned out, seen as if through a window. Like a silent pantomime. But a space that is only seen never becomes concrete. We experience only the space that we can also hear. [199]

Hearing distance means the lifting of the “walls of sound” which encircle us as a “prison cell.” The passage is based on a complicated relation of three types of spaces:

²⁰ Contemporary theorists of silent cinema rarely attributed an expressive function to the accompanying music or noises during projection, nor did Balázs.

²¹ These last three descriptions are taken over almost word for word from *Der Phantasie-Reiseführer*.

the prison cell of noise, the distance beyond these walls of noise, perceived only visually (pantomime), and the distance apprehended by hearing. Perhaps unconsciously, by noise Balázs gives the exact description of silent cinema: the story world of the silent films, “seen as if through a window,” creates a distance, cut from the here and now of spectators immersed in and walled up by the music and noise of the movie theatre. In contrast, silence is something which connects the listener to a distance, without making it closer, without appropriating it. The single examples of silence defined in this way are the “voices from nowhere” (213), passing sounds:

silence is what I hear when the morning breeze wafts in my direction the crowing of a cock from a neighboring village; when from a mountain far above me I hear a woodchopper’s axe; when from across a lake I hear sounds made by people I can barely see; when in a winter landscape I hear the crack of a far distant whip.
[199]

These ambivalent features of silence invite for a comparison with Walter Benjamin’s account of the changing functions of art and the human sense perception in mass mediated experience. In his ever debated essay on technical reproduction, distance and nearness are the key terms through which these transformations can be made perceptible. One definition of the experience of aura itself is “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be.”²² The ambivalence of Benjamin’s term of aura stems from his changing attitude towards the role of technical media, as “‘liquidation’ of the cultural heritage, of bourgeois-humanist notions of art,”²³ or as the decline of experience and “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.”²⁴ Miriam Hansen, among others, showed how the term “aura”

²² Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” (1931), trans. Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, part 2, 1931–1934., ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 518. This definition is repeated in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) word by word (in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, transl. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Random House, 2007), 222.) The term aura appears for the first time in 1927 related to his first impressions with hashish.

²³ Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin and the Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry*, 25/2 (Winter 1999): 306-43.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, 194.

refers not only to a form of experience in decline, but Benjamin actually sought for new modes of sensorial engagement possible through technological media.

Benjamin's example of natural objects' aura resembles the spatial terms of the Balázsian silence: "If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch."²⁵ In Benjamin aura is related to the agency of looking, especially in his study on Baudelaire where aura is conferring to the object the power of looking back. The similarities between the experience of silence and aura follow the complex structure of a distance felt near (or a closeness made distant?). The cinematic expression of this structure is found in Balázs's description of the sound close-up:

The purely visual film cannot do this. I cannot show a close-up of a tree blossom and at the same time show how tiny and insignificant it is on the huge tree. I cannot show a head in close-up and at the same time show it disappearing in a crowd. The sound film can lend form to this significant paradox. It can allow us to both see and hear a man screaming in close-up and at the same time, in the same image, to hear the general tumult that drowns his lost, lone voice. [204]

In a technical age that fulfilled Benjamin's prophecies about the desire of the masses to "bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" and "the urge [...] to get hold of an object at very close range,"²⁶ the passing, distant sound which resonates in the listener could, poetically at least, describe man as part of a mediation without appropriation. Although struck by the terror of losing the senses, the ending of *Perfect Sense* flaunts with an almost optimistic note. None of the grand narratives (terrorism, divine punishment, apocalypse) listed in the story accounts for the disease, science and rational thinking are powerless, action is impossible and fruitless in face of this catastrophe. Contrary to the mainstream science-fictions, the inevitable cannot be obstructed or domesticated. What makes the ending highly ambivalent, though, is the status of the narrative voice situated both in the space of the story doomed by catastrophe and in an imaginary space derived from the power of the cinematic medium to connect or

²⁵ Benjamin, *The Work of Art...*, 222.

²⁶ Benjamin, *The Work of Art...*, 223.

disconnect sound and image. Perhaps, the “Perfect Sense” of the title alludes to — and with that the film envisions — a sensation without the alienating subjectivity and without transactions that inscribe distances in order to overcome them, which is precisely the work of the senses, and of technical media.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altman, Rick. “Sound Space.” In *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- . “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound.” In *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, edited Rick Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Balázs, Béla. *Der Phantasie-Reiseführer: das ist ein Baedeker der Seele für Sommerfrischler*. Berlin: Zsolnay, 1925.
- . *Early Film Theory. Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*. Translated by Rodney Livingston, ed. Erica Carter. New York—Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Little History of Photography.” Translated by Jephcott Shorter and Kingsley Shorter. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931—1934, edited Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- . “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” In *Illuminations*, translated by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, edited Hannah Arendt. New York: Random House, 2007.
- . “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations*, translated by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, edited Hannah Arendt. New York: Random House, 2007.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- . *The Voice in Cinema*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Condillac, Etienne Bonnot de. *Condillac's Treatise on the Sensations*. Translated by Geraldine Carr. London: Faval Press, 1930.
- Doane, Mary Ann. “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity.” *Differences* 18/1 (2007): 128-52.

- Füzi, Izabella. "The Face of the Landscape in Balázs." In *Raum und Identität im Film: Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven*, edited Irma Duraković, Michael Lommel, and Joachim Paech. Marburg: Schüren-Verlag, 2012.
- Guillory, John. "Genesis of the Media Concept." *Critical Inquiry* 36/2 (Winter 2010): 321-62.
- Hall, Gladys. "Interview with Gladys Hall." *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1929.
- Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin and the Cinema: Not a One-Way Street." *Critical Inquiry* 25/2 (Winter 1999): 306-43.
- Hevesy, Iván. "Színes film, beszélő film." In *Az új művészetért*, edited by Katalin Krén. Budapest: Gondolat, 1978.
- Joseph, Brandon W. "Biomusic." *Grey Room* 45 (Fall 2011): 128-50.
- Lastra, James. "Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound." In *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- O'Rawe, Des. "The great secret: silence, cinema and modernism." *Screen* 47/4 (Winter 2006): 395-405.