

The Sound of Silence: Composing Absence in Gus Van Sant's *Gerry*

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I will begin by saying how it always astonishes me that to think and talk about sound in cinema – and I mean sound, not just voice, not just music, all sound – is a somewhat marginal concern amidst the overwhelming amount of visual, narrative, esthetic or philosophical studies that accompany the history of the medium; especially when one considers that the coupling of sound and moving image goes back to the earliest stages of its development. With Thomas Edison, for example: in 1894, in an interview for *Century Magazine*, Edison explained his intentions of coupling the Kinetoscope with the phonograph, a project that was aborted because it was deemed commercially non-viable. Or with the practice of the “bonimenteur,” who augmented cinematograph projections around the world at the turn of the last century by adapting the content of the films to local culture with voice, noise and music. Or with the music accompanying “silent” films: not only piano playing, but also full orchestras where space and budget permitted. And so, just as taking notice of sound lets us realize it’s always been there, acknowledging its presence permits us to question its absence.

Of course, in an audio-visual art such as contemporary cinema (audio-visual is hyphenated), where sound is of the essence, there is rarely complete silence. By removing dialogue and reducing action to a minimum to eliminate audible sources you can achieve a sort of quasi silence or relative silence: the “silence” of the country opposed to the noise of the city, or the “unbearable silence” between interlocutors unable to speak. But if you remove all sounds, if you push the proverbial mute button, you leave a “mark of filmic enunciation” as patent as Jean-Paul Belmondo staring down the barrel of the camera in *Breathless*. Behind the curtain of sound stand big empty speakers to which our awareness is inevitably drawn because of their ineptitude. On the other hand, when filled with sound, the speakers, the apparatus, are immediately forgotten, begging the question: where, with respect to the image, is the sound we hear

coming from? By defining the various spatial relations between sound and image, we can discover how sound circulates from one space to another, sometimes filling all zones, and sometimes leaving certain zones empty, mute, silent.

What I propose to do now is explore those spatial relations between sound and image in Gus Van Sant's 2002 film *Gerry*. Referring to the work of Michel Chion, I will argue that a progressive transfer of sound from the *visualized zone* to the *off* register effectively constructs a perceived absence of sound in the diegetical environment of the film. More specifically, I will analyze how, in the famous "sunrise sequence", sound designer Leslie Shatz, by using weak or missed synchronisation points, composes a sound environment that actively participates in depopulating the acoustic environment of the characters.

Michel Chion proposes in *Le son au cinema* – and expands on in *L'Audio-vision* – a tripartite spatial environment that situates sound in three possible spatial relations with the cinematographic image. These are: in, "hors-champ", and off. Sounds from the "in" register are essentially all sounds for which sources are visible in the frame. If you can see what is producing the sound you are hearing, it is considered "in". This is why Chion considers the "in" register a "visualized zone". This visualized zone is opposed to the "acousmatic zone", acousmatic meaning: "that which we hear without seeing the sound's original cause" or "that which lets us hear sounds without the visualizing of their causes" (1990: 63). We thus have two zones: one (the "in" zone) from which we can see the sources of the sounds we hear, and one (the acousmatic zone) from which we can't. The acousmatic zone is then divided into two registers, "hors-champ" and off. Hors-champ (literally: out-of-field), is the space outside the frame; hors-champ sound is acousmatic sound relative to what is shown in the frame, meaning its source is invisible, but it can nevertheless be situated in the space which is that of the image. For example, the knocking on a door while what is shown in the frame is a character reacting to the sound from inside the room. Sound from the off register is sound for which the suspected source is not only absent from the image, but also non-diegetical, situated in another time or another space from that of the situation directly evoked, the most common examples being voice-over and incidental music (65). Chion depicts these three registers in this pie chart (fig. 1) where

each register borders on the other two. Of course, these borders are permeable, letting sound circulate from one register to the other as the image itself modulates.

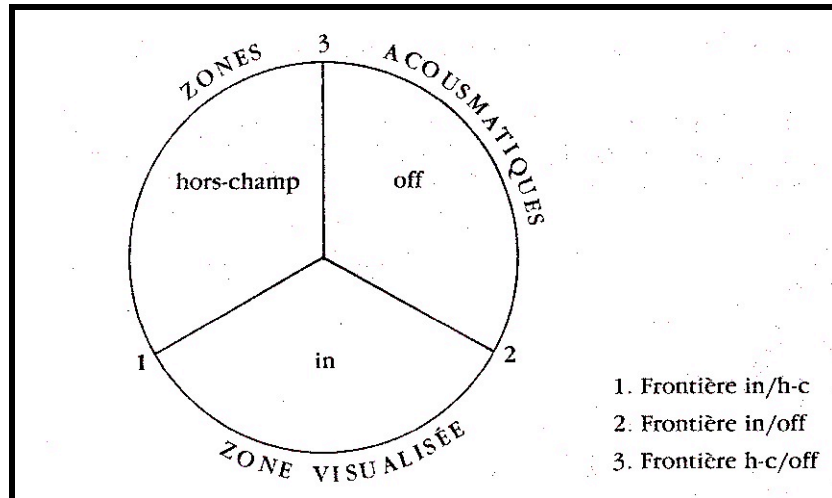


Figure 1

Although this characterisation of spatial audio-visual relations is often insufficient to describe the complexity of numerous in-betweens – Chion concedes that it is the particularity of cinema to constantly invent new spatial audio-visual relations – it will nonetheless give anchorage for my reading of *Gerry*.

For those who are not familiar with the plot, the film *Gerry* accompanies two young men, Gerry and Gerry, as they stop on a drive through the desert to do a short hike to see “the thing.” Wanting to stay away from “fanny packs and single moms,” they wander off the trail. As they try to find their way back, they get lost and plunge deeper and deeper into desolation, isolation, alienation.

The succession and opposition of two types of spatial relations structure the overall sound of the film. The bulk of the film is *sonorized* with a naturalistic soundtrack, representative of the desert in which the characters are wandering. The wind, the sand, the far-off storms modulate throughout, resonating empathetically with, or even inducing, the characters’ psychological state. All these sounds are diegetical; whether “in” or “hors-champ”; loud or quiet, numerous or few, they let us, the spectator, hear the soundscape that

surrounds the protagonists. This naturalistic sound environment is intersected with long sequences where the diegetical sound is absorbed by incidental music – Avro Pärt’s *Spiegel Im Spiegel* and *Für Alina* – coming from the “off” register. In these music sequences, the “in” and “hors-champ” registers are totally void, yet they do not feel completely silent. Since the sources in the image remain the same and their space is continuously actualized, the wind keeps blowing in our mind’s ear; the sound persists in our awareness even if it is not ours to be heard at the moment. These two relatively stable audio-visual structures, stable because they rely on simple conventions to be decoded and understood, bring me to a third more troubled structure, exemplified in the sunrise sequence.

But before we get into this particular sequence, I should expand on the notions of synchronism and *synchrosis*. As defined by Michel Chion, “a point of synchronisation is, in an audio-visual chain, a salient moment of encounter between a sonorous moment and a visual moment” (52). As such, synchronism is not a characteristic of sound *per se*; it describes the encounter of two relative and relevant occurrences, one visual, and the other auditory. Neither is synchronism an all or nothing phenomenon; it ranges on a scale from tight (“synchronisme serré”) to loose (“synchronisme large”). Tight synchronism favours a naturalistic sound environment, while loose synchronism favours a more relaxed and poetic sound environment (57). Despite this relative flexibility in temporal concordance, sound and image, when they are seemingly linked semantically, are nonetheless drawn to one another. Chion names this phenomenon *synchrosis*. *Synchrosis* (“la synchrèse”), a word he forges combining the words synchronism (“synchronisme”) and synthesis (“synthèse”), is “the irresistible and spontaneous connection that occurs between a sonorous phenomenon and a visual phenomenon, when these two arrive at the same time, and this, regardless of any rational logic” (55). Because of *synchrosis*, any visualized source can seemingly and seamlessly produce any sound: coconuts can be horse hooves; a toilet can be the *Lost Ark* of the covenant; breaking glass can be ping-pong balls. *Synchrosis* “lets you sound footsteps with anything, in function of what you wish to render” (Chion, 1990: 56).

I quote this reference to footsteps because they are in many ways central to the argument I want to make about the sunrise sequence. This sequence arrives around the last quarter of the film and echoes, in its approach to sound

design, a sequence at the end of the first quarter of the film, as the two Gerrys begin their hike. The sequence begins after an umpteenth night spent in the desert. The two Gerrys are slowly walking in the light of dawn. At first, only the silhouette of their two heads are visible, bobbing above the horizon. Then, as the sun slowly rises, in a single six-minute shot, their struggling bodies become more and more visible. The sound is striking in contrast with the two structures I previously described. We first hear a low rumble and footsteps in the sand. And then, above these, a glassy swell that lingers and subsides. At first, because of the logic installed by a dominantly naturalistic sound design in the film so far, the low rumble passes for a stylized air tone, and the footsteps are those of the characters in the shot; both sounds are from the “in” register. But the glassy swell complicates that reading. The source of this sound is clearly not visualized and it cannot be attributed to any source surrounding the space of the image. It resounds from the “off” register like some element of electro-acoustic music. As the shot evolves, the sound environment is further complicated by more and more sounds, some concrete, but without evident sources, and others clearly synthetic. The “off” register densifies, progressively outweighing the “in”.

As this abstract sound environment takes form, the sound of the footsteps periodically disappears and reappears. Thus far, since the source of the sound is uninterruptedly present in the image, it does not feel silenced, in the same way the desert was not silenced by the Avro Pärt music. But as the bodies become clearer, the looseness of the synchronization also becomes more evident. Two opposing forces come into play. Because of synchrosis, we desperately want to anchor the repetitive crunch we hear in the image, but eventually the persistent weakness of the synchronism severs any possible ties with the “in” register. The crunch that was the footsteps migrates to the “off” register. In this sequence, silence does not come from the inherent absence of sound; it is constructed through the displacement of sound. Because the “in” register is depopulated of sound in favor of the “off” register the diegetical sound environment is not just temporarily inaccessible, it is effectively disabled. The two characters that, throughout the film, march in almost pathological speechlessness are finally robbed of all sound as they stumble to their ultimate common resting place.

In this film, silence is not a mere acoustical phenomenon; it is a poetic figure that exacerbates the characters' plunge into nothingness. The depopulated diegetical sound environment echoes the barren wasteland in which they, the characters, walk. The silence I have attempted to describe is the product of cinema. It is perceived through the enacting of an audio-visual process where sound is displaced from one space to another. The three registers – in, hors-champ, off – that Chion defines are all continually present in and around the image. Composing sound and the absence thereof involves mastering the movement of sound. Flipping the on/off switch does not create silence as a force and figure; it only transforms sound into a lingering idea. With loosely articulated temporal junctions between sound and image, and certain conventions of reception, silence can be heard as an acting force.

Let's conclude by listening to as much of the sunrise sequence as time will permit, hoping that all this has prompted enough questions to feed our discussion.

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