

**Sounds Abstract:
Making strange, Abstract sound
and Abstract listening in Audio-Visual context**

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“All art is abstract, in the sense that all art engages with the world and abstracts aspects of it in order to present us with an object or an event that enlivens or enlightens our apprehension of it. “The world is everything in that case”, wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein”.¹

The focus of this essay is on abstraction through the theory of Ostranenie; Making Strange/defamiliarizing, abstract sound; if and how it that is possible, abstract listening; the Reduced listening mode theorised by Pierre Schaffer in the 1940's France and finally the impossibility of the image/sound relationship. The aim is to explore abstraction in areas other than conventional painting and photography, for example, how we listen and hear, how we perceive the world around us, how sounds could possible be abstract and finally the relationship between seeing and hearing.

Making Strange/abstracting

Victor Shklovsky is thought to be the most important of the Russian Formalist critics. In 1917 he formulated his idea of Ostranenie, or ‘making strange’/defamiliarization. The purpose of art, for him, was to “force us to notice”.² “Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. The object is unimportant because as art the poem does not have to point to anything outside itself; the poem must “not mean/but be.”³ It was about noticing unseen landscapes that are visible but unperceived by us. About representing, knowing and braking habits in the ways of seeing because objects, people and surroundings often become too familiar too us, therefore we do not see, really see them/it any more. It was about turning on our awareness.

Simon Watney writes about Vicktor Shklovsky’s Ostranenie in his essay ‘Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror’: “Shklovsky, for one, was content to describe the process by which perceptions become habitualised, become no more than mechanical reflections of a seemingly given reality. ‘Wee see the objects as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette.’ Habitualisation is understood by Shklovsky as an effect of dulled perceptions, perceptions which have been clouded by routine, by culture.”⁴ Making strange was about changing reality and changing it into a new reality. In this reality we are surprised by everything, we see something new in the old, the banality of the everyday life becomes an exciting adventure. In this reality there is no need to go abroad too see the world and experience something new when you can turn on your awareness for that. Shklovsky himself stated: “ Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life, to make the stone stony. The end of art is to give a sensation of the objects as seen, not as recognised.

*“ Art exists
to help us recover
the sensation
of life, to make
the stone stony”*

¹ M. Gooding. *Abstract Art*, 2001, p 6.

² L. Lemon. *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 1987, p 4.

³ L. Lemon. *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 1987, p 4.

⁴ V. Burgin. *Thinking Photography*, 1993, p 160.

The technique of art is to make things 'unfamiliar', to make forms obscure, so as to increase the difficulty and the duration of perception. The act of perception in art is an end in itself and must be prolonged. In art, it is our experience of the process of construction that counts, not the finished product."⁵ In this new reality everything is art and in that sense you are abstracting art out of the banality of daily life by making things difficult. Your perception has to go the 'extra mile', a new route towards the same destination, and on that new route you are bound to see something new and arrive at the destination from another direction.

Making Strange is a way of abstracting. Some argue that all art is abstract; it is 'art for art's sake'. Some even go further to state that everything in life is abstract because 'every abstraction emerges from reality'. Abstraction is an unknown reality, a visual suggestion, rather than a technical riddle. But what makes things abstract? Abstraction denies many of those possibilities of interpretation offered by figurative images; it demands instead an effort of the imagination, a creative response - something that refers to nothing but it self. "Objects are objects, they can be pictured; but to represent dynamic relations between objects required an abstract visual language."⁶ So in a way by abstracting you are defamiliarizing, and by defamiliarizing you are abstracting, using reality to create another reality that was previously unknown and unperceived by us.

For general definitions of these terms used here the dictionary is always helpful to simplify and make things clearer. The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that 'abstract' can be a noun, adjective and verb. Broadly speaking, for the present discussion the verb is the most helpful. Its meaning is "to withdraw, deduct, take away; to separate in mental conception, to consider apart from its material embodiment or from particular instances".⁷ In this context the most interesting things are: "taking away" and "material embodiment" since defamiliarizing is exactly that.

There are many ways of defamiliarising or abstracting. For example, domestic or daily objects and routines without using video, sound or photography or any medium other than your self, without using art at all - it is more about making art out of daily life. You can empty a word of its meaning by taking, for example, a familiar domestic object and repeat its name over and over again until the word detaches itself from the object, becoming a strange meaningless sound.⁸ You could also record your own voice and listen to it. You have always listened to your self from 'within' now suddenly you hear your self like other people hear your voice, from without.⁹ It is not the same and it is almost like you become someone else, in a sense: your voice becomes unfamiliar, detached from your self, extracted from your consciousness, and abstracted. You change your perspective by looking at objects from a different point of view. But Abstraction is also about reference to the source since every abstraction has reference to reality. You have to cut the cord to its source so it becomes independent of reality, something new and something different, unreal in its 'reality'.

*Chair, chair,
chair, chair,
chair, chair,
chair, chair,
chair, chair,
chair, chair,
chair, chair,
chair, chair...*

⁵ V. Burgin. *Thinking Photography*. 1993, p 161.

⁶ M. Gooding. (2001) *Abstract Art*, 2001, p 7.

⁷ C. Soanes & A. Stevenson. Editors. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2003, p 7.

⁸ R. Droit. *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*, 2002, p 5.

⁹ R. Droit. *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*, 2002, p 155.

There are hardly limits to what 'making strange' can be applied to. The Russian Alexander Rodchenko wrote in 1928: " In photography there are old points-of-view, the point of view of a person who stands on the earth and looks straight ahead, or, as I call it, the 'navel photo', with the camera resting on the stomach. I am fighting against this point-of-view and will carry on fighting for photography from all positions other than the 'navel position', so long as they remain unrecognised. The interesting angles at present are those from 'top to bottom' and 'from bottom to top' and there is much work to be done in this field." ¹⁰ He continues to say: "...We do not see what we look at. We do not see the wonderful perspective foreshortenings and inclines of the objects. We, who have learned to see what we are used to seeing and what is indoctrinated into us, should reveal the world. We should revolutionise our visual perception." ¹¹ It is a matter of awareness, where you turn it and how long you focus. You could probably defamiliarise domestic object just by looking or even staring at it for a long period of time, aiming your awareness on one thing until it 'cracks' and then 'breaks down' under the pressure of your mind powered stare. The object is no longer what it used to be.



Alexander Rodchenko, "The Driver" 1933

*“We should
revolutionise
our visual
perception”*

Abstract Music

“Music is the most purely abstract of the arts, beyond language, purely sensuous and yet capable of touching directly the spirit of the listener.” ¹²

Abstract music is a term used within the classical music field to describe music that is not 'about' anything. Abstract music has no words and no references to stories or images or any other kind of extramusical idea. It is to be experienced purely as music. It is also known as absolute music and is in contrast to program. Program Music is a term usually applied to orchestral music in the classical music tradition in which the piece is designed according to some preconceived narrative, or is designed to evoke a specific concrete idea. This is distinct from the more traditional absolute music, popular in the Baroque and Classical eras, in which the piece has no narrative program, but is simply music for music's sake - like art for art's sake in abstract art and theory of Ostranenie.

¹⁰ V. Burgin. *Thinking Photography*, 1993, p 177.

¹¹ V. Burgin. *Thinking Photography*, 1993, p 178.

¹² M. Gooding. *Abstract Art*, 2001, p 20.

The painter Wassily Kandinsky believed that art like music should be expressive of the artist's 'inner life', the deepest intuitions and feelings, without recourse to 'the reproduction of natural phenomena'. "Like music, it should devote itself to the creation of autonomous forms, and to the application of methods that are proper to its own media and free it from 'mere representation'." ¹³ From this aspiration arose 'the modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion', in short, for abstraction. Why should abstraction in music, painting or daily life be expressive of the 'inner life'? Is abstraction not about cutting out a connection between things so they can stand alone, without reference to anything but it self? Reference to the 'inner life' of the artist can be there without being visible, without emotions and feelings being poured into the work. The artwork or music is always from the mind of the maker and when daily objects are abstracted, with Ostranenie for example, it happens within the mind.

Paul Schaffer, a French pioneer in music and music theory in the first half of last century wrote extensively on the subject of abstract music. In his book "Traité des Objets Musicaux" he wrote: "non-figurative painting called 'abstract' led straight to the antipodes of the concrete: nevertheless we could not really call a music 'abstract' which does without the symbols of solfège and carves into the living sound!" ¹⁴

Theo van Leeuwen writes in his book "Sound, Music, Speech": "There are two kinds of argument against musical naturalism. The most 'hard line' view is that music is not, and cannot be, representational at all, that it is a pure play of forms, a kind of abstract, tonal mathematics. This view has been held by music semioticians like Ruwet and Nattiez (who said that 'music by itself signifies nothing'), by music sociologists like Adorno for whom 'structural hearing' was the highest form of music appreciation, and by composers, for instance Stravinsky: "I consider that music is, by its very nature, powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature. If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality" ¹⁵ Both argument are valid but the 'problem is that they are talking about classical music. Music is usually a play of forms, structure and tone and therefore abstract, but often composers and musicians have the aim to make representational music, especially in popular music like rock or pop for example. In music where the main focus are the lyrics, and the lyrics 'talk' about an experience or something in reality, a direct reference to something outside the song. Then the music is no longer self-contained and only a play of forms. Of course no music can be fully representational. Music with the aim to refer to reality is usually a mixture that and pure play of forms.

*“Music
by itself
signifies
nothing”*

Other views on this matters are that "musical representation is necessarily rather abstract and therefore should not aim at the naturalistic, 'faithful' representation of all the detail of a specific sound at a specific time and a specific place, but represent the essential characteristics and the emotive temperature (the 'mood') of a type of sound or action (the 'busy hum', 'the peaceful stream'). In other words, the truth of the musical representation of a sound should not lie in maximum fidelity to what you would have heard if you had heard the sound in reality, but by judged by a combination of emotive-interpretive and abstract-generalized criteria." ¹⁶

¹³ M. Gooding. Abstract Art, 2001, p 20 – 21.

¹⁴ J. Dack. Website: <http://www.sonic.mdx.ac.uk/research>

¹⁵ T. Leeuwen. Speech Music Sound, 1999, p 165.

¹⁶ T. Leeuwen. Speech Music Sound, 1999, p 165.

This is exactly what contemporary film sound designers do. They move away from naturalistic recording and seek to combine relatively abstract representation, a representation of essential qualities, with emotive effect. They do, for an example, use cornstarch instead of real snow because it produces much more 'real' sound for walking in snow than snow itself. There are other things like a squashed melon sounds more 'real' than a head being bashed in. "Sound shows us the image differently than what the image shows alone, and the image likewise makes us hear sound differently than if the sound were ringing out in the dark." ¹⁷

Abstract Sound

If and when trying to abstract sounds, the words "taking away" and "material embodiment" are crucial words. You have the source and the sound that comes from it. By taking away that source you could be, in theory at least, abstracting the sound. But the issue is more complex than that. Do all sound recordings not become abstract as soon as they are recorded and perhaps played in a different place? By that they are taken out of context and do not have the visual elements that are the source or the makers of these sounds. Does that mean sounds recorded and played next to the visual of the source, are not abstract? For example if sounds from a static car with a running engine would be recorded, the car then switched off and the recording of the engine played back. What would happen then? What would change if the car would be taken away but the sound would still be playing? What if you would feed live sound from an outside car with the engine running into a room with no visual noise? Does it make a difference if it is the original or the copy? If you do not have the visual element but you hear it is a car motor you still do not know what type of car it is - you only have a vague visual outline. Maybe if you were a car mechanic but then the person listening is obviously very important, where it is from, what it does for a living, what education it has and ECT. Therefore the viewer or the audience is important which makes this even more complicated subject to explore.

But still, could sounds, in practise, really be abstract? There are different views on that. Theo van Leeuwen writes: "The more the articulation of a representation is reduced, in all its aspects, the more abstract modality, abstract truth value, increases, because its truth criterion lies in the degree to which the representation can capture the underlying essence of what it depicts, or represents its subject in a generalized way. This truth criterion applies, for instance, the scientific diagram, which dispenses with almost everything that is needed for naturalistic representation (colour, perspective, the play of light and shade and so on) and reduces the detail of the representation to a minimum (the diagrammatic representation of a person, for instance, leaves out the individual features of that person, and provides only the basic outline of a 'figure', a person-in-general)." ¹⁸ He continues to say: "It is rare for sound reproduction to be abstract in this sense. Our culture prefers the visual medium for its scientific diagramming, perhaps because it is difficult, indeed, almost impossible, to be completely dispassionate and unemotional in the medium of sound. The most abstract form of sound is music. But unlike scientific diagrams, music is always also sensory." ¹⁹ For a sound to become abstract it might be enough for the sound to be unknown, unrecognisable, a sound that relies so much on the visual connection to its source that it cannot be identified without it. It could also be a sound that has been manipulated by reversing or distorted by pitch or volume to question the recognisability of things. So in a way abstracting sound is also about recognition and identification, if the viewer has heard a sound like that before

¹⁷ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 21.

¹⁸ T. Leeuwen. *Speech Music Sound*, 1999, p178.

¹⁹ T. Leeuwen. *Speech Music Sound*, 1999, p178.

and if he knows it. Manipulated sounds, depending on how 'distorted' they are, probably always take a bit of their character with them even though they sound different from the original. Their timbre, rhythm, texture, they're naturalistic or mechanical traits should shine through. That makes identification and recognition extremely interesting in thinking about how the mind works trying to find the image of the source to fit the sound in its 'archives', knowing that he has heard that sound before in some form.

Like abstract sound, abstract photography is a contradiction in itself. Rosa Olivares, editor of quarterly magazine 'Exit' writes: "Photography always draws on reality. The photographer always deploys the action of light to transfer onto paper the form, the relief, the essence of something that is, or was real for long enough, for the time necessary to become a photograph."²⁰ Is that not exactly the same problem that the abstraction of sound is dealing with? This paragraph could be rewritten with sound instead of photography and make as much sense. In this way photographic abstraction and sound abstraction are dealing with the same problems. So, in theory, it should be just as possible to abstract sound as photography. Olivares continues: "That the subjective perception an artist makes in a work, whether painting, sculpture, photography or any other media, removes it from reality in order to transform it into something else. To transform it into a work of art, into a fragment of thought or sensitivity, into a piece of the artist torn off to be shared, devoured, manipulated by everyone else."²¹ Is this not possible, in that way, to transform every thing, even recorded sound, into abstraction?

Earlier in this essay, in the chapter about Abstract music there is a paragraph about Paul Schaffer's ideas of concrete music and abstract music. He identified the problem of "reference to the external world" which applies to thoughts on abstract sound: "If sound objects are used which do reveal their causal origins and are exploited by the artist for these qualities, they will have a "double meaning". Their intrinsic sound characteristics will be apparent but so will their reference to a source." It is the artist who must decide whether to choose to abstract features and suppress reference or vice versa.

Isn't this the core of this debate? Isn't abstraction about reference to the source and the transformation from reality into this new reality where there is no source? Cut the cord so it becomes independent of reality, something new and something different, something unreal in its own reality.

*“reference
to the
external
world”*

If we apply theory of abstraction in art, music and photography on to sound could we produce totally abstract sound? First of all look at what characteristics sound has to have to be abstract according to abstract art.

1. It has to deny possibilities of interpretation.
2. Demand effort of the imagination, a creative response.
3. Something that refers to nothing but itself.
4. Abstraction is an unknown reality, a visual suggestion, rather than a technical riddle.
5. Oxford Dictionary's definition of abstract is "relating to denoting art that does not attempt to represent external reality, but rather seeks to achieve its effect using shape, colours, and textures."

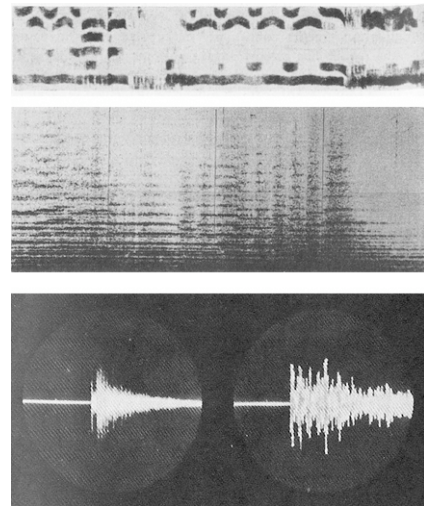
²⁰ R. Olivares. Exit: Abstraction, 2004, p 20.

²¹ R. Olivares. Exit: Abstraction, 2004, p 20.

Everything points towards the conclusion that abstraction of sound is possible, at least in theory, but that does not prove that it is possible in practise. Composer John Cage talked about his desire for a certain abstraction of sounds: "I attempt to let sounds be themselves in a space of time"²² By that he meant that sounds should be set free from its maker, the shadow lifted from the object. He wanted us to turn our awareness to the surrounding sounds and listen to them in their own terms as independent sounds - creating an absence of origin.

Could abstraction of sounds then go through a visual medium, a photograph or a moving image, a representation of sound with an image? It is hard to reproduce the effects that sound makes since it is such a complex medium and the effects on us are quite different than, for example, a visual element. There are though some common grounds. Both use an object that receives information, visual or aural which then is processed by the brain. If abstraction of sound would go through visuals how would they look like? The most obvious would be a sound diagram, showing the sound waves visually. Most viewers would associate this with sound. Equipment measuring the intensity of sound in decibels would also be quite obvious. Other ways would be to associate to something that connects to sound or music, by showing something that the viewer recognises as producing distinctive sound but that also would be the obvious and probably not the best solution. The aim of a visual suggestion to sound would have to be to get the viewers mind to search in his mind for the soundtrack to the image unconsciously. It probably does that default: to search when their perception is stimulated or even provoked.

"The point being that in abstract art there is no attempt to depict an object or person and the viewer of an abstract work is encouraged to appreciate the play of "pure" forms and colours in their actual, concrete manifestation on the canvas. Movement, dynamic interaction, depth are not excluded from abstract art and it might be argued that these do depict events and processes in the real-world."²³ Maybe the answer is that abstraction of sounds happens with the viewer itself, not on the canvas or in the picture or with the soundtrack. Maybe you can get abstraction of sound by how a person listens to the sound.



Three examples of sound visuals.

*“Could
abstraction of
sounds go
through a
visual
medium...”*

²² R. Kostelanetz. *John Cage*, 1971, p 146.

²³ J. Dack. Website: <http://www.sonic.mdx.ac.uk/research>

Abstract Listening

The first chapter of this essay argues that abstraction of banal objects of our daily life is very possible just by changing the way we look at them using the theory of Ostranenie. Then could it also be possible to abstract sounds by changing how we listen to them, hear them and perceive them?

According to *Audio-Vision* by Michel Chion, there are at least three modes of listening, each addressing different objects. They are called causal listening, semantic listening and reduced listening.

1. "Causal listening, the most common, consists of listening to a sound in order to gather information about its cause or source. When the cause is visible, sound can provide supplementary information about it; for example, the sound produced by an enclosed container when you tap it indicates how full it is. When we cannot see the sound's cause, sound can constitute our principal source of information about it. We must take care not to overestimate the accuracy and potential of causal listening, its capacity to furnish sure, precise data solely on the basis of analyzing sound. In reality, causal listening is not only the most common but also the most easily influenced and deceptive mode of listening. ... Causal listening can take place on various levels. In some cases we can recognize the precise cause: a specific person's voice, the sound produced by a particular unique object. But we rarely recognize a unique source exclusively on the basis of sound we hear out of context."²⁴ This mode of listening is like a non-abstracted photo of a person. You can see the person and get basic information about it by seeing where the photo is taken, outside, domestic space, factory, train ECT, how the person is dressed, haircut, body language and so forth. But that is only basic knowledge and a photo can never tell you things that meeting, interacting with, touching or talking to friends or relatives of that person could tell you.
2. Semantic listening refers to a "code or a language to interpret a message: spoken language as well as Morse and other such codes. This mode of listening, which functions in an extremely complex way, has been the object of linguistic research and has been the most widely studied. One crucial finding is that it is purely differential. A phoneme is listened to not strictly for its acoustical properties but as part of an entire system of oppositions and differences in pronunciation (hence in sound) if they are not pertinent differences in the language in question. Linguistic listening in both French and English, for example, is not sensitive to some widely varying pronunciations of the phoneme a."²⁵
3. Reduced listening was given name by Pierre Schaffer. This listening mode focuses "on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning. Reduced listening takes the sound – verbal, played on an instrument, noises, or whatever – as itself the object to be observed instead of a vehicle for something else. A session of reduced listening is quite an instructive experience. Participants quickly realize that in speaking about sounds they shuttle constantly between a sound's actual content, its source, and its meaning. They find out that it is no mean task to speak about sounds in themselves, if the listener is forced to describe the independently of any cause, meaning, or effect."²⁶ This listening mode is the opposite of 'Causal Listening'. Reduced listening is the most interesting of those 3 listening modes in context of this essay. If looked at closer it's connection to abstraction becomes clearer.

²⁴ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 25 – 26.

²⁵ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 28.

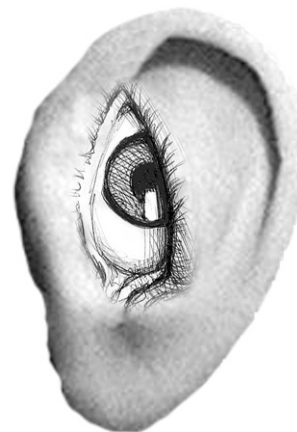
²⁶ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 29.

What happens is, when you listen to a recorded sound, it takes repeated hearings to allow us slowly to stop attending to its cause and meaning to be more aware of the sound it self. Then you can focus on the sound and really hear it like you have not heard before. Reduced listening could be the equivalent of abstraction and therefore called 'Abstract listening'. As with abstraction in general Reduced listening is not natural, it disrupts lazy habits and opens up of whole new world of previously unimagined questions. "Once sound is divorced from the source of its production – so called acousmatic sound – important clues about its nature and origin are lost." ²⁷ You are defamiliarizing/making strange already familiar sounds, releasing it from the restraints of its source. It opens up our ears and sharpens the power of listening, forcing our awareness to listen not just hear.

Reduced listening "draws our attention to sound traits normally hidden from us by the simultaneous sight of the causes – hidden because this sight reinforces the perception of certain elements of the sound and obscures others." ²⁸ With 'Reduced Listening' you begin to look at any given sound in a different light, see its structure and texture, not just get an image of the source the sound came from. The sound becomes abstract. Maybe you would get an abstract picture of that sound in your mind and use it to describe this sound. Does it have texture, depth, colour, structure, movement, is it up-side-down, does it lean to the right and so forth. The possibilities are endless. This listening mode has a strong connection to Abstraction and Making strange and can be looked at as their equivalent.

Sound/Image - Seeing/Hearing

In the preface of his book *Audio-Vision* Michel Chion writes: "The objective of this book is to demonstrate the reality of the audiovisual combination – that one perception influences the other and transforms it. We never see the same thing when we also hear; we do not hear the same thing when we see as well." ²⁹ He sets out from that there is no natural and pre-existing harmony between image and sound. It is about seeing and hearing and realizing how your sight, ears and mind work, both separately and as a whole. How you listen not only with your ears but your eyes and mind as well and how you see with the help of your hearing. "For as far back in human history as you would care to go, sounds had seemed to be the inevitable and "accidental" (and therefore mostly ignored) accompaniment of the visual-stuck like a shadow to the object that caused them. And, like a shadow, they appeared to be completely explained by reference to the objects that gave them birth: a metallic clang was always "cast" by the hammer, just as the smell of a baking always came from a loaf of fresh bread. Recording magically lifted the shadow away from the object and stood on its own, giving it a miraculous and sometimes frightening substantiality." ³⁰



*"...you
listen
with
your
eyes.."*

²⁷ N. Hamlyn. *Film Art Phenomena*, 2003, p 167.

²⁸ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 32.

²⁹ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p xxvi.

³⁰ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p xvi (Walter Murch foreword).

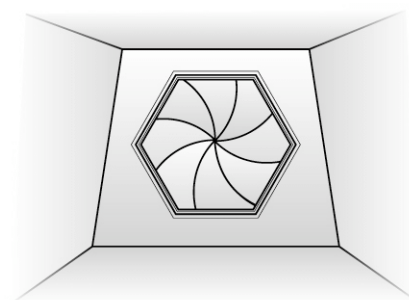
With the technique of recording many important things happened; sound came into films, radio station broadcasting music, literature and news, music being recorded and so forth. Later it also opened up a new way of thinking about art; art with sound that communicates on more levels than just by 'showing' you something. It is not only complicated how it all works in your body and mind but also the discussion about it is also very difficult - but just as interesting.

The sound/vision relationship is a complex subject but how does sound help how we see things? Does it help at all? As we see sound goes in to the background, we take sound for granted because we do not realize how much it is involved with how we see and perceive things around us. "Experimental film-makers have been extremely wary of sound, and not without reason. In talking pictures the spectator's attention is inevitably divided, and the resulting loss of attention serves the illusionism of cinema as much as do the master shots and eye-line matches of narrative grammar."³¹ A person looking at an image with sound has divided attention sometimes resulting in the image having less of an impact or vice versa - the sound having less of an impact. Possibly the image has an advantage because humans rely so much on their sight. Still, we begin to hear before we are born, four and a half months after conception. "...We develop in a continuous and luxurious bath of sounds: the song of our mother's voice, the swash of her breathing, the trumpeting of her intestines, the timpani of her heart. Throughout the second for-and-a-half months, Sound rules as solitary Queen of our senses: the close and liquid world of uterine darkness makes Sight and Smell impossible, Taste monochromatic, and Touch a dim and generalized hint of what is to come."³² When we are born Sound takes a back seat with the other senses finally being awoken. By asking anybody if they had to choose between their vision and their hearing, most would answer vision. Sound is though much more important than we realise. How we see, how we hear and taste is a combination of many of our senses. A coffee taster relies for example just as much on his ability to smell as much as taste. With only his taste he would not know the difference between coffee and tea.³³

We use our hearing to help us see and we use our sight to help us hear, they reinforce each other even though the ear analyzes, processes and synthesizes faster than the eye. The eye has to do more all at once when perceiving; it must explore in space as well as follow along in time. This makes sense because reading with your eyes is slower than hearing the same. An example of this is the effect for the automatic door opening in the Star Wars movies. The director sometimes only used a static shot with the hexagonal door open, followed by one with the door closed. By using a futuristic "pssst" sound over those two shots the viewer sees them close very smoothly not as a brutal cut between two static shots. You see a movement, which is not there because



"...we begin to hear before we are born"



"pssst"

³¹ N. Hamlyn. Film Art Phenomena, 2003, p 167.

³² M. Chion. Audio Vision 1994, p viii (Walter Murch foreword).

³³ J. Marsden. Body Hits – Sensory Overload, 2003.

your hearing tricks your eyes into seeing the in-betweens. Our brain processes this information from our ears and eyes to make up a “whole” - a fusion of sound and image. This is what Michel Chion calls in *Audio-Vision* ‘added value’: “By added value I mean the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience on has of it, that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image.”³⁴ He continues: “On the other, sound has an influence on perception: through the phenomena of added value, it interprets the meaning of the image, and makes us see in the image what we would not otherwise see, or would see differently. And so we see that sound is not at all invested and localized in the same way as the image.”³⁵ ‘Added value’ can also have a negative effect on the image by ‘explaining’ something that would otherwise be open for interpretation, becoming too literal so the viewer or the audience is ‘spoon-fed’ resulting in flattened experience instead of enhanced one.

The relationship between sound and image is such a difficult subject because sound and image are such a distinctly different media. You can recreate a much more ‘real’ experience with sound than with video or photography by using stereo recordings and stereo and surround systems playing them back trying to recreate the experience of hearing and listening. There is also music/sound software that plays with perception and tricks the mind into thinking the sounds are more than they really are. The Imax theatre tries to recreate ‘reality’ by using immersion with large format screens, that you are placed so close to that you do not see the edges of the cinema screen. Then there is the 3D technique but both rely heavily on sound as well by using a 6 channel multi speaker sound systems immersing the viewer with sounds coming from all directions.

What happens when this sound/image relationship is disrupted? The connection between them is taken away. Try to watch a movie with the sound out of sync. It would also be hard to see a film with no sound just as it would be difficult to only hear a movie. But possible it would test your perceptions. Your mind might start to create a soundtrack in your mind with a silent film or create visuals if you only had the soundtrack. How extensively depends on if you know the actors, how they talk and how they look like, if you know the basic plot of the movie and so forth. When reading emails or letters from people you know, friends or family, don’t you read it in your mind with that person’s voice? Your mind does that unconsciously. Some even have different voices for different moods of letters. So maybe seeing a movie without sound is not bad at all, maybe it adds more to the experience than it takes. It would, though, probably take some time getting used to until you would unconsciously bring your own soundtrack to the movies.

Sound/image relationships are well researched both in books, films and art. Michel Chion has written extensively about the sound/image relationship both in art, music and cinematic context. Examples of artist explorations are Colin Crockett’s “Video Tape with Bicycle Sound” 2001 and “The Sound Recordist Walks Away, Alone: The End” 2001. In those he explored the sound/image relationship by having a static shot of him with a microphone and recording deck bicycling out of the frame or walking away from the camera. The soundtrack follows him and is no longer associated with the image itself - they become two separate things. The sound designer Walter Murch has written extensively about the subject and also been sound director for many well-known films. His most known sound scene is probably



Francis Ford Coppola “Apocalypse Now”

³⁴ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 5.

³⁵ M. Chion. *Audio-Vision*, 1994, p 34.

from the beginning of 'Apocalypse Now' when choppers propellers become the blades of a Saigon hotel-room fan over Willard (played by Martin Sheen) lying on the bed taking him back to the horrors of war. Director and musician Michel Gondry has explored the sound/image relationship in some of his music videos like "Star Guitar" for Chemical Brothers 2002. The video is shot from a train and only shows manipulated landscapes of houses, trees, trains and cars going by in the rhythm of the song. It is done in such a subtle manner that is hard to realize at first that the image are manipulated to follow the beat.

Conclusion

Abstract art, Reduced listening and Ostranenie or making strange have all got the same qualities that is the transformation from one reality to another 'reality' the abstraction. This movement can take place both in a physical space or within the viewer itself. It is about clouded perceptions, how we do not see and hear things around.

Is abstraction of sound possible? Let us say that we have an object that is the abstraction of a sound. This abstraction would be layered and these layers would be the sound, the artist, the context and the audience and probably more. Abstracted sound then would be the connection between those layers but all those layers would have to be in tune to make up the whole and for the sound to be abstract. But even though it is complex in theory it should be possible in practise.

Is it possible to have image with sound without having sounds? Or even sounds with an image without having any image? The sound would be a vehicle for the image but the image would only exist in the viewers mind and vice versa; a silent image would produce a sound in the viewers mind 'tricking' it to think there is a sound accompanying the image. It is surely possible but there is no way of that applying to each and every person. The work, in the first place, has to move or stimulate the viewer and the 'problem' is that no one reacts in the same way to a piece of art or even banal domestic object Not everybody would defamiliarise the same way even though using the same object because, for example, the 'making strange' happens within the viewer. The new reality becomes only real by changing our perception of the object. There are so many other factors that come into this equation like the history of that person, his background, education, friends and family and ECT.

Would it have to be a representation of reality in one way or another, would it have to be recognisable to the viewer? It could be a common visual element taken out of context and used for other purpose than it has before. Defamiliarized, 'made strange' – abstracted into a new reality. A natural phenomena that becomes unnatural. The problem lies in how we perceive things because our perception is so different from one person to the next. Every viewer sees it from a different perspective. That is of course a good thing but not all would see artwork intended as abstract to be abstract at all. It is about changing your view and changing your perception on things, braking habits of hearing, seeing and thinking.

The sound/relationships works on so many levels, sound is sometimes appropriate and sometimes not, image is sometimes appropriate and sometimes not. It is like a stormy 'on-and-off' relationship that is often good or even fantastic but the bad days are very dark and hopeless with no solution in sight but divorce. Sound and image should be in an open relationship, meet and have fun but leave each other alone and explore other possibilities when the time is not right.

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