

Review: Sound is the New Light

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## REVIEW-ESSAYS

**Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.**

### **Sound is the New Light**

William Whittington. *Sound Design and Science Fiction*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2007. vi + 280 pp. \$24.95 pbk.

Over the past thirty years or so, film has become entranced by sound. A tide of innovations in sound recording and playback technology has transformed cinematic culture in much the same way that other technologies—the optical soundtrack, the deep-focus lens, color emulsion, and cinemascope—did in the past. Filmmakers now can exploit the psychology of sonic perception to create their worlds, which means that the range of suggested dimensions expands far outside the focal limits of vision and the screen. And since sound is vaguer than sight (sound sources are hard to locate) and subtler (we cannot close our ears as we can our eyes), the possibilities for entraining the audience to the rhythm of the screen action is increased exponentially. With new sound techniques, today's films can deliver deeper intimacies and more immersive spectacles than classical cinema.

The new sound technologies enable filmmakers to use sound as music. Unlike visual stimuli, sound inputs can be layered into complex, dynamic, simultaneous arrangements. Distinct timbres, volumes, thematic lines, and spatial arrangements can be structured into symphonic weaves. All aspects of sound can become parts of a single acoustical design. In classical film, the job of sound was to anchor the visual image and to clarify the characters' speaking voices. The sound engineer's job was that of a guild craftsman, to reproduce the conventions of a stylized, formulaic world. Sound effects were drawn from studio sound libraries, and sound editing was often the last phase of post-production, when all the rough spots were finally smoothed over with reason-damping sonic sutures. The new technologies allow sound engineers to construct their own sound effects, to surround listeners with shifting sound patterns, to modulate from ambient noise to music at the thresholds of awareness—in short, to create unique and powerful soundscapes that will make willing audiences accept any image without resistance. The lowly mixers and sound editors who turned off the studio lights have become sound designers. Their status in the artistic hierarchy of film production is now as great as the cinematographer's, since they perform the functions of *f/x* producers, editors, and even set designers, over and above recording and mixing. In its fusion of mimetic recording and synthetic fantasy, film sound has matched, and in many cases exceeded, the visual image in its power to control an audience's attention.

Sf film has long been viewed as having a privileged role in this development. Many of the leading sound designers have worked on trend-setting sf films—Walter Murch (*THX-1138* [1971]), Gary Rudstrom (*Terminator 2*:

*Judgment Day* [1991], *Jurassic Park* [1993]), Randy Thom (*Contact* [1993], *Starship Troopers* [1997], Oshii's *Avalon* [2001]), and Benjamin Burt (*Star Wars* [1977] and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* [1982]), to mention only the most prominent. It is an axiom of theoretical work on sf film as a distinct medium (distinct both from other kinds of film and from sf in other media) that the field is a laboratory for new technologies of consciousness-manipulation, as well as for expressing cultural ambivalence about them. Most of the emphasis in this work has been on the ways in which visual special f/x and design create compelling images of the future effects of technology, whose power to evoke sublime and grotesque wonder creates the spectacle that is the true tradition of sf film—spectacle that is often the visually violent overwhelming of intellectual reflection, the supposed essence of sf writing as a “literature of ideas.” This primacy of the visual in sf film is being challenged by New Sound. As Michel Chion describes the soundscape of *Blade Runner* (1982): “The image comes to float like a poor little fish in this vast acoustic aquarium” (“Quiet Revolution” 72).

William Whittington's *Sound Design and Science Fiction* is an entertaining and informative introduction to these developments. Whittington traces the relationships between specific technologies and their science-fictional world-making effects through case studies of blockbuster films that first applied them: the iconoclastic role of music in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the effect of the portable Nagra tape recorder and deconstructive sound modeled on the French New Wave in *THX-1138*, the creation of original sound effects and sonic geography in *Star Wars*, biomechanical sound effects and the use of horror-sound in *Alien* (1979), the consequences of the voiceover of *Blade Runner*'s studio release compared with the soundscape of the Director's Cut, the full thematic integration of acoustic technologies in *Terminator 2*, the ambience of the home theater and thematization of immersive sound in *The Matrix* (1999).

Throughout *SD&SF*, Whittington provides extremely useful accounts of his chosen sound designers' creative processes and tools. He attempts also to make social-psychological claims about broad cultural effects of the new experience of spectacular sound. Invoking as a model Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (1993), which argues that the computer interface and the science-fictional art it inspires have powerfully influenced postmodern subjectivity, Whittington sets out “to examine the sonic equivalent of this identification pattern” (5). The result is less a sustained critical argument than a tacit history of the rise to dominance of the aesthetic of immersion in industrial sf cinema. Through constant intensification of acoustic effects, audiences come to delight in the films' “cinematic play, self-reflexivity, and shifts in subjectivity” (21). Audiences of sf film become more savvy about the technologies of filmmaking, and consequently take more pleasure in them. “This awareness taps partly into the intellectual pleasure of sf cinema, which encourages an analysis of thematic content as well as mastery over the material means of its manufacture” (7). “[A]wareness” and “analysis” in Whittington's context refer not to critical reflection on contemporary cinema's politics of consciousness (and sf film's role within it), but to sophisticated fascination with

the techniques of sensory-cognitive manipulation, and the gradual thematization of immersion that emerges from it.

Whittington's chronology gets off to something of a rocky start with chapters on *2001* and *THX-1138*. His discussion of the former focuses on Kubrick's use of classical music, which he attempts to rationalize as simultaneously postmodern pastiche and a driving force of the mythic narrative. Whittington's interpretations are somewhat confused—*2001* is both a postmodern spectacle and an evolutionary myth, a display of “celestial mechanics” and a cosmic courtship. At times, the film seems simply to evade him. (At one point, he explains the Khachaturian Adagio as the diegetic soundtrack Poole has chosen for his shipboard workout, which would make him the most melancholy astronaut in the solar system; why Kubrick would violate the rules of his non-diegetic accompaniment for this one episode Whittington does not address.)<sup>1</sup> It is not clear why Whittington felt the need to include a chapter on *2001* at all, except perhaps to pay homage to the primal scene for sf blockbuster directors to follow. Kubrick's iconoclastic place in the film industry, his devotion to European modernism, and *2001*'s anomalous status—a physically gigantic art movie that repudiates all the values of the Hollywood epic—seem irrelevant for Whittington, even though none of the younger “Hollywood Brats” imitated Kubrick's allusive use of pre-existing classical compositions, nor his frigid aesthetic. Even more puzzling is why Whittington does not discuss those aspects of the film's sound design that truly are relevant for later practice: the dramatic use of silence (both for montage, as in the famous bone-to-spaceship cut, or the dead air of the void as Poole drifts into space), the counter-musical use of technological sounds, the contrast between orchestral/choral Western art music and the pings and respirators accompanying a diegetic humanity that seems otherwise deprived of music altogether, and the mysterious noise echoes of the room beyond the infinite, in which the distinction between natural and synthetic sound is blurred (or indeed Kubrick's technical solution of using 6-track magnetic stereo to record the film's sound, with five speakers behind the screen for playback). The hidden story is how this monumental film inspired what amounts to a complete repudiation of its values. Blockbuster films abhor vacuums; *2001* inhabits them.

A similar historical-critical tone-deafness is apparent in the chapter on Walter Murch's groundbreaking sound design for George Lucas's *THX-1138*. Whittington identifies two primary inspirations for the new creative attitude toward film sound: the revolution in rock music production and the influence of the French New Wave. Whittington touches only lightly on the former, noting the influence rock had on Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973) soundtrack (also designed by Murch), the first film to replace a musical score with rock songs as a constant ambience, much as *2001* had done with classical pieces. The chapter misses an important opportunity to explore the ways in which New Film Sound aspires to the condition of rock music. Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, The Beatles, The Moody Blues, Tangerine Dream, and many psychedelic rock artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s were creating visionary science-fictional environments and narratives with sound alone, stimulating a boom in

innovations in mixing-, microphone-, and playback- technologies. Whittington, however, remains rather rigidly monodisciplinary, focusing exclusively on the putative influence of the New Wave. The future master directors of New Hollywood—Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, James Cameron, and (in the UK) Ridley Scott—attended film schools at the height of the European art-film boom, and they were particularly impressed by the deconstructions of cinematic apparatus in the films of the *nouvelle vague*.

Whittington singles out three models—Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), and Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966)—which use sf as a pretext for breaking the conventional linkages between sound and image, and indeed for de-naturalizing each element in its own right. Whittington has interesting ideas about the sound design in each of these films (though Truffaut's seems to have been included mainly because it is his only sf film, not because of any cinematic experiments), and he argues persuasively that Murch's *musique concrète* of sound effects in *THX-1138* is based on these models. It is also from the New Wave experiments, Whittington argues, that the New Hollywood directors developed their fascination with genre films, the familiarity of whose conventions invited playful deformations. But if this is so (and Murch has often expressed his affection for the New Wave), it conjures up an elephant in the screening room. If the films of the Hollywood Brats were inspired by radical experiments in de-naturalizing cinema, how did they become the consummate purveyors of the very thing these experiments were directed against, namely the systematic naturalization of every aspect of the cinematic experience? Specifically, how did the roughening and defamiliarization of cinematic sound in Marker's and Godard's films lead to the use of sound for total saturation? In terms of sf film specifically, Whittington quotes Murch on his vision for the sonic futurism of *THX-1138*:

[Y]our perception of this strange world comes from the sound it makes. The more unusual and evocative those sounds are, the more you have a sense of being in a strange place. One of the subtexts of the movie that guided us ... was that we wanted a film from the future, rather than a film about the future. (qtd. 68)

It is hard to imagine a sentiment more at odds with the aesthetic of the French New Wave. The New Wave's experiments constantly critiqued the notion of historical time. Even films that used sf conventions, like *Alphaville*, *La Jetée*, and *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (1968), were without exception hostile to the notion of an accessible future. One might even say the future was the one place they did not want to hear from.

This disconnect between New Wave-adoring young California film-school students and the immersive aesthetic that they eventually created would make a fascinating study in the mutation and co-optation of experimental techniques, and a springboard for a critical exploration of the development of New Hollywood sound design. Whittington, however, focuses single-mindedly on the development of high-budget, high-concept, "total" sf cinema. The rough techniques used by low-budget, independent sf films that might be considered the true heirs of New Wave sf cinema (such as L.Q. Jones's *A Boy and His Dog*

[1975], Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* [1976], George Miller's *Mad Max* [1979], Slava Tsukerman's *Liquid Sky* [1982]), or the Toho Studios' sound designs based on experiments with magnetic tape, which pioneered many of the hardscrabble sound techniques that later independent studios employed, go without mention. There is only one historical line of progress in *SD&SF*, the story of the sf cinema of total immersion.

Whittington is on sure ground when he describes the creativity made possible by innovations in sound technology. *Star Wars* is seen from the perspective of Burt's sound team advancing acoustic immersion through breakthrough techniques in noise suppression (allowing for sophisticated mixing/layering of sound), speaker positioning (creating imaginary spatial dimensions and relationships), and carefully designed sound effects (electronic alignment of sound qualities to dramatic/thematic motifs, such as tuning Darth Vader's lightsaber in minor key and Obi Wan's to C major, or designing R2D2's blips to sound like language). Two chapters on *Alien's* "audio-biomechanics" carefully detail the film's inventive use of ambiguously "biomechanical" sounds to create the sonic geography of the *Nostramo*, as well as the complex and indeterminate subjectivity mixing diegetic and nondiegetic dimensions, external space, and characters' states of consciousness.

In a strong chapter on *Blade Runner's* sound design, Whittington analyzes the film in terms of Deckard's infamous voiceover forced onto the film's theatrical cut by the studio. Drawing on Kaja Silverman's reflections from *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) on gender and authority in the voiceover, Whittington masterfully details the ways in which the foregrounding of Deckard's voice undermines the film's intricate sonic palette, and ultimately the film's thematic design. Without the voiceover, the film distributes authority over the narrative not only among the various characters, but throughout the science-fictional cityspace and the whole soundtrack. Indeed, the characters of Gaff, indeterminate in sexual, ethnic, linguistic, and class terms, and Batty, endowed with insight and lyricism utterly missing from the essentially clueless Deckard, become subtle stand-in narrators. The voiceover, by contrast, grants Deckard's character ultimate authority over the story, closing up ambiguities about identity of which he is the primary carrier. (Whittington notes that this fox-in-the-chickencoop voiceover was recorded without background ambience and in close perspective, exaggerating the effect of direct access to a privileged speaker's consciousness.)

It is in his discussion of *Blade Runner* that Whittington makes the most persuasive case for the virtues of immersive cinema. Throughout his discussion of *Star Wars* and its legacy, he argues that sf as a genre encourages the development of new sonic techniques for two reasons: it is inherently fantastic (as opposed to realistic) and hence presents almost unlimited possibilities for linking sound to image in the viewer's consciousness, and it invites sophisticated reflection by its fan audience about the techniques of its own production. At times, this leads Whittington to contradictory positions. Sf film's immersiveness hides its constructedness in order to amplify the fantastic spectacle, but it also

“acknowledges artifice as a construction to create speculation, hesitation, and doubt” (120).

Science fiction ideology thrives on this artifice and a self-reflexive awareness of it by film-goers, and multichannel sound has contributed significantly to this project in cinema, offering us sonic spectacle that fuses wonder, speculation, and belief. (120)

How a genre and a medium can synthesize self-reflective doubt, on the one hand, and wonder and belief, on the other, is a powerful question. Whittington does not adequately address it, however.

In the end, *SD&SF* provides few arguments for the doubt-creating reflexivity of high-concept sf cinema (the terms “estrangement” and “alienation” do not appear in the book), while it describes in detail the sonic techniques used by filmmakers to short-circuit those faculties. Whittington accepts an opposition between fantasy/artifice and realism that had some credence in early postwar film theory. But in the culture of the New Hollywood, when depictions of real conditions have been extinguished in US commercial film, realism is a somewhat irrelevant concept. Hyperrealism and naturalization dominate the industrial aesthetic; the “real” is whatever the audience will accept as natural. The creaking and groaning of spaceships in imitation of the stock sounds of sailing ships in earlier films is effective precisely because of its reality effect. So is the sound of explosions in the vacuum of space, the creation of imaginary dimensions in a theater, the confusion of one’s own heartbeat with the heartbeat of a Xenomorph. In *Blade Runner*, however, Whittington does show how such spectacles that distribute the authority of sound throughout the film’s artistic design force viewers to exert considerable creative effort.

Whittington’s strongest chapter is a detailed breakdown of the sound design in *Terminator 2*. Examining the Foley sounds, the tonal qualities of the sound effects, the central significance of artificial sound reproduction in the narrative, and the placement of sound vis-à-vis the action, Whittington offers *T2* as a model of a fully integrated sf film in which the technology of cinematic design constructs thematic and dramatic meaning at all levels.

In the final chapter, “What is *The Matrix*? Sound Design in a Digital World,” Whittington argues that *The Matrix*’s sound design raises the thematization of immersive sound to a higher level. Acoustic cues and ambiances signify the different levels of reality in the film, and the audience’s attention is engaged and guided by them. Further, as home-based playback systems become even more sophisticated than those in theaters, the deconstruction of experience that *The Matrix* tells as a story crosses the theatrical threshold into daily experience. Similarly, the extension of elements of *The Matrix*’s sound world into games underscores the evolving relationship between film and game in the digital age. (I eagerly anticipate Whittington’s reading of *Inception* [2010], a film about its own ambivalence regarding immersive cinema.)

For its history of sound design and its multifaceted, idea-rich descriptions of the sonic techniques in blockbuster sf film, *SD&SF* is an excellent

contribution to research in sf cinema. Its critical and theoretical commentary will need supplementation, however. The story of New Hollywood sf sound design as an element in the hegemony of immersive spectacle must be made more explicit, and the counter-aesthetics of estranging sf cinema need to be engaged. The notion of cognitive estrangement, nowhere mentioned in the book, needs to be put in play, if only to delineate the differences between the experience of sf in popular telemedia and critical/experimental sf. There is more to sound design than state-of-the-art technology and there is more to contemporary sf cinema than the “New” Hollywood.

#### NOTES

1. The absence of any reference to Chion’s study of the film, in which he argues that Kubrick insisted that there be no diegetic dimension to the music, is perplexing, especially since Chion is one of the leading theorists of film sound.

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