The Chirping of a Little Bird

Some (Film) Theoretical Reflections

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1. Introduction

Franz Biberkopf holding his hands over his ears to protect him from the city noise when he leaves the quietness of the prison walls has become the iconic sound-image of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's version of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. As the authors of »Sounds Familiar« (this volume) have shown, Fassbinder's epic translation of Döblin's book does not make extended use of the topology of the city, but the overwhelming traffic noise has indeed become a familiar sound trope of Berlin as exemplary modern city of the early twentieth century. Focusing on the mental state of Biberkopf, other sounds of the city are not immediately obvious in Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz*. Therefore it is interesting to return to the city of Berlin and make a few (film) theoretical sound excursions to suggest some further reflections on Fassbinder's mental soundtrack and the ways in which it can be related to the soundscape of the city. In discussing the difference between expressionistic and realistic sound effects, paying attention to the ways in which the sound track is related to gender differences and by relating sound to its powers to create and invade spaces, I will propose some additional intermedial observations to the ones already put forward in »Sounds Familiar«. Moreover, I suggest that methodologically we remember sounds of the urban past *trans*medially in the sense that with every new technologically mediated soundscape, we add a layer to our aural memory that is transported through the different media. Such as the simple sound of a chirping little bird.

2. Returning to Alexanderplatz

For the television programme *In Europa* (VPRO 2007) Günther Lamprecht, who legendarily played Biberkopf in Fassbinder's epic television series, returns to Alexanderplatz of the year 2007. Standing in the middle of the square, closing his eyes he goes seventy years back in time and imagines the sounds of this place when he grew up: horses and carriages, breweries that carried their barrels; underneath the station the voices of the vendors of the big food market. These were the sounds of Berlin of his youth, Alexanderplatz of the 1930s. Opening his eyes, Lamprecht continues, »Now, I hear mass tourism«. In this particular episode of *In Europa* about Berlin in the 1930s, historian Geert Mak recalls in voice-over Fassbinder's Biberkopf as the symbol of the moral downfall of mankind, caught between the anarchistic decadence of the Weimar republic and the emergence of Nazi ideology. Compared to the rare city sounds in Fassbinder's film, Lamprecht's own memories of the city itself are rich in sound qualities. Still on Alexanderplatz in 2007, Lamprecht recalls how in 1945 he witnessed the end of the war at the exact same spot when the whole square was just rubble and steel. When fourteen-year-old Lamprecht came out a bunker, hands in the air, a drunken Russian soldier told him: »Wojna kaput, wojna kaput«, the war is over. »After two weeks of constant noise of drumfire and bombings, it was suddenly silent«, Lamprecht remembers.

In contrast to the observations in *Shifting Sounds* earlier in this volume, where it was described how silence in Amsterdam gradually became a sign of war in the early 1940s, Lamprecht remembers silence as the sound of peace. But there was one other little sound that he vividly remembers in connection to this silence: from underneath the debris he suddenly heard a very soft squeeking sound. And then he saw a little bird, a sparrow. As if these little chirping sounds had been hiding under the ruins and the blanket of violent war noise and only now dared to appear again. While Lamprecht sighs that with this sound the war was definitively over, he directs our attention to a sparrow's twittering on present-day Alexanderplatz which at the very moment he talks about his sonic memory enters the frame and the sound space of the present-day camera. It is a magical moment, where past and present collide through an aural sign. And where a little bird's chirp becomes part of a city soundscape with huge historical significance. I will return to the squeeking sound of a little bird later on, when paying attention again to Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz*. In most of this expansion, however, I turn to some sonic concepts in film theory and philosophy that might be brought in dialogue with the findings in the previous chapter, especially in comparing the different audio-visual adaptations of Döblin's novel.

3. Realistic versus Expressionistic Uses of Sound

As mentioned the first thing that is remarkable in Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is that frequently the soundtrack of the city gives way to the internal world of Biberkopf. A theoretical distinction that can be made in this respect is the one between expressionist and realistic uses of sound. It is important to note that, as emphasized by Michel Chion in his *Audio-Vision*, there is no »natural and pre-existing harmony between image and sound«.[1] We relate images and sounds with our brain, and filmmakers can experiment with these relations, but there is no law that makes images and sounds go naturally together. Nevertheless, since the official introduction of sound film in 1927, the soundtrack has been constructed largely in function of realistic representation and the predominant mirroring of sound to vision: what we see is what we hear. In Phil Jutzi's film version of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931) the soundtrack is realistic. For instance, when Biberkopf leaves Tegel prison at the beginning of the film, both the music and the sound effects of tram bells and car horns get louder and more agitated when Biberkopf enters more deeply into the crowdedness of the city centre. The sound thus follows realistic conventions: we travel with Biberkopf to the city and become gradually overwhelmed by the images and sounds: what he perceives is what we perceive.

In contrast to this realistic use of sound that is always externally (objectively) motivated, filmmakers have also experimented with expressionist soundtracks, which are more internally motivated and could be described as »what the character feels is what we hear«. Since his first sound film *Blackmail* (1929), famous for the sound close-up of the word »knife« that translated the obsessive thoughts of the heroine of the film, Alfred Hitchcock has experimented with different forms of internal sounds that express a character's thoughts, fantasies or emotions. Two more examples of early sound experiments in Hitchcock's films are the internal monologue in *Murder!* (1930) and another obsessive state of mind of a character which transforms music into noise in *Secret Agent* (1936).[2] While the interplay between image and sound indicates the expressionistic or realistic status of the sound (such as determining the source of the sound in the image), the quality of the sound itself (pitch, volume, direction) may indicate its status as expressionistic or realistic sound. Clearly the volume of the city cacophony hurting Biberkopf's ears in the first scene of Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz* translates the sounds of the city in an expressionistic way: Biberkopf is terribly afraid to enter the chaos of

1 Chion 1994, xvii.

2 Pisters 2007, 169-73.

urban life. So even while just outside the prison the city is not very audible yet, we do hear its overwhelming sounds as the expression of an internal experience.
Could these sounds be representative of the actual city, or are there ways to translate the expressive inner experiences of Biberkopf to what is going on in the big city? On a comparative level, a more extended argument perhaps could be made to see how the expressionistic use of sound in Fassbinder's version relates to a more realistic approach of the sounds of the city in the radio play and the first filmic interpretation of Döblin's novel. Do we hear different cities in these various versions?

4. Acousmatic Sounds and Embodied Voices

Another theoretical observation made by Chion concerns the particular use of sound that does not have a visible source in the image track that are not necessarily expressionistic or psychological sounds. This type of sound, such as a non-diegetic voice-over, is called »acousmatic« sound.[3] »Acousmatic« is an old Greek term used by Pythagoras to indicate that masters were hidden behind a curtain when teaching their pupils. They were not visible; only their voice was audible, which increased their power, as if they were speaking with the voice of God. Chion has a special term for filmic characters that are powerful because of their acousmatic presentation: the »acousmêtre« (a contraction of acousmatic and *être en maître*). The most famous examples are the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and Dr. Baum/ Dr. Mabuse in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (Fritz Lang, 1933): as long as they are not visible they are omnipotent. As Kaja Silverman, referring to Chion, has argued, in classic cinema also the all-knowing voice-over is reserved mostly for male characters.[4] If there is a female voiceover, it is an embodied one, the voice of an actress whom we can see in the image while she is speaking in voice-over. And this embodiment gives her less authority over the images, over the narration.
Another difference in relation to the voice that Silverman observes is the opposition between the maternal voice and the paternal word, and it is mostly the word – the discursive and signifying power – that wins this battle, at least in classic cinema. In this respect Silverman also discusses Chion's argument that cinema is »a machine made in order to deliver a cry from the female voice«.[5] Obviously this does not mean that

3 Chion 1994, 129.

4 Silverman 1988.

5 Chion in Silverman 1988, 77.

women do not speak in classical cinema. In »Shifting Sounds« the example of *Out of the Clouds* (1955) is given. Here the female owner of a pub explains the sounds of London. But these are soothing words to familiarize and reassure in a motherly way strangers with a new environment, making the city a *home*. What is demanded from women on a more profound level in cinema, Silverman argues, is an involuntary sound: the scream, the cry, or possibly a (non-discursive) melody. Ranging from Fay Wray's scream in *King Kong* (Merian Cooper, 1933) to the »perfect scream« in *Blow Out* (Brian de Palma, 1981), cinema has indeed produced a whole range of female screams. Male screams are hard to find in classic Hollywood cinema. The female voice is embodied within the diegetic world and has often much less discursive power. Even vocal resistance takes place in this non-discursive level. In this respect the counter-sound of the female cry is laughter. In her book *The Unruly Woman* Kathleen Rowe has demonstrated how laughing women are considered as improper and transgressing many conventional gender borders of decent behaviour.[6] And in this respect it is interesting to see that in both Jutzi's film and in Fassbinder's television play there are some remarkable, almost uncanny scenes of laughing women.

So the quality of the voices, their acousmatic status and their (gendered) relation to the utterance of words or just sounds, screams or laughter would therefore offer another possible perspective on the different soundscapes of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The radio play, for instance, although an acousmatic medium in itself, allows interesting reflections on questions of embodiment (»a voice comes from a throat«), power and perhaps also gender relations. The female voices in the 2007 version of the play are incredibly soft and childlike. And in Fassbinder's television epic, it is interesting to note that Biberkopf's traumatic memory of him murdering his wife Ida (for which he served a prison sentence) is repeated in six flashbacks. The images of the flashback return in exactly the same way, but each version is overlaid with an acousmatic voice, which relates Biberkopf's affective and personal memory to a different set of objective facts: ranging from a scientific observation of the physical laws that explain what happened to Ida's rib case, to scenes from the city (a horse falling into a pit, the collapse of a huge building), political and historical events and news of the day.[7] The voice is Fassbinder's own male voice, which claims some authority over the objective facts laid over the subjective memory. This is another way in which the internal and external meet in an audio-visual encounter. Or as Biberkopf states at the beginning of the Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz*, of the encounter of »the city, the world and me«.

6 Rowe 1995.

7 Del Rio 2009, 73-96.

Also the voices of the women in Berlin Alexanderplatz might be analyzed further and in a comparative way. Do they have a different status in the radio play than in the film or the television play? With what authority do they speak, when and how do they sing, laugh, are silent or scream? One of the most interesting scenes in this respect is Mieze's scream in Episode 11 of Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz*. In this scene Biberkopf has Reinhold hide in bed in their apartment to show him braggingly Mieze's devotion. But when Mieze arrives she tells Franz she is in love with another man [...] In response to Franz's rage she »delivers a cry« to the point that Franz throws himself on her and starts to scream with her before assaulting her. There is a brief but very powerfully sonic moment when in their screams, their despairs meet, before the violence takes over again. I will return to this scene at the end of these brief reflections. Here I have pointed to the possible gender relations that we can hear on the different soundtracks of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

5. Terriorializing and Deterritorializing Effects of Sound

A final sonic conceptual thought that I would like to bring into the debate concerns the idea of territorializing and deterritorializing effects of the soundscape. Here I will refer to *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write extensively about sounds, music and the voice.[8] Before going back to soundtracks as such, I raise some points that Deleuze and Guattari introduce in relation to music: the territtorializing refrain and the deterritorializing »becoming-music«. An important aspect of music is its power to create territories. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the refrain is territorial and has the function of creating »safe havens« in the chaos of the world: a child comforts itself in the dark by singing softly a nursery rhyme; a bird launches into its refrain marking its territory.[9] Every household, too, is an aurally marked territory. Homes are created by sound walls: a radio that is playing, singing and speaking voices, the sound of the washing machine – they are all the aural markers of a familiar territory. Countries are created by national anthems. Sound has even much stronger capacities to territorialize than sight, Deleuze and Guattari argue. As they concisely put it, »Flags can do nothing without trumpets«.[10] These are the territorializing powers of sound and music, of the refrain.

8 Deleuze / Guattari 1988, 299-350. See also Pisters 2003, 175-215.

9 Deleuze / Guattari 1988, 299-300.

10 Ibid., 348.

But the territory, the home or country can also be invaded, opened up by sound:

> One opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth. […] to join with the World, or melt with it.[11]

Sound tends to dissolve and connects with other elements easily. According to Deleuze and Guattari, sound is considered in its potential force to enable all kinds of becomings: sounds, music, noises, singing open up to other spaces: a singing voice enters into the territory of a bird, it enters into a »becoming-bird«. One can think of the singing opera voices in Frank Darabont's film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) where the most transgressive act of one of the prisoners in the Shawshank prison is the playing of an opera record. By hearing the voices of the opera singers, the prisoners were freer than if they had left the prison walls behind them. These are the deterritorializing forces of sound, of »becoming-music«.
So according to Deleuze and Guattari, territorializing, deterritorializing and reterritorializing forces are to be taken into consideration when we talk about sound.[12] Walter Murch, in his foreword to Chion's Audio-Vision also points to the territorial forces of sound:

> There were of course many more significant reasons for the rise of the Great Dictators in the twenties and thirties, and it is true that the silent film had sometimes been used to rally people around the flag, but it is nonetheless chilling to recall that Hitler's ascension to power marched in lockstep with the successful development of the talking film.[13]

The power of sound is, of course, even more obvious when we think of the power of Hitler's voice through the radio. Chion's concept of the »acousmêtre« now can be explained in terms of territorializing forces of sound.

Listening to *Berlin Alexanderplatz* according to these (de)territorializing characteristics, it would be interesting to analyse how, in the different versions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, sound creates the sense of a home – related to interior spaces as well as the city as a whole – and at which moments the territorial forces are opened up with deter-

11 Ibid., 311.
12 Ibid., 348.
13 Murch in Chion 1994, xi.

ritorializing aspects. One clear example can be given from the epilogue of Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz*. After the murder of Mieze, Biberkopf ends up in a mental hospital. Many scenes translate his state of mind in surreal images full of »becoming-animal«, often displayed through bodily gesture and posture. In one scene Franz and Mieze are slaughtered like cows in an abattoir. In another scene Franz drinks milk from a saucer on the floor like a cat. Here the music and voice of Janis Joplin's »Me and Bobby McGee« indicates the deterritorializing effects of becoming-animal emphasized by the lyrics (»Freedom is just another word for nothing to lose«). In the final scene of Fassbinder's version, Biberkopf is *domesticated*: as an assistant gatekeeper at a factory he is alert at his job site, but no longer transpierced by the sounds of the city. Instead, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* ends with a folk song / anthem while the country marches into the war.

6. The Scream, the City, the Bird

At the end of this short reflection on some theoretical aspects of sound in film I would like to return to the above-described scene of Mieze screaming. Her screaming is so penetrating and loud that it really has deterritorializing powers. As Biberkopf exclaims: »Mieze, you scream the house down!«. By screaming she not only »breaks down« the walls of the house that is no longer a safe place, but it is as if she lets in the chaotic and dangerous forces of the city on the verge of a historical transition. But even while she screams her lungs out, there is still one other little sound audible: a bird's thin squeaky sound, Mieze's canary, remains audible throughout the whole scene. A soft chirping sound under the rubbles of a sonically torn-down house. After having listened to Lamprecht's sound memories of Alexanderplatz at the end of the war, the chirping of the sparrow emerging from the debris, one cannot avoid connecting the two sounds. The sound of a little bird in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is about to die, only to be revived many years later, after the war trumpets have silenced. And hearing a bird chirping in my city garden in Amsterdam does not just sound familiar – it opens layers of sonic memories of a mediated urban past.

7. Sources

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