

Audio-visual?

Lettrism was an artistic movement founded in 1945 in Paris by the Rumanian poet Isidore Isou. The latter and his main follower, Maurice Lemaître, with the incidental complicity of Gil J. Wolman, Guy Debord, François Dufrêne, Marc'O and others laid the foundations for lettrist cinema in the early 1950s: the discrepancy between sound and image; the deconstructive engraving of arbitrary images (films that they had come across, laboratory rejects, etc.); syncinema or screenings conceived as events like happenings; infinitesimal cinema (that emphasises the imaginary world and wipes out the usual elements in what we normally understand by cinema); poly-automatism or the unpredictable laws of chance...* To mark the season held in the MACBA, "Lettrist cinema, between discrepancy and rebellion," the author analyses the relationship between looking and listening in cinema.

In a semi-outdoor theatre at Cincinnati Zoo sits a teenage Robert Wilson, listening to *Madame Butterfly*. As the heroine expires on stage, the whoops and screams of the animals kick in, creating a unique experience for the eyes and ears. And yet, it is also an experience that forms part of everyday life: this incident, marking a meeting of dissimilars in a space designed for theatre, showed Wilson that it was possible to listen and see at the same time, provided enough room was given to each sense. The experience is repeated in the work of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, for whom music and dance only share a formal structure, founded on time. The idea is that the music should have a space of its own which is not the space of the dancers' bodies, and that dance can be liberated from the rhythm that the music might impose.

Fully listening and looking at one and the same time is a rare experience. This is perhaps the reason why the relations between seeing and hearing have always drawn a host of responses, running the gamut from a complete affirmation of their possibility to a categorical denial. And included in this spectrum are certainly the many different ways in which the relationships

between listening developed with the coming of cinema.

The cinematic image is known to have seriously altered the register of seeing and thinking. The projection of images on a screen questions the whole construction of our gaze, opening a breach in that foundation myth of thought-sight, Plato's story of the cave. But it was not only seeing that was to take a hammering from the cinematographic image; listening too was affected by that strip of images that occupied the space of hearing.

The whole history of cinema could therefore be seen as the chronicle of a perceptive mutation, still underway. In this mutation, classical and experimental cinema represent two positions, in turn complex, which call into question the possibility of an audio-visual experience.

Classical cinema, so-called because of its narrative/representative character, shows the images in movement, fading into one another, with the breaks hidden as the flow slides across the screen. Often, these breaks are stitched over, using music that accompanies the image. In this way, the audio-visual experience is like a vital continuum in

*Text taken from the presentation of the cinema programme "Lettrist cinema, between discrepancy and rebellion" signed by Eugeni Bonet and Eduard Escoffet



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which the images appear to have achieved the temporal flow typical of all things musical. This vital continuum reflects a collectively shared interiorisation, in the words of Noël Burch, who considers that the origins of cinema contained a primitive exteriority¹. In Burch's view, the early cinema spectator did not identify with the action or the characters, but instead was aware of the materiality of the screen and the flatness of the images and would certainly have been fully conscious of the changes in the camera's point of view. With the passing of time, he argues, all this became interiorised, resulting in that first mutation of sight and thought—but also of hearing. For the first time, the cinema became that “dream factory” in which the images that stood outside the mind appeared to the conscious as a flow requiring no intervention.

Classical cinema offers many examples of this type of interiorisation. Remember the scene in Alfred

Isidore Isou *Traité de Bave et d'Éternité* 1950-51

Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) where Norman Bates stabs Marion in the shower. On the screen, the camera makes us feel the presence of Bates approaching the bathroom. As he enters the room the music becomes so intricately mixed with the stabbing that it has a tremendous effect on our eye. It is almost impossible to remember the scene without the accompanying soundtrack, and vice versa. The eye listens because the scene is forged in that nexus that makes it impossible for the ear to stop seeing. There is a declination of seeing and hearing in which neither of the senses acts as might be expected. Superimposed over the spliced images we have the splicing of the sounds: indeed, Bernard Herrmann defined his music for this film as black-and-white music for a black-and-white movie.

Contrasting with this preponderance of editing to be seen in classical cinema, experimental cinema has chosen the path towards abstraction. Here, the splices are no longer subordinate to the editing and they eventually lead to the annihilation not only of the image, but also of the film and of the camera. This has put an end to the need for an understanding based on the terms of causality, since the visual and sound elements no longer work together for the sake of that continuity. In this way,

experimental cinema questions the audio-visual experience offered by classical cinema. This staging is far from uniform and comes in many different forms. Of these, two are particularly significant: those that correspond to what is known as chromatic music and visual music and those that operate through a film without images, which are the ones that we are going to examine most closely here.

If we had to set a date for these two manifestations, we would see that they emerged at a very similar point in time. The former began with futurism, whereas the latter started in 1930 with Walter Ruttmann's film, *Wochende*. Futurism brought the first experiences in abstract cinema, and the formulation of chromatic music. These films were made using the procedure of painting on the film, the idea being to attack rational logic and intelligence and to point, in the words of the futurists, towards a *polysensoriality*. But, what type of audio-visual experience does chromatic music involve? It appears to presume that the eye listens, that visual music (as Oskar Fischinger termed it) makes it possible to listen to the images. For the eye, listening would mean ceasing to see, by hunting in what is seen as a discursive process that authorises an intellectual apprehending. Listening becomes the perception of the rhythm that is projected on the screen, and which often, coincides with the sound-becoming that accompanies them. Listening to the images also means recognising that common structuring which—according to the theories common in the early twentieth century—correspond both to sound and to colour.

While the eye is listening, what is the ear doing? The birth of the cinema — and before that, the opera, though to a different extent— caused a mutation of our hearing. The ear, with cinema, listens by looking. But is it really our hearing that sees? Is it our sight that hears? It is difficult to give a conclusive answer. The most we can say appears to be that these films operate a separate perceptive direction, which distances itself from that fostered by classical cinema. In this direction, the visual and auditory channels possibly devise crosses in which perception shifts to create unprecedented experiences.

If this is the case, what difference can be established between the encounters produced in the shower scene in *Psycho* and Fischinger's *Studie 1-13* (1929-1934), which examines "colour rhythms" using compositions by Mozart, Verdi and Brahms among others? The difference appears to lie in the intentionality and thus in the material used. In the first case, we have a narration/representation in which the spectator is caught in that continuity offered by the sound-image nexus. The audio-visual is oriented towards that capture. In the second case, the abstract images in themselves create a distancing which is frequently multiplied by a counterpoint in sound.

There is a process of autonomous seeing and listening and their possible articulations. Here the capture requires what one might call the spectator's consent—his or her willingness to play.

If we centre specifically on films without images, these issues become even more problematic. A distinction is drawn between the films that offer a black or white screen and those that dispense with the film itself. Lettrism, founded in 1945 by Isidore Isou, contains examples of both kinds. The former include some films by Lemaître and Gil J. Wolman's *L'Anticoncept* (1951), which alternates between black and white. The film is projected onto a sort of white moon suspended above the curtains in the cinema. In it we hear short reflections on life, love and art—sound poetry and syncopated texts. The work is basically developed on sonorities. The silence of the images invokes the image-becoming of

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Maurice Lemaître *Un film porno* 1978

sound. Fixing on the black or white, the gaze suffers the discontinuity of the seeing, and at the same time sees the creation of mental images which may reproduce what is stated in the reflections, or may be the fruit of our imagination.

This process, which is set up as cinema's interrogation of itself, and even as an announcement of the death of cinema, as Guy Debord presents it in a film presented in 1952, is accentuated in films which do away with camera, film and screen. François Dufrêne's *Tambours du jugement premier* (1952) is a good example of this type of cinema which referred to itself as *cinéma imaginaire*. In this work we hear fragments of Lettrist poetry, alliterate verses, sung aphorisms and fragments of short narratives that do not follow a discursive logic. Our eye finds no point of support, not even the black or white of the screen; everything is sound, or rather images that spring from what is said, but also from the interstice between the sound and the silence of the image. Cinema definitively breaks with the vital continuity of classical cinema, the supposed unity of the audio-visual, and instead opts for a discontinuity which is only felt as such because of its opposition to the spectator's expectations of continuity. As we listen, we imagine a housewife with a vacuum cleaner, and even the interior of a great swastika on which a pair of

women's shoes might slip. But this imagination is not activated constantly; the aphorisms and the alliterate verses remind us that the continuity of the images is an illusion, that the purpose is to "doubt the very existence of cinema through imaginary cinema"².

It is often said that in these works it is the sonorous that gains ground; that this is cinema for the ear. The absence of images empowers the ear to activate the creation of mental images. However, if we were to listen to those sounds as Lettrist poetry, or simply as sounds, as Dufrêne (in his later work) and John Cage both did (under Artaud's influence), then, perhaps we would continue imagining but above all, we would be listening to them and for this purpose the image is unnecessary. In short, the possibility of cinema for the ear will depend on the listening habits of the listener and also on the type of sounds and projection.



Maurice Lemaître *Le soulèvement de la jeunesse: Mai 68* 1968



Maurice Lemaître *Une oeuvre* 1968

With these experiences, experimental cinema does not just constitute a questioning of the cinematographic image. Its methods point to an enquiry into the very possibility of the audio-visual. As a result, experimental cinema, by producing discontinuities, invokes an exteriorisation which in turn invites us to re-establish the relationship between the external images and the way in which the interiority is woven.³ This is, perhaps, an invitation to consider the ways in which that individual and collective audio-visual is forged by attending, essentially, to the trends which have been introduced by the cinematographic audio-visual. ❧

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 See his magnificent essay, *La lucarne de l'infini*, Paris, Nathan, 1991.
- 2 DUFRÊNE, F. "Prodrome" Introduction to *Tambours du jugement Premier*, ION. Centre de Création, No. 1, April 1952, p. 195.
- 3 For more on this issue and on Lettrism see DELEUZE, G. *L'Image-Temps*. Cinéma 2, Paris, les éditions de Minuit, 1985, pp. 279-281. In relation to the works from the movement mentioned here, the initiative taken by the film programme commissioned by Eugeni Bonet and Eduard Escoffet, *El cinema lletrista, entre la discrepància i la sublevació*, held at the MACBA in Barcelona in late 2005, is particularly welcome.