

## Listening to Film Sound

Jacob Smith



[Link to music video clip in criticalcommons.org: "Modes of Listening in The Replacements' 'Bastards of Young' Music Video"](#)

The black and white image of a loudspeaker fills the television frame. The cone of the speaker trembles as we hear the needle hit the groove of a phonograph record. In the few seconds of silence before the record begins, a pair of out-of-focus legs pass before the speaker, which jumps to life as the music makes its entrance on the soundtrack. For the rest of the three-minute duration of the song, the camera remains focused on the pulsations of the speaker, all the while zooming back to gradually reveal a wider view of the room that contains it. First we see a cheap stereo where the record is spinning, then the up-turned milk crate underneath it, which doubles as a shelf for a row of worn LPs. By the end of the first chorus, the frame includes the edges of a nondescript sofa, a coffee table, and the corner of a curtained window. From time to time, the person listening to the record enters the frame: bending over to empty an ashtray; grabbing what looks like a bottle of beer; holding a cigarette and tapping it in time to the beat; and resting a sneaker-clad foot on the back of the sofa. As the song reaches its conclusion, the listener paces agitatedly in front of the stereo, and, apparently overwhelmed by the emotions prompted by the record, kicks over the speaker and walks out of the room.

We have been watching the 1985 music video for the song "Bastards of Young," performed by the American post-punk band the Replacements. This short film is a useful point of entry for the Cine-Files dossier on Film Sound because it is responsive to the three ways in which the dossier's contributors were invited to approach the phrase, "listening to film." First, "Bastards of Young" is a film that depicts an act of listening. Indeed, we are shown an everyday living space in which listening to records seems to be the primary activity. Second, when this video is placed in its historical context, we can discern that it mobilizes a certain rhetoric about competing modes of listening. The 1980s were a time when many

post-punk bands like the Replacements rejected the marketing strategies of the post-MTV record industry, and if they reluctantly agreed to make a promotional video, they often refused the conventions of the genre. Notice how “Bastards of Young” does not contain the kinds of images that typically promote a record: exciting glimpses of a live performance; arresting colors, textures, and props that match the sonic timbres of the track; or glamorous shots of the artist. In other words, the video not only depicts listening, but advances a polemic about the relative merits of different kinds of listening, asserting that it is the ragged but passionate sounds of the unadorned record, and not the polished, professional audio-vision of the music video that counts. Finally, notice how the video depicts how a private act of listening produces an active response from the listener (the kick to the speaker) and a subsequent movement out of the domestic interior. Has our listener been moved by the record to quit her dead end job, or to start her own punk band or record label? The “Bastards of Young” video thus enacts a third way to consider listening, as a public act, one defined by an openness to others, and that is a requirement for full participation in a media public.

The three ways of thinking about “listening to film” that I have applied to “Bastards of Young” were the prompt given to the contributors to this dossier, all of whom were asked to curate a film clip that either 1) depicts listening as a mode of onscreen behavior, 2) features sound design that cues a particular technique of listening, or 3) demonstrates how sound can function to convene and/or activate a cinematic public. The prompt to think expansively about “listening to film,” combined with the interdisciplinary bent of much of the scholarship in the field of Sound Studies produced an impressive diversity to the essays. [1]

Several of the essays in the dossier focus on listening as a mode of onscreen behavior. To one degree or another, all of these authors are concerned with dynamics of overhearing, eavesdropping, and what Erving Goffman calls the “information states” that characters might possess about a given situation. [2] The dossier thus helps us to appreciate how filmmakers must carefully choreograph acts of listening and calibrate the subtle effects that arise when audiences hear and know more than characters. Michel Chion’s essay on *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992) is a beautifully crafted study of a telephone conversation scene – what he refers to as a “telepheme.” Chion’s close reading reveals an ever-shifting play of seeing and hearing, speaking and being heard, while at the same time situating the scene within a historical moment when mobile phones began to serve as a symbol of social power. Chion’s influential body of work on film sound is mobilized by several of the contributors in the dossier, including Neil Verma. In a striking analysis of *Hangmen Also Die* (Fritz Lang, 1943) Verma uses Chion’s notion of “systems of audition,” the “patterns of who can hear and who can be heard,” as a way to chart the structures of listening found throughout the film. Verma argues that there are fresh insights to be gleaned by approaching the film as an “allegory about the politics of hearing,” and by considering its relationship to wartime listening technologies.

Jean Ma examines another scene that depicts characters being overheard, albeit in a different emotional register. She explains how the performance of a song in *Two Stars in the Milky Way* (Dongshan Shi, 1931) stands as an innovative strategy to “envision a sonorous presence.” Moreover, Ma rises to the methodological challenge of listening to a musical sequence from the dawn of sound cinema whose soundtrack does not survive. Moving from the emergence of sound film in the 1930s to the rise of a new wave of sound design in the 1970s, William Whittington’s study of *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981) allows us to consider another chapter in the history of film sound practice. One of Whittington’s key insights is to recognize that, starting with the film’s title sequence, the soundtrack explores the distinction between what the audience and the characters are hearing. The irony is that the main character in the film is a sound designer, and Whittington cannily uses the film to chart a shift in Hollywood sound design from the use of sound effect libraries to field recordings.

Whittington’s essay shows how cinematic sound design can cue techniques of listening shaped by a particular cultural and historical context, which aligns with scholarship in the field of Sound Studies that tracks changes over time in regimes of listening. Take for example, Jonathan Sterne’s notion of a modern “audile technique” that developed in tandem with telephones, telegraphs, and stethoscopes. Several of the essays in the dossier use their case studies as a means to explore the history of listening. For Mack Hagood, Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006) is a vivid example of how cinematic representations of tinnitus have become an “economical representation of trauma” in recent years. Making a comparison to the voice-over narrators of post-World War II films noir, Hagood asks, “Could a nation’s trauma be sounding in the ears of its onscreen heroes?” Keir Keightley discerns a “mid-century shift in dominant listening formations” that can be found in the work of Jerry Lewis and in particular, the

film *The Patsy* (1964). Keightley shows how Lewis's "pantophonographic" style – consisting of mismatches of sound and image, a montage of vocal sounds, and the mimicry of the noise of sound reproduction – enacts a historically emergent structure of listening. Keightley takes Lewis as a distinctly sonic performer, and Jay Beck examines the sonic signature of a particular director: Lucrecia Martel. Beck shows how Martel uses sound in the film *La Ciénaga* (2001) to create a "haptic cinema" by severing sounds from their sources and depicting characters either in the act of listening or "struggling to be heard."

Film soundtracks can provide evidence of historical techniques of listening, but they can also evoke the past through the use of resonant sounds that function as historical "earcons": sounds that contain "special symbolic meaning not present in the sound wave." [3] Robert Spadoni asks us to listen to two such meaningful sounds heard in *The Woman Who Came Back* (Walter Colmes, 1945). Spadoni shows how the opening sequence of the film mobilizes one sound as an engine of narrative movement, and another to mark generic identity. The former sound is associated with a radio style, and Spadoni is one of several authors that move between film and radio: an approach characteristic of Sound Studies scholarship, which tends to think "across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another." [4] Kate Lacey demonstrates that listening to Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter* (Germany, *Pale Mother* [1980]) means listening to an archive of historical radio broadcasts, which the film mobilizes as an "acoustic shorthand" for collective memory. Lacey makes clear that it is imperative to attend closely to the interplay of sound and image in making assessments about the film's depiction of the past.

Lacey's recent work has made an important intervention in Sound Studies through her assertion of the public, political and ethical dimensions of listening. Listening, she argues, is an active practice, indeed one that should be appreciated as constituting an attention to others and otherness that is "the prerequisite both of citizenship... and of communicative action." Lacey refers to this type of listening as "listening out": to listen "without necessarily listening to anything... being in a state of anticipation, of listening out for something," a necessary counterpart to interventions in the public sphere that are "undertaken in the hope, faith or expectation that there is a public out there, ready to listen and to engage." [5] Some of the essays in the dossier understand listening in this register and shift their attention to the cinematic soundtrack's role in addressing and constituting a listening public. Caryl Flinn's study of *The Sound of Music* sing-along phenomenon presents a vivid case in which a film soundtrack inspires a mode of participatory engagement. Flinn finds clues to the textual afterlife of the film in the circulation and repetition of its soundtrack as well as the staging of several of its musical sequences. Shane Vogel's discussion of the 1957 film *Calypso Heat Wave* demonstrates how sound and image attempt to represent an "authentic folk culture," but in the process, reveal race to be "the very medium of representation itself." Vogel makes a comparison between the use of visual images such as spotlights and screens, and the various acts of listening portrayed and implied by the performance, such that images find their "fullest realization in the sound of the song." Mara Mills' essay on audio description opens onto another set of listening publics, including the D/deaf community, and thereby complicates what we mean by "listening to film." Building upon the concept of ekphrasis, Mills examines a range of understudied sound/image relationships she defines as "translation overlay," in which "alternative content is added to source material without creating a new work." In perhaps the most audacious example of "thinking across sounds" in the dossier, Mills argues that these practices be placed in the history of machine translation and efforts to "index, catalog, search, and retrieve digital images."

Mills ends her essay by asserting that audio description "adds another track to film sound," a phrase that can be read in two ways: as the addition of a layer of information to the text; or as a new route or trajectory by which the study of film sound might proceed. The Cine-Files Dossier on Film Sound as a whole aims to "add another track to film sound" in both of these senses as well: by cupping our ears to the richness and multiplicity of meaning to be found in the cinematic soundtrack; and by signaling the numerous tracks leading from and through the cinematic soundtrack out into a broader sonic world.

**Jacob Smith** is Associate Professor in the Radio-Television-Film Department at Northwestern University. He has written several books on sound, including *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (2008), *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (2011), and *Eco-Sonic Media* (2015, all from the University of California Press), and has published articles on media history, sound, and performance.

## Notes

[1] Jonathan Sterne defines Sound Studies as “the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival.” Scholars working in this field analyze sonic practices, discourses, and institutions, with the goal of better understanding “what sound does in the human world, and what humans do to the sonic world.” Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (London: Routledge, 2012), 2.

[2] On eavesdropping and overhearing, see Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 144-5. On information states, see Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 134.

[3] On earcons, see Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 82.

[4] Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” 3.

[5] Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 165, 7. Thanks to Neil Verma for his suggestions about this section of the essay.