Sounds of Slowness

Ambience and absurd humour in slow sound design

‘Noise of a door opening and shutting, noise of footsteps, etc.,
for the sake of rhythm.’

‘Silence is necessary to music, but is not part of music. Music
leans on it.’

Robert Bresson (1997: 52 and 136)

Abstract:

Slow cinema is typically understood as a contemporary global production trend marked by an observational mode that comprises extreme long takes and foregrounding of cinematic space and time. But commentators often overlook the vital role played by sound design in the films’ elongation of temporality and the formation of our affective responses to it. This article investigates the ways in which kinetic and affective features of sonic motifs influence our emotional engagement and enrich our experience of slowness. As part of a growing trend of films with multi-layered soundtracks that substitute a traditional orchestral score, slow films employ rhythms, ambient noises and environmental sounds for distinctively ‘slow’ effects. Attending closely to how environmental noises and rhythms are mixed, looped, modulated and structured has the potential to reveal deliberate attempts by filmmakers to provoke emotional responses ranging from transcendence to absurd humour, to induce a direct, unfiltered engagement with a protracted temporality, and finally, to encourage audiences to confront sound at its sensuous fundamentals. The article offers an in-depth analysis of two distinctive motifs: first, a rhythmic overlay of environmental effects and loops of background noise that shape the materiality of cinematic space and the passing of time; second, the exaggeration of sound’s sensuous properties (such as rhythm, volume and duration) that function as absurdly comic interludes, in the absence of clear-cut narrative motivations.

Keywords: Sound design, slow cinema, soundscape, affect, silence, rhythm, comedy, *musique concrète*, *Sátántangó*, *Goodbye Dragon Inn*.

In his seminal book, *Audio-vision*, Michel Chion writes about the consistent neglect by film theorists of the ways sound shapes our perception of images (and vice versa): ‘one perception influences the other and transforms it. We never see the same thing when we also hear; we don’t hear the same thing when we see as well’ (1994: xxvi). For Chion, cinema is not exclusively a visual medium as it is often suggested by our everyday language (that we *see* films and *watch* movies), but is constituted of a reciprocally working relationship between sounds and images, which he called audio-vision. Ever since Chion persuasively argued for the significant role that sound plays in film, it has been a commonplace, even a clichéd assumption to suggest that scholarly studies do not give enough credit to the way sound design and arrangement of sonic motifs direct our attention and inform our emotional engagement. Despite the increasing amount of work dedicated to exploring precisely this field, it is true that critical studies tend to favour vision in the analysis of films and frequently forget how a complete theory of cinema requires an in-depth consideration of sound. As Song Hwee Lim has recently noted, ‘even less discussed then, if at all, is the relationship between sound (or the lack thereof) and slowness/speed in cinema and how sound and silence contribute to our perception of the rhythm and pacing of a film’ (2014: 116).

This article examines the role sound design plays in slow cinema, and investigates the ways in which kinetic and affective features of sonic motifs influence our emotional engagement and experience of temporality. By slow cinema I mean a discrete strand of contemporary international art-house films, famously described by Jonathan Romney as ‘a varied strain of austere minimalist cinema’ with ‘a certain rarefied intensity in the artistic gaze, [...] a cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality’ (Romney 2010: 43-44). As is frequently noted, these are films less interested in plot than they are in creating a mood and atmosphere, largely through an observational mode that comprises extreme long takes and the foregrounding of cinematic space and temporality. And yet commentators on slow cinema have been too reliant on the films’ *visual* characteristics, in that they attempted to understand slowness in purely *visual* terms. Indeed, journalistic and critical coverage of slow films frequently dwells on its hallmarks such as the panoramic vistas of beautiful landscapes, the technically

accomplished, lush cinematography, elaborated setups of *mise en scène*, and so on. I aim to reconsider this tendency by investigating how slowness functions in *auditory* terms, and how sound structures are central to our experience of slowness.

Nonetheless, this is not the first study to draw attention to the soundscapes of slow cinema. Indeed, exceptions range from Philippa Lovatt's work on the films of Jia Zhangke (2012) and Liu Jiayin (2016), to Song Hwee Lim's analysis of the role of silence in Tsai Ming-liang's films (2014). My aim is to build on these projects by focusing on the poetics of sound design and the affective returns of how filmmakers utilise rhythms, ambient noises and environmental sounds for distinctively 'slow' effects.

In a long passage, film critic James Quandt describes the slow cinema's 'art house formula' by referring to its 'tone of quietude and reticence [and, among other things,] materialist sound design' (2009: 76-77). The analysis I propose stems from a 'material' understanding of sound design, as something beyond the interpretive, semiotic or semantic possibilities that sonic motifs offer; but rather sound as a concrete, sensuous aspect of films. Just as films are not easily reduced to plot or narrational cause-effect relationships, their sound design similarly functions so as to affect audiences through numerous patterns: rhythmic structures, shifts and variations in timbre, texture and duration, or precisely the lack of any meaningful sound. Once again, this is not the first study to make such claims. Influenced by Chion's audio-vision, Adrian Martin writes about 'sonic spaces' as a means to expand the traditional *mise en scène* analysis into a more holistic model, particularly by attending to 'how sound influences or shapes our apprehension of pictorial space' as well as 'unreal or hallucinatory spaces' (2014: 111). To this, we might add Andy Birtwistle's 'audiovisuality' and his quest in 'examining the sonic [and its materiality] in the context of their relationship to the image' (2010: 18).

The films may be characterised by quietude and reticence, but precisely because sounds are used so sparingly that they have become an indispensable aspect of the films' unique aesthetic experience. Indeed, the modulation of ambient sounds in rhythms and loops is crucial in slow cinema's programmatic elongation of temporality and the accompanying laconic protagonists, coupled with their quotidian way of life, actively invite audiences to listen to the silent, humdrum environment. The sound design is so subtle that it often bears the stamp of authenticity: because the films are visually and sonically observational, they demand to be experienced in an

auditorium with a proper projection and amplification. Sound is of vital importance in such claims to authenticity, as Pablo Lamar, the Paraguayan director of the relatively obscure slow film *La Última Tierra* (2016) and a sound engineer by training, had intentionally blocked the film's entry at the International Film Festival Rotterdam video library, so that journalists could 'explore the sound, the texture and the small movements' (Goodfellow 2016).

As in any other contemporary film sound practice, slow cinema sound design is composed of multi-layered elements that are fused together in harmony to give emphasis to the materiality and plausibility of a diegetic world. The primacy of the soundtrack is indicative of a growing global trend that offers elaborate sound designs, which are equipped with aesthetic qualities to the point that they substitute for the more classically oriented orchestral score. For Danijela Kulezic-Wilson these 'musically conceived sound effects [...] can be designed with so much attention to their rhythmic and musical properties that they themselves become music: non-sentimental, non-domineering, non-illustrative, but strikingly effective and visceral' (2008: 130). This is not to say that these films are devoid of music altogether (in fact slow films have their fair share of minimalist music), but rather are relatively muted in their employment of musicality. For this reason, my analysis must begin with the foregrounding of silence.

Aesthetics of Silence

Susan Sontag's (1969) vigorous defence of silence as an emancipatory aesthetic force with the capacity to rescue art from its linguistic restrictions has proved influential for many post-modern thinkers. Greg Taylor's appropriation of Sontag's reasoning is worth quoting and discussing at length here, mainly because his characterisation of 'the cinema of silence' as a particular stylistic tendency contains an uncanny resemblance to the ways in which slow cinema has been described years later by various critics. Taylor's astute observations are prophetic to the extent that they precede widely accepted (and frequently repeated) definitions of slow cinema, even though his negative evaluation of slowness as a pathology (the phrase 'achingly slow' describing the works of these filmmakers, for instance, recurs at least two times) can be seen politically regressive given the amount of attention paid to the relationship

between temporality and labour (see, for example, Schoonover 2012). Moreover, bringing a discussion of silence (as a liberating force, no less) is particularly fruitful today, considering the current circumstances of a world nearly drowning in noise and mainstream cinema industry being obsessed with louder films.

For Taylor, Sontag's 'The Aesthetics of Silence' (1969) offers a productive framework to consider a range of films that follow 'a stylistic approach which seeks to transcend linguistic consciousness, forestalling interpretation while the camera lingers –erotically, one might say –on the physicality of the concrete world and human physiognomy, in all its resolute thereness' (2007: 52). 'We might indeed call this the cinema of de-articulation,' writes Taylor, 'as its accomplishments so often lie at the edge of language, meaning, and clarity. Yet in its desire to set under-articulated blankness against expectations of underlying depth and meaning, it also uses its rhetoric of silence to point us towards an invisible horizon of translinguistic, liberated conscious experience' (2007: 53). Taylor here invokes Sontag's call to substitute the hermeneutic approach to understanding art with the erotic; in other words, the attempt to engage fully with artworks on a sensual, phenomenal level, and liberating oneself from interpretative tendencies that reduce the power of artworks into mere systems of meanings. Such a shift in art theory and aesthetics is not too different from the Deleuzian inspired affective turn of the early 2000s; in essence, a more sustained attention to the embodied, bodily experiences viewers inhabit as opposed to representational and/or contextual readings of artworks. However, Taylor is not interested in venturing into this contemporary, though theoretically elusive field, and instead draws from romantic notions of the sublime as a significant precursor to silence as a means to 'transcend normative (and restrictive) modes of consciousness' (2007: 56).

Following a treatment of modern still photography and its potential to induce a 'heightened perception' (2007: 62), Taylor turns his attention to contemporary films that likewise demand from their audiences to stare at the world in its matter-of-factness. In many ways, Taylor associates the quietude of the aesthetic of silence with the patient gaze of contemporary slow cinema, which in his own words gives rise to a 'new "silent cinema" for the modern, sound era' (2007: 62). According to Taylor, not only the usual suspects of the contemplative art-house strand are amongst the adherents to this aesthetic (Tarr, Reygadas, Tsai, Ceylan, et al.), but also practitioners whose relationship with slow cinema is, to say the least, tangential (Herzog,

Jarmusch, Dardenne brothers, Straub & Huillet) as well as a number of avant-garde filmmakers (Snow, Hutton, Gottheim, etc.). But what is central to all of these directors is the ways in which their works have invited audiences to watch the world closely through extended duration and have encouraged them to observe faces, landscapes and images in ways beyond the capacities afforded by linguistic communication. Taylor writes,

beneath the specific, recurring technical choices in these films lurks a commitment to modern photography's indivisible visual field, and a related desire to make the artist's job seem like one of shaping, delimiting, and drawing us into that field in order to celebrate enlightened perception while at the same time underlining the field's contingency and final impenetrability (2007: 63-64).

He suggests that the lack of sound and foregrounding of quietude enables a heightened sense of perception and vision, somewhat akin to a transcendental, sublime experience with sharpened senses. The longer we are involved in this process of looking (and listening, albeit to silence), the more we are submerged in this 'heightened sentience', which Taylor defines as 'silent art's true masterstroke' (2007: 65), and which liberates us from the confines of a linguistic consciousness to other, perhaps more profound, modes of engagement.

Taylor's argument is an ambitious one, but there are some clarifications in order. First, Taylor's rhetoric recalls reduced listening, originally suggested by Pierre Schaeffer, but popularized in Anglo-American film studies by Michel Chion, as a mode of listening 'that intentionally and artificially ignores causes and meanings [...] in order to concentrate on the sound itself, in terms of its sensory properties including pitch, rhythm, texture, form, mass, and volume' (2009: 487). I argue below that this is a mode that slow cinema actively encourages by eliminating both the causes and meanings associated with diegetic sounds, and invites us to attend more closely to such properties. Second, the ways in which Taylor uses silence should not always be taken at their literal meanings, though that is also possible, in particular by treating the cinematic silence as a musical property, such as an accented rest (Kulezic-Wilson 2009). Similar to the notion of slowness, silence here functions as a relative measurement: in other words, the films are not literally silent or lacking sound

altogether, but their deployment of sound effects are minimised in comparison to mainstream conventions.

As in any other minimalist art form, when certain aesthetic features are reduced or pared down to their bare necessities, they gain saliency and significance – and we would therefore need to attend to the subtlest, tiniest shifts in any of that feature’s attributes. Indeed, Taylor describes his case studies as ‘allegories of silence’ that ‘use silence as a way of both enriching character and narrative, and encouraging our own journey into sub-linguistic consciousness’ (2007: 63). Just as romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich captured the sublime through an accompanying observer, who was often dwarfed by the vast, sweeping panoramic landscapes (and whose role Taylor identifies as a diegetic surrogate that mirrors the actual spectator’s ineffable journey into the landscape and a deeper understanding of one’s relation to it), the cinema of silence similarly features laconic protagonists that function as a guide or a surrogate for film audiences. In other words, the films belonging to the cinema of silence, as Taylor sees it, ‘are not purely “silent” in that they tell stories, and thus convey meaning through language; but they still feel silent to us precisely because they work against the hermeneutic expectations of traditional narrative, undercutting language and meaning in favour of transcended consciousness and erotic experience, offering the spirituality of silence as an antidote to (post-) modern life’ (2007: 63).

This tendency of ‘undercutting language and meaning’ is congruous with the aesthetic project of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ and Taylor rightly names Samuel Beckett (via Sontag) as an artist who uses ‘a torrent of words to say that [he] has nothing to say’ (2007: 55), to which I will be referring to again towards the end of this article. The historical trajectory that Taylor sketches is quite accurate, with Robert Bresson and Michelangelo Antonioni prefiguring as foundational filmmakers that helped develop silent art’s equivalent in cinema. This should remind us what Michel Chion calls ‘ritualized film’; films that ‘punctuate and ritualize time’ (2009: 111) through the ‘rhythmic recurrence of certain sounds’ (2009: 112) that substitute the lack of music (such as what we would find in Bresson’s austere cinema) – again, an important framework through which to consider the role of sound in slow cinema.

In concluding his article, Taylor writes that this aesthetic is not ‘set in stone’ (2007: 65) in the sense that different filmmakers appropriate silence to different ends, including comedy, which may be seen as an antidote to the relatively serious claims

of transcendence. Andy Birtwistle, for one, examines the contrasting functions of environmental sounds that are unusually foregrounded in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Tsai Ming-liang: in the former, wind motifs create an ‘audiovisual dissonance’, whereas constant rain in the latter serves an ‘all-pervasive’ expressive potential (2015: 77 and 82).

Here I would like to outline two formal observations on how muted sound effects contribute to the experience of slowness in the works of two different filmmakers. In the moments where the visual narration remains stilled, frozen or monotonous, sonic features are patterned into motifs that captivate audiences. These motifs, I argue, are underpinned by two affective responses. On the one hand, Béla Tarr’s films use a rhythmic overlay of environmental effects and loops of background noise to induce sustained ambience, which not only materialises the concrete world, but also amplifies and quantifies the perception of temporality. Because there is little narrative detail or development, such aesthetic strategies encourage viewers to scan the visual aspects of the image – its framing, composition, scale, colour, and so on – or indulge in patterns of rhythmic structures. This is akin to what Taylor suggests as something that transcends linguistic consciousness, and invokes, perhaps paradoxically, a more careful attentiveness to vision and seeing. On the other hand, Tsai Ming-liang overstates various modulations in sound design (such as rhythm, volume and duration) to elicit sound gags; essentially humorous interludes that function as escape buttons from the agonising portrayals of slowness. In the absence of meaningful narrative events, such exaggerations in sound design demonstrate an incongruity between what the audiences expect and what they perceive, or what is described as the ‘logic of the absurd’ in theories of humour (Palmer 1987). In this respect, Tsai’s films represent a type of humour that proceeds at a snail’s pace, but achieves this through the use of sound design as much as the use of imagery.

Sustained Ambience and Rhythmic Noise

Béla Tarr’s monumental *Sátántangó* (1994) begins with a prologue sequence that best illustrates how sound design incorporates discrete elements that, when combined together, sustain a distinctive ambient rhythm. The opening scene features a muddy cattle yard adjacent to a large barn, an image that in itself does not invite any specific interpretation for its inescapable banality. Moments later a herd of cattle comes out to

graze and the soundtrack, previously featuring a subtle howling wind, fills in with an enthralling drone effect – possibly modulated by reverberating tolling church bells – and screeching bellow of the cattle that resonates hypnotically throughout the entire scene – hypnotic and dreamy, because of the apparent mismatch between the source of the sound (as the cattle occupy the background of the frame) and its relative volume level (the cows’ bellowing is unusually amplified and seem to emanate and echo from a further distance). Later, the cattle begin to move around: a cow trots closer to the camera and her galloping steps crescendo, the sound texture stressing the wet ground. At the same time, the screeches become louder and richer in colour, confirming the sound perspective in relation to the position of the camera, which is to say that it extends the visual depth of field in aural terms. The cattle scurry left and scatter around groups of dilapidated buildings, while the camera tracks horizontally to follow the animals through the setting with no evidence of human action nor an overt narrative motivation. The camera scans the abandoned village and slowly we begin to grasp a narrative predicament, albeit revealed implicitly: what used to be an old farming collective is now being overtaken by domesticated animals in the total absence of human agency – visually as well as aurally. But even the cattle recede from view as the camera tracks alongside the length of a flat brick wall (the soundtrack featuring occasional caws of birds in addition to the combination of the wind and the bells), only to arrive at a street, relocating the cattle. The animals eventually disappear behind a building and the scene fades to black, giving way to a non-diegetic narrator, who recounts lines from the source novel, László Krasznahorkai’s dense prose. The voice-over narration announces the coming of autumnal rains, and that Futaki, as one of the many characters, was awoken by the sound of bells, and explains that the nearest chapel had no bell tower, nor was the town close enough for its bell sounds to travel.

This is a contemplative scene in the truest sense and constitutes an emblematic example of dead time: in the absence of language and conventional forms of meaning, the sequence relies on its varying use of sound effects (the wind, the bells, the beastly bellowing). Granted, this is merely the opening six minutes of a film longer than seven hours, and perhaps expecting an indication of plot at this point is too demanding, but the use of sound effects in *Sátántangó* is characteristic in the ways in which the combinations develop into a structured pattern. The droning, tolling bells continue over the next scenes and their puzzling existence becomes a subject of

discussion between Futaki, Mr and Mrs Schmidt. From a narrative point of view, the sound here expresses a mood of mystery as all characters (and eventually the viewers, thanks to the voice-over narration) suspect that the bells represent the arrival of Irimiás and Petrina, two outcasts previously thought to be dead. Indeed, in the next chapter ('Rise from the Dead'), we see two characters walk into town in a scene that had acquired legendary status for its evocation of a mythical apocalypse (more on this later). Moreover, the tolling bells function as a point of reference for a specific time in the beginning of the story, as the film's plot structure moves back and forth across several episodes. For example, the beginning of the third chapter is roughly simultaneous with the beginning of the first, and the sound helps ascertain that specific moment in the story.

But to appreciate fully the affective registers of sound design in this scene we would need to focus on its musical texture and the ways in which it evokes the materiality of its diegetic world. Examining sound in this holistic manner can only help us better to understand the important role it plays in slow cinema and the ways in which it contributes to an aesthetic of slowness. Texturally the sound design has the qualities of *musique concrète* as traditionally conceived by Pierre Schaeffer, as a form of experimental music composed without the use of recognisable orchestral instruments, where sounds are intentionally divorced from their causal source. Indeed, the reverberating church bells are precisely what both Schaeffer and Michel Chion call acousmatic sounds: sounds 'pertaining to the auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source' (Chion 2009: 465). Although we recognise the source of the sounds as church bells, the voice-over narration displaces our recognition by explaining the impossibility of their existence, which creates an unusual instance of an acousmatic sound that is just as hallucinatory and spectral as it is materially present. Danijela Kulezic-Wilson writes about the prologue scene in *Sátántangó* (as well as the opening scene of *Damnation* [1988], Tarr's earlier feature) as examples of the 'musically conceived sound design' in which an 'audio-visual counterpoint' is established by combining sound effects and visual accents that are rendered in rhythmic harmony through prolonged duration (2015: 45). For Kulezic-Wilson, the church bells function as a loop over which other aural elements of the scene add rhythmic nuances. This is not the only instance in which Tarr deploys loops to sustain a rhythmic pulse, as Cristina Álvarez López (2015) observes the repetitive use of howling winds for minutes on end in Tarr's swansong *The Turin Horse* (2011)

and the infamous walking scene from *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), which I discuss below.

This particular use of the audio-visual counterpoint, or namely rhythmic pulsations, takes on a whole different level in a scene from *Sátántangó* during which Futaki and Schmidt talk about dividing paper money. Their conversation is rather dull, long-winded and dreary (as is most often in Tarr's films), but the banal passing of time in the entire scene is literalised by a loudly ticking clock – the epitome of a regular beat and a standard metre. In what could have been an uninteresting scene, the regular beats of the clock seem to be measuring (or even dictating) rather than accompanying the film's rhythmic pulsations and its reification of the passage of time. But soon Schmidt takes out a large sum of money and divides it between Futaki and himself, during which the sound of crumpling paper transforms the scene back to an irregular beat, in a similar manner to the counterpoint referred to by Kulezic-Wilson. Another, more unusual variation on this motif is repeated in the fourth episode ('The Spider's Function') which takes place in the local pub. The soundtrack of this scene is engulfed by a rhythmic pulse that sounds more like a metronome than a clock. Towards its end there is a spellbinding moment in which the camera tracks backwards from a close up on the bartender's face, slowly revealing the whole room, in which the rest of the characters are literally frozen with no discernible movement. The tolling bells from the prologue reappear (in this instance this loop functions as an Irimiás and Petrina theme), while the metronome rhythms crescendo and slowly evolve with multiple droning reverberations creating a delay effect, rendering the monotony of the scene to appear equally hallucinatory.

It should be no surprise that Tarr uses rhythmic overlays in such specific ways so as to extend, confuse and modify the passing of time, while dismissing more conventional forms of storytelling such as plot progression or characterisation. In an interview Tarr acknowledges that stories constitute a part of cinema, but suggests other, more uncommon yet crucial parts, such as 'time, rhythm, noises' (Daly and Le Cain 2001). But there is more to Tarr's use of sound effects: they substitute stories by materialising the concrete, physical world in which these bleak narratives take place. The carefully selected, economic choices of sound effects emphasise a physical, sensual, perhaps even tactile quality of surfaces and textures. I have already mentioned the sounds emanating from the cattle footsteps that accentuate the dampness of the ground, and so do too the incessant deluge of raindrops, scene after

scene. In others, a striking echo of the cows' bellowing or the buzzing of a mosquito fill the air, rendering their own space unsettling. This is even more palpable in a scene where Futaki hides from Mr Schmidt in another room and loiters around, leaning to an open window. Suddenly, the conversation between Mr and Mrs Schmidt is drowned by the environmental noise (our old friend, the howling wind) flowing from the window. In other words, as numerous commentators have observed (see, most notably, Ranciere 2013) Tarr's universe is oppressive, its inhabitants are constantly barraged with a harsh climate and, by extension, an absurdly authoritarian society.

Sound is instrumental in establishing this socio-cultural context and function as what Adrian Martin calls 'sonic spaces' (2015: 111) that mould *mise en scène* in purely sensorial ways. A much-celebrated sequence in which Irimiás and Petrina walk the length of a street, cluttered with nothing but a motley of debris swept away by what is clearly an artificial wind machine articulates a very simple idea: the unwelcoming, anarchic, physical reality of the environment. The sound design in this scene is in concert with the image: the irregular beat of environmental noise as well as the near distortion of the blasting wind is as hyperbolic and expressive as the wind machine itself. And when the same duo arrives at the local court of justice to see an official, the deafening, chaotically rhythmic typewriter noise accentuates not only the mind-numbing tediousness of everyday bureaucracy, but also the pandemonium of a crumbling society with deteriorating civic institutions.

Just as Sontag's aesthetic of silence and Taylor's cinema of silence encouraged a liberated, trans-linguistic consciousness, the sounds in slow cinema enable audiences to focus more carefully on the landscape, as well as to the subtle shifts in visual and aural patterns that let us sink in the slowness in order to fully absorb the materiality of the physical space. I want to invoke here what Song Hwee Lim writes about Tsai Ming-liang: 'cinema of silence is designed to make us a better *audience* as well as better *spectators* so that we both hear and see more in a diegetic world that allows us to concentrate and contemplate' (2014: 125, original emphases). In other words, Lim suggests that the joint aesthetic mechanism of silence and slowness is a deliberate attempt to alert audiences into recognizing the subtle modulations of sound structures. As mentioned above, these arguments strike a similar chord with Pierre Schaeffer's reduced listening, which motivates treating sounds as purely sensual phenomena, and with a focus on textual traits, beyond interpretive, semantic schemas.

An illustrative sequence to test this hypothesis is found halfway through *Werckmeister Harmonies*, in a scene where we see nothing but two characters walking next to a block of apartments. It involves Mr Eszter and Janos leaving the former's house, surrendering to the requests made by Tünde upon the local community's agitation in response to a travelling circus. The camera captures the characters' profiles in close-up and tracks along their pathway following their movement, though remaining squarely on the faces appearing side by side. Janos attempts to converse with Eszter, but the latter is indifferent, asking simply to move on to their destination, which is exactly what the rest of the scene depicts: we see two figures walking in silence for the unexpected duration of a full a minute. There are several layers of formal devices at play in this scene. We are at once immersed in the image through its fluid camera movement and extreme close-up, yet at the same time its lingering mode and disregard for narrative momentum is highly estranging. As such, the protracted temporality facilitates a process of interrogation, through which we are invited to question the scene's dramatic significance. And because the film persists in concealing a narrative motivation, there is sufficient space for us to delve further into this process. Indeed, as the tracking shot continues, we can begin to register the sonic rhythms that make up the scene's dazzling allure, under the veneer of its visual vapidness: a subtle mix of wind, bouncing footsteps and, crucially, the off-screen rhythmic clacks caused by Janos thumping his lunch box. It is indeed the scene that inspired Gus van Sant to film Casey Affleck and Matt Damon trudging through their trek across a desert in *Gerry* (2002), their walk emulating the one in *Werckmeister Harmonies* with sounds of their rhythmic footsteps in harmony to the visual arrangement of their heads moving up and down. For Danijela Kulevic-Wilson, van Sant and his sound team perform a piece of '*audio-visual musique concrète*' (2008: 128), which demonstrates an 'aesthetic capacity of sound effects by emancipating them from strictly narrative functions' (2008: 130). But if we are to repudiate narrative and interpretive functions of film sound, what are we to make of them, aesthetically, politically or perceptually?

This is not to say that we cannot interpret the walk in *Werckmeister Harmonies* in any meaningful way, but rather that there are a variety of interpretive channels deliberately left open. To me, the walk carried out by Janos and Eszter symbolises an eternal struggle: these are not *flâneurs*, at least not in the traditional sense, drifting away through a city for pleasure, but observers of a society on the

brink of an existential crisis. However, this is all but one semantic reading of a tantalising scene that demands to be experienced through other means. For instance, we can also consider the same scene as dramatic in the sense that it aims to recreate the visceral and phenomenal experience of walking. Though I will not develop this suggestion in more depth, such extended periods of walking regularly feature in slow films. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to claim that walking scenes constitute a typical, even emblematic feature of slow cinema (David Bordwell calls it ‘trailing’, see his 2005: 153; Matthew Flanagan had already defined slow cinema as a ‘cinema of walking’ in one of the first writings on the subject, see his 2008). Walking is intrinsically a meditative activity and the films often exploit its prospects to explore a world through the eyes of a surrogate protagonist. Sonically, walking affords several possibilities: the walk and talk, as regularly deployed in television serials to introduce weekly themes; and its subdued variation, which fuses walking with atmospheric sounds that fulfil the material conditions of perceiving an environment. In other words, while television serials use the walk and talk sequence to move the story forward, *Werckmeister Harmonies* parodies it by showing Eszter refusing to take part in a conversation, and asks us to experience the walk, for which sound and rhythm play an incredibly central role.

Like *Werckmeister Harmonies*, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), Malaysian-born Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang’s ode to cinema-going, also features a rich profusion of footsteps, though with varying emotional effects. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is perhaps an extreme example of Tsai’s minimalist narratives. It takes place in a single setting, the Fu-Ho Grand Theatre in Taipei prior to its final screening of the martial arts epic *Dragon Inn* (King Hu, 1967). The story involves three distinct character groups, whose goals and motivations are not conveniently established at the outset, but rather are gradually revealed as the film progresses through various situations. The characters consist of a limping female ticket clerk with a heavy foot, who painfully walks around the theatre seeking the attention of an absent projectionist; a Japanese tourist, who takes refuge inside the theatre and seeks sexual encounters with other patrons in loosely humorous ways; and two old men (played by the aging stars of the original *Dragon Inn*), who are present at the theatre during the whole screening, but only come together and converse about their past right before the film ends.

Many of these episodes are interconnected with the limping ticket lady walking through the film theatre's dark corridors in order to complete menial chores. At the beginning of the film, we see her carry out a routine task with excruciating detail: she prepares a steamed bun, walks through a corridor, climbs the stairs, traverses across two more connecting rooms, and finally arrives at the projectionist's booth (the whole sequence clocking in nearly five minutes). Only at this point do we comprehend that the steamed bun was in fact a symbol of her unrequited affection. I can only stress again that there is nothing much else happening in this sequence of five minutes other than a character (by and large unknown, at this point) walking, except of course that its sound design offers a rich, multi-layered experience: a distinctively uneven rhythmic beats of her heavy footsteps, the metallic clang of a steel door opening, a continuous and relentless rain in the background, and the muffled playback of *Dragon Inn* gradually becoming clearer as she gets closer to the projection booth. The rhythms grab our attention, Tsai wants us to listen: they are not only the material soundings of a suffering human being nearly in tears, but also a eulogy on the passing of the cinema of silence as noises emanating from the theatre speakers gradually envelop other sound effects.

There is also an amusing play on the auterist signature here, though perhaps only accessible to those already familiar with the director's oeuvre. Those would know from experience that once an image is composed of a space with two doors on opposite ends, the distance between the two would soon be traversed by a character dawdling from one end to another. Indeed, this is a recurrent joke, structured across Tsai's other films as well as in this film, with unusual patterns and shifts. For example, in a later scene we would see the same woman climbing iron stairs, the echoes of which resonate in the distance with a spectral-like quality mixed once again with the muffled noises of the film screening, though to the extent that it is profoundly disorientating. The timbre of both sounds is modified to convey a dreamscape of a place where ghosts wander – a direct reference to what the Japanese tourist is told in a scene, and to the ways in which the two old men, Miao Tien and Chun Shih who play themselves, disappear into the theatre as ghosts.

In other words, the sounds are exaggerated, though they retain some narrative links. But there are also instances in which that exaggeration takes place in order to serve one purpose only: humour. These sequences are repeated multiple times, as if Tsai is developing a slightly dry, yet humorous joke on our demands as spectators.

This connects with the second function of sound design: the ways in which it leads to absurd humour through the use of sound gags.

The Sound Gag and Absurd Humour

Here I borrow the concept of the ‘sound gag’ from Marijke de Valck (2005), who suggests the term as an aesthetic device primarily used for comic effect in the films of Jacques Tati. Its roots are in what Noël Carroll (1991) calls the ‘sight gag’, a visual form of comedy in which the humour arises from ‘the juxtaposition of incongruous elements’ (de Valck 2005: 223) that viewers reinterpret with laughter. According to de Valck, Tati’s sound gags convey humour through ‘the lack of fidelity’ (2005: 228); in other words, through the discrepancy between what is normally expected from the sound source and the sound actually perceived. I draw this parallel between what we expect and what we perceive, because I think fidelity is only one property through which manipulated sounds achieve a comic effect. Indeed, in the examples that follow, I argue that Tsai *exaggerates* the properties of sounds (in my examples volume and duration, but potentially also timbre and pitch) in order to achieve a comic effect, while not necessarily evading fidelity. In other words, my understanding of the sound gag – and humour in its broadest sense – is underpinned by the incongruity theory, the simultaneous co-existence of discordant elements (images, sounds) and the resolution of their conflict via laughter.

A few minutes into *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, we see the Japanese tourist watching *Dragon Inn* attentively. But a nearby couple disrupts his viewing experience by raucously snacking on what I assume are melon seeds. To be sure, there is an element of sound perspective at play here, and that we hear these sounds in this manner because Tsai wants to both emphasise the tourist’s auditory perception and to recreate the central, if unnerving, feature of the phenomenal experience of cinema going. Nevertheless, it is clear that the volume levels have been exaggerated in order to create an absurdly comic situation, and indeed it is yet another pattern that reaches its explosive climax in a longer scene involving the Japanese tourist and the Tsai regular Yang Kuei-mei, brilliantly credited as the ‘peanut eating woman’. Initially, it appears that an audience member once again disrupts the tourist, though this time by Kuei-mei sitting very comfortably (with her legs stretching above the row of chairs in front) and cracking peanut shells as opposed to licking melon seeds. But Kuei-mei

momentarily vanishes in pursuit of the slippers she had dropped into the darkness of the theatre, only to appear right behind the tourist, to his astonishment. Her reappearance is of course announced by the cracking of the nutshell, which literally scare-jumps the tourist and the sounds continue throughout the scene in an absurdly (and unusually amplified) stable rhythm. Eventually the tourist leaves the auditorium, seemingly out of fear, but not before stepping into an ocean of nutshells discarded by Kuei-mei (once again the humour directly references the phenomenal experience of cinema going), who in her dazed and trance-like state, continues to watch the film and crack her peanuts.

These are funny scenes, because Tsai embellishes such familiar situations by exaggerated performances and sound effects. We laugh because we find this incompatible mixture of familiarity and strangeness amusing, but most importantly we laugh because the incongruity within the action is sustained even further through stasis. Indeed, as I have mentioned earlier, sound gags are humorous not only because of exaggerated volume levels, but also exaggerated durations. In Tsai's *The River* (1997), Tien Miao is portrayed as a father with an odd personality. The film begins by showing his daily activities: obsessed with the leaking water from the ceiling, he repeatedly rearranges the plastic buckets to keep his flat dry. In a later scene, we see the father in the toilet, with his back turned against us, depicted through a long shot framed by the bathroom door. He urinates for an extraordinary one minute, the soundtrack reaffirming the activity with consistent and continuous volume level. The scatological humour arises from the incongruity between what we conventionally expect to see in cinema and the depiction of it in such an unusual extent of time. We do not expect anyone to urinate for a full minute (at least on the film screen), but we do not find this unrealistic, disgusting or alienating because Tsai already establishes the character with his weird and eccentric behaviour. As such, the logic behind such humorous scenes relies not only on a contradiction between our expectations, but also on the blend of the familiar everyday with the outlandish and the extraordinary. Referring to the elements of sound in Tsai's cinema, Song Hwee Lim writes not only on the '*accentuation of sound effects*' that 'tend to be of quotidian nature, adding to a hyperrealist effect', but also on 'uncomfortable sounds ... associated with bodily functions and sexual activities [whose] presence often makes the audience feel embarrassed, uneasy, and self-conscious' (2014: 118, original emphases).

This discussion of the blending of the familiar and the unfamiliar, or the hyperrealist and the uncomfortable is a good opportunity to return to what I briefly mentioned at the outset as the ‘logic of the absurd’ (Palmer 1987). Indeed, my repeated use of the phrase ‘absurd humour’ in the past few paragraphs was by no means coincidental, because it denotes a form of comedy and an art historical genealogy that help us to explore further another auditory feature of slow cinema: its ambivalence to dialogue and speech. In this respect, the laconic characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd seem especially appropriate. In his authoritative study, Martin Esslin situates the Theatre of the Absurd as part of the broader ‘anti-literary’ (1968: 25) movements of the twentieth century, in which the legitimacy of the spoken language and dialogue is severely threatened and frequently contradicted by other modes of representation. Through a ‘radical devaluation of language’ (Esslin 1968: 25) and general distrust of the spoken word, the Theatre of the Absurd is less concerned with conveying information or narrating the fate of its characters, but instead is preoccupied with a stark representation of situations through other theatrical means, such as imagery, staging and performance. According to Esslin, the emphasis on the image and the reluctance to use language, were attempts to return to earlier, non-verbal forms of theatre, and he suggests that the plays of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett were largely influenced by silent comedies as well as other key figures such as Jacques Tati. Does this all sound familiar? It should, because reading Esslin’s description of the Theatre of the Absurd is analogous to reading Greg Taylor’s cinema of silence (I have already mentioned the ‘radical undercutting of language and meaning’ as its aesthetic project, for instance) or slow cinema as described by many commentators.

While we often tend to think of slow cinema as wordless or devoid of dialogue, there is considerable variety amongst different films and styles. Here, dialogue and speech generally do not carry the same function as they do in mainstream cinema, in that they rarely convey contextual information or character traits, except in rarefied instances. On one side of the spectrum, there are films that are completely devoid of dialogue or any other form of spoken word (such as films of Lisandro Alonso, James Benning and Peter Hutton – precisely the cinema of silence that Greg Taylor has mentioned). *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, for example, contains only two scenes with dialogue, and the first one does not even appear before halfway through the film. At the other end of the spectrum, the spoken word used either in

short and obscure exchanges of dialogue or with rarer interludes of longer exchanges (for example, the lengthy philosophical discussions in Lav Diaz's *Death in the Land of Encantos* [2007] that appear several times across the nine-hour film). In Béla Tarr's case, at least from *Damnation* onwards, the use of the speech ranges from deeply emotional and philosophically intriguing (Janos's illustration of a solar eclipse at the beginning of *Werckmeister Harmonies*) to enigmatic, even incoherent (the now famous, Nietzschean monologue in *The Turin Horse*, to which another character responds hysterically by declaring it as 'bullshit'). At times, monologues are so feverish and incomprehensible that they seem to be voiced purely for the purpose of rhythm, independent of semantic content – one thinks of Kelemen's outpouring of names and recurrent phrases in chapter six of *Sátántangó*, 'The Spider's Function II', which is yet another source of absurd humour for its exaggerated duration and repetition. In other words, speech is not quite non-existent in slow cinema, but its purpose is so reduced and haphazard that it fits in with the aesthetic undertaking that the Theatre of the Absurd initiated nearly half a century ago.

Although slow cinema is frequently praised for its visual flair, the ways in which filmmakers use ambient sound largely contribute to their aesthetic design and such a meticulous attention to sonic motifs is prominent across the works of directors commonly associated with this global production trend. Regarding filmmakers as singular as Béla Tarr and Tsai Ming-liang (amongst others, surely) as visual masters only is, simply, to have an incomplete view over the aesthetics of slow cinema. Such a critical attitude would overlook the vital role sound plays in the formation of our affective response to the films in question, which, in the absence of straightforward narrative implications, seem to be the main point.

In this article, I have only sketched two out of the many ways in which sound can direct our perception of temporality and construct a material experience of cinematic space. Attending closely to how environmental noises and rhythms are mixed, looped, modulated and structured has revealed deliberate attempts by these artists to provoke emotional responses, to induce a direct, unfiltered engagement with a protracted temporality, and finally, to encourage audiences to confront sound at its sensuous fundamentals. But this is by no means an exhaustive catalogue of sound motifs in slow cinema. Out of all the avenues I have not yet explored in this essay, what, and how, do we investigate the use of expressionistic music in these films? After all, who can forget the magnificent compositions that capture the emotional essence of great

films, compositions that linger in our minds for days, weeks, months – Mihály Vig's melancholic *Valuska* theme (2000), which accompanies Janos throughout his otherwise silent and solitary wanderings in *Werckmeister Harmonies*; Arvo Pärt's devastating *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* (1977) in the final, equally arresting sequence of *Japón* (2002); or Nuri Bilge Ceylan's general obsession with baroque music? These are sounds that no words can replicate, especially when combined with elaborate images, and should be the subject of another, future study.

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