

Booms, Bells and Distant Voices

The Ambiguity of Sound: Tarkovsky and Beyond

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Introduction



The NFTS sound design exercise *Staircase*. A still taken from the 2004 NFTS documentary *The Marvelling Lens* about French photographer Eugène Atget (1857-1927) directed by Rowena Cohen.

The initial idea for this project began in 2013 during an early sound design exercise at the National Film and Television School (NFTS), in which the students were asked to create a suitable 30-second room tone for the staircase image above. We were then required to populate the sound space with offscreen sounds to create a convincing atmosphere or narrative unfolding outside the frame. This idea of a soundworld existing beyond what one could see was fascinating, and set me on my way towards an exploration into the ambiguity of sound.

* * *

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the ambiguity of sound in film. The paper is divided into two parts. Part One acts as a general overview of different examples and ideas relating to the ambiguity of sound in film, art and through my own personal experiences. Part Two develops these ideas in more specific detail by focusing in on a single work. For this I have chosen to examine the soundtrack to Andrei Tarkovsky's 1986 film *The Sacrifice*, which employs a fantastic range of sonic ambiguity to help create a very particular poetic mood of mystery and otherworldliness.

Throughout my research I have been particularly focused on exploring sound as a means to evoking this feeling of otherworldliness. In doing so I have tried to examine the rich potential of sound objects that exist beyond our field of vision - the unexplained, supernatural, hallucinatory and uncanny auditory stimulations that seemingly linger between this world and the other. Sound that expresses a sense of mystery or evokes a mood of fear or spiritual transcendence, as we come into contact with phenomena we cannot easily explain or understand.

The paper has been written as a series of self-contained segments that can be read freely in no particular order. The headings are aimed at suggesting a general direction for the overall work, though equally these can be rearranged according to the reader's fancy. This has been done to reflect the germination of the project; how emerging thoughts crystallised into ideas and spontaneously connected to other ones.

My hope is that the ideas presented here will help strengthen the importance, value and creative scope of sound in film, towards a greater mindfulness and appreciation of sound and listening in our everyday lives.

* * *

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PART ONE

Sound: Inexplicable, but True

Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the bells, the Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, or Concord bell, when the wind was favourable, a faint, sweet, and, as it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness. At a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by the wood-nymph.¹

* * *

A Chorus of Distant Church Bells

An afternoon in rural England. Perhaps a Sunday. A light breeze steadily strokes the land as it gently bakes in the hot summer sun. Narrow streams of cloud expand across the blue sky. Soft, rolling hills unravel to form patchworks of greens and browns, intersecting along clusters of trees, hedgerows and amongst the jagged ruins of old stone walls and fading pathways. A pastoral countryside stretches towards the horizon, where the land and the sky meet in a brownish haze of heat and dust. Beneath the thickets not far away the echoing voices of singing birds are heard; their spritely calls peppering the stillness of the afternoon heat with colour and vitality. Hovering above the grass the bees and butterflies are at play. Here and there the tiny clicking sounds of insects rummaging amongst the undergrowth. Far

¹ Henry Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 65.

off in the distance are the sounds of church bells, fusing together as they traverse the land to form smooth continuous clouds of sound; a majestic, ethereal accompaniment like a distant choir that suffuses everything with a sense of numinosity.

This personal reverie emerges from my childhood memories, some real, some imagined. Like a dream bound up in the nostalgia of the imprinted past: the intermingling of family picnics, countryside walks, events, paintings of rural Wiltshire, television programmes and films. This also however, is an image of a world many people recognise. With its rolling hills, birds and hedgerows, this is a description of a quite quintessential summers day in the English countryside.

This countryside setting is abound with churches, whose timeless bells mark the passing of time and the celebration of holy occasions. For many residents of English towns and villages, the sound of echoing church bells is a familiar part of their rural soundscape. And yet the familiarity of a feature like church bells to some, does not negate its uniqueness or importance as an indicator of culture and community life to others. Church bells still are, what Canadian composer and acoustic ecologist R.Murray Schafer called, a *Soundmark* - "A community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded"².

Two notable features of the listening experience described in my reverie above contribute towards the particular mood evoked by the sound of the church bells. First, the church bells are heard and not seen, and secondly, the bells emanate from some distance away. Through the natural dissipation of sound across space, the bells seemingly transmogrify from discrete strikes to something smooth and continuous, like a distant chorus. The details of the discreet sound source(s) are obscured by the physical space that lies between me and the church bells. Under such conditions, how with any certainty can I believe that the sounds actually are those belonging to church bells? Could it not be something altogether different? A sonic mirage? A phantom image?

Ambiguity nourishes imaginative flight. It is a sense of something more than what it presents itself as reality. Why? Could it be the quality of the sound; long soothing sounds swimming in space, like the angelic church music of a choir? Could it be that I can correctly identify the source of the sound as that belonging to a place of worship? Could it be to do with a (sublime) sensation of expansive space; sounds emanating from distant points far away like star light? Could it be the acousmatic

² R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Destiny, 1993) 84.

experience of listening to a sound without verifying its physical point of origin with the eye; all effect seemingly without cause, transformed over time and space? Could it simply be a result of my own feelings or mood coupled with the sensations of the countryside at that particular moment? All of these possibilities stem from the ambiguous nature of sound.

Strange Sounds and Sonic Booms

On the 12th April 2012 I was working at the family computer in my parents house, when suddenly I heard an enormous rumble from outside. It sounded and felt like an explosion of some sorts, causing the walls of the room to violently shake. Perhaps someone nearby had left the gas on I thought, or maybe something had exploded on the industrial estate not far from our home. I went outside up a small pedestrian footbridge to look for any visible signs of the accident, but saw nothing. Later that evening the mystery of the sound was revealed on the BBC news website:

'Helicopter hijack code' triggered sonic boom Typhoons: A data entry error by a helicopter pilot led to two Typhoon aircraft being scrambled in an emergency response. A loud bang was heard across parts of England at about 18:10 BST on Thursday. The MoD revealed it was a boom from a Typhoon authorized to go at supersonic speed while responding to an emergency call from a helicopter³.

A reporter in Oxfordshire described some of the telephone calls from residents made to the local radio station: "They described a strange noise. A loud explosion. They said that spontaneously they ran out into the street and met their neighbors. At that point no one knew what it was." Another resident described the moment just after the loud noise: "It was very strange because it went very quiet and it was like, all of a sudden the birds stopped singing...for a split-second it was like everything had gone quiet outside."⁴

Modern history is full of reports of encounters with strange sounds in the environment. One of the most intriguing in recent times has been a collection of phenomena involving the widespread report of a sound known as *The Hum*. This persistent low-frequency hum or drone has been reported by a relatively small numbers of people in different areas around the world. In many cases the exact cause of the sound has remained a mystery. However some experts have concluded that the hum is

³ BBC website report (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-17697328>)

⁴ Ibid

actually the accumulative sound of distant industrial compressors, fans or farm machinery. These tend to be more audible at night in the countryside where background noise is at minimum. Dr David Baguley, head of audiology at Addenbrooke Hospital in Cambridge believes that in some cases the hearing of sufferers has over time become hyper-sensitive; involuntarily 'amplifying' the environment the more they become aware of background sounds. This he reports, is a internal mechanism of the body that operates "during moments of pressure or stress when we want our senses on full alert"⁵. This highlights the development of hypersensitive hearing due to concentrated listening habits. Such psychologically conditioned habits suggest that people are more likely to be suffering from auditory hallucinations than hearing actual sounds in their environment.

As I recalled the experience of the unexpected Typhoon sonic boom, I started to think about the ambiguous nature of sound. At the time, the feeling of encountering a kind of ambiguous sound seemed to stem from the fact that I was unable to discern the source of the sound with my eyes. It seemingly appeared from nowhere, uncanny, out of place with the normal state of suburban life I was existing in. It was loud and omnipresent, heard across some four counties from no particular direction. The lack of any visual verification pertaining to the event led me (and many other people evidently) to experience a momentary state of anxiety and confusion. Into this perceptual gap flooded images channeled from my imagination, speculating on the potential source of the sound.

Ambiguity, as described by the online oxford dictionary is: "The quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness"⁶. It is this property of sound, its inexactness, that raises questions concerning the origin, behavior and meaning of a sound. It renders auditory phenomena susceptible to imaginative speculation towards mystical, supernatural and otherworldly impressions. This uncertainty and openness to interpretation in sound is what can frighten, fascinate or inspire us. In turn our behavior and attitudes towards sound highlights the kind of culture that we exist in today; how we experience and understand modern life through what we hear and listen to.

Sound: Invisible, Inexact, Uncanny

Sound is a vibration that causes sound waves to travel through oscillating molecules in a medium like air or water. While light which reaches the human retina within the 180-degrees forward-facing field of view, sound reaches our ears from all directions at all times. Unlike the eye which with the

5 BBC website report (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8056284.stm>)

6 Oxford Dictionaries (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ambiguity>)

aid of an eye-lid is able to shut out external stimuli, the ear remains in a state of permanent receptivity. As such humans are accustomed to hearing sounds from everywhere at anytime, which are not always discernible to the eye. This is not some physiological defect, but rather a useful function of the body helping the species evade potential dangers lurking in the environment. It acts as a kind of early-warning system that has allowed humans to identify the general direction of a sound and react to it before the need for visual confirmation. For in terms of basic survival, to see is to be too late.

The ambiguity of sound lies in its potential omnipresence and our not knowing always what the source of the sound is. Seemingly it is everywhere and nowhere, anything and nothing.

Despite this auditory sensitivity, early man could not always be sure what he was hearing was actually what he was hearing. Like his modern counterpart, what man knows and recognises as familiar is contextualised in an understanding of his local and everyday surroundings. Auditory activity lying outside the field of view is more easily identified and categorised if it remains within the frame of knowledge that man already possesses about his environment. If he encounters a new environment, he is able to comprehend the new sights and sounds as those belonging to the new land he now finds himself in. The very unfamiliarity of the place contextualises the unfamiliarity of the sounds, helping him to navigate through the new environment – the so-called 'known unknowns'.

The real uncertainty of sound - the ambiguous, inexactness of the auditory experience - is felt most profoundly when unknown or unexpected sound activity is heard in familiar settings. Or when familiar sounds behave in an unfamiliar way. This can have an 'Uncanny' effect on us as listeners - a strange feeling arising from the experience of something familiar and yet at the same time unfamiliar. This essentially is a crisis of faith; when what we believed as real, as truth, is brought into question. The uncanny lead us towards concerns relating to our perceptual experience and our general understanding of reality: Did what I hear really occur or was it a figment of my imagination? Do I believe as real what I thought I heard? What other forces could be at work here? Someone's devilish invention?

The Mystery of The Hidden Noise

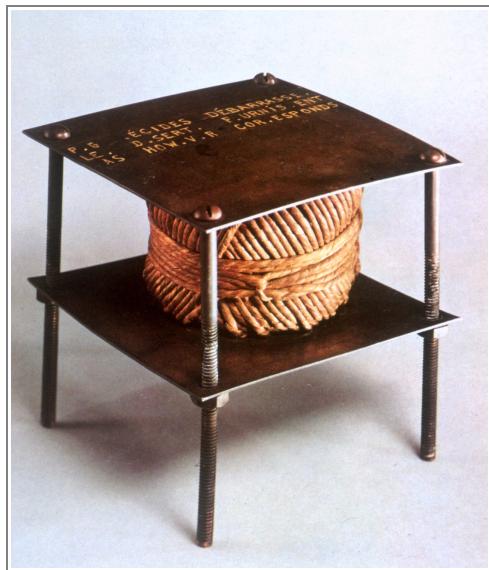
If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? A brief meditation on four questions concerning the possibility of unperceived experience:

- 1.) Does a sound exist if no one hears it?
- 2.) Does a sound exist if we do not hear it, even though we are told it does exist?
- 2.) What is the source of a sound if we do not see it?
- 3.) What is the source of a sound if we do not hear it?

In the summer of 2013 I attended *The Bride and the Bachelors* exhibition, part of the *Dancing around Duchamp* season held at the Barbican centre in London. The exhibition consisted of an overwhelming array of paintings, objects, readymades, sculptures, books, pictures, sounds and scheduled performances that explored Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) many interactions and exchanges with composer John Cage (1912-1992), choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) and visual artists, Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) and Jasper Johns (b. 1930). In amongst all these varied works of art, I discovered (a replica of) a little piece called *The Hidden Noise* (or *A Bruit Secret*).

This rather mundane-looking yet curiously fascinating readymade created in 1916 is comprised of two brass plaques bolted together with screws. Sandwiched in between these plates is a ball of twine. The story goes that Duchamp's friend Walter Arensberg was instructed by the artist to carefully unscrew the plates and place a small object inside the ball of twine, before reattaching the plates to their original position. Duchamp told Arensberg to not tell him or anyone else about what object he had placed inside the ball of twine - "a sort of secret between us"⁷, Duchamp explained in a 1956 interview. This readymade could then be shook to produce an audible rattle; a "hidden noise". What produces the rattle noise inside no one knows; a mystery that has remained to this day.

⁷ Marcel Duchamp interview, 1956 (http://www.toutfait.com/unmaking_the_museum/Hidden%20Noise.html)



The Hidden Noise (1916) by Marcel Duchamp

My visit to the exhibition came no closer to solving the mystery of the noise than anyone's efforts before me. In fact, I was left with the impression that the enigma was doubled. For not only did I not know what was making the sound, but I was unable to hear the sound for myself. As a matter of security, the gallery had decided to lock Duchamp's 'action' readymade away in a transparent plastic casing. There was no shaking and there was no sound. Only looking. Given the intrinsic sonic dimension of the artwork (the clue is in the title) this felt like a great disappointment. Perhaps I should have followed Brian Eno's example, who in 1995 sabotaged Duchamp's famous urinal readymade by embellishing the work with some of his own home grown urine. Pissing on the Hidden Noise would have been an altogether different kind of remonstration, but perhaps I could have attempted to shake the plastic case that housed the readymade. At the very least I'd have known the sound of my struggle (it was fixed into the ground pretty solid).

The Audiovisual Contract: Violence and Ecstasy

Austrian film director Michael Haneke uses offscreen sound to great effect. In his 1992 film *Benny's Video* he permits the audience to hear moments of action rather than as a series of images. This audiovisual strategy allows Haneke to incite the imagination of his audience with precise efficacy. In their very personal imaginings this has the effect of making the audience involuntarily complicit in the brutal events unfolding on/offscreen.

With an image, you cut the imagination short. With an image, you see what you see and its 'reality'. With sound, just like words, you incite the imagination. And that's why for me it's always more efficient, if I want to touch someone emotionally, to use sound rather than image.⁸

Imagination is the furnace of emotion. It can be excited through the invisible. These sounds we hear need not necessarily be strange, ambiguous or at odds with the environment. As Haneke demonstrates, they can be the normal sounds that we associate with particular imagery or within a given context. In this case it is the hacking to death of a young girl. The conscious awareness of such activity registering in our minds through our ears, amplifies the violence of the actual viewer-spectacle. This in film, amid a visucentric culture, can be far more arresting than simply showing another image to a mind worn numb with onscreen presentations/re-presentations of violence.

In the 1962 independent cult horror *Carnival of the Souls*, organist Mary Henry emerges from a department store changing room only to discover that the world has turned suddenly silent. She can no longer hear anything from the environment around her. The only sound she can hear (or we the audience at least can hear) is the sound of her own voice and footsteps. Later she reports to the doctor: "It was more than just not being able to hear anything. Or make contact with anyone. It was though...as though for a time I didn't exist. As though I had no place in the world. No part of the life around me". In both its concrete and abstract forms, sound in an audiovisual context, where one sense may be removed or heightened, threatens to disturb us. It can lead to what psychologists call *Derealisation*, an alteration in one's perception of the world, much like what Mary Henry experienced.

In ancient Greece Pythagoras is said to have taught some of his students from behind a veil while they sat in front listening silently to his voice. Pythagoras believed this would improve the student's ability to concentrate. This came to be known in Greek as *Akousmatikoi*. Many years later in France, French composer and theoretician Pierre Schaeffer pioneered *Musique Concrete*, an *Acousmatic* art of recorded sounds projected from loudspeakers. By rupturing the bond between sounds and their physical sources, recording technology was celebrated as granting composers and sound engineers new and exciting possibilities in the imaginative exploration of sound and the

⁸ Michael Haneke, *Benny's Video* DVD Interview (French 1992)
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h1upX_U88k)

listening experience. This encouraged a *reduced* mode of listening which directed awareness to hearing alone. Schaeffer remarked: "Often surprised, often uncertain, we discover that much of what we thought we were hearing, was in reality only seen, and explained, by the context."⁹

While the rupturing of conventional audiovisual perception can be effective at creating great discomfort and anxiety in the mind of the listener/viewer, it can also serve to produce desirable effects of heightened concentration and auditory awareness towards greater beauty and understanding. This in the hands of a competent sound designer or composer can be used to great imaginative effect. As composer and theoretician Michel Chion writes, "concrete music, in its conscious refusal of the visual, carries with it visions that are more beautiful than images could ever be."¹⁰

Basho and the Temple Bell

From 2004 to 2012 I lived abroad - Japan, Indonesia and intermittent travels to neighboring countries Thailand, Laos, China and India. Throughout those eight years I encountered everyday soundscapes that were radically different from what I had been used to in England. One of the most consistent and attractive sonic features of these different environments were the sounds of bells and gongs. In Japan it was the deep sonorous bronze gongs and bells of Buddhist temples that caught my attention. In Indonesia it was the sound of the Javanese gamelan orchestra performing in villages or playing over crackly radios late at night. While in North India it was the higher-pitched chimes of small prayer bells ringing out to mark temple rituals and prayer. The spiritual life that I inherently associated with such sounds together with the air of exotic unfamiliarity never ceased to arouse my curiosity and imagination. Often the most charming effect was the feeling of space evoked by such sounds as they echoed out across the land; an unseen pervasive force.

One day a number of years ago I was wandering around Senso-ji temple in Asakusa, downtown Tokyo, when I came across a stone engraved with a haiku poem by the 17th Century poet Matsuo Basho. At the time I was fascinated by the haiku form. I was particularly drawn to the way it expressed the poetics of sound with such beauty and clarity, and yet continued to evoke a feeling of mystery. This I felt was encapsulated in the poem I discovered that day, and is relevant here to our discussion on the ambiguity of sound:

9 Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966) 93.

10 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1994) 33.

A Cloud of Cherry Blossoms

The temple bell,

- Is it Ueno, is it Asakusa?¹¹

From his Fukugawa home in downtown Tokyo, Basho observes the clouds of cherry blossom stretching out across the fields towards the districts of Ueno and Asakusa in the North. As he gazes out his ears detect the distant sound of a temple bell being struck - a light metallic tone, repeating slowly. He listens in gentle calm and considers the location of the sound: Could it be from the temple bell in Ueno or perhaps Asakusa?

In reading the haiku we instinctively feel that Basho is quite sure of the origin of the sound, the temple bell. The effect however is a little more ambivalent. Is Basho curious or pleasantly surprised? Is he happy or sad? What does the bell ringing mean for him? What if the source of the sound is a mystery - is Basho pleasantly curious or fearful of the uncertainty? Does it matter to Basho whether the sound is from Ueno or Asakusa? Could the sound have been something other than a temple bell - something else in the environment, maybe a sound Basho thought he heard, for his ears only? Is Basho's account to be trusted if he, the ear-witness, remains uncertain about the source of the sound?

These considerations demonstrate how the listener may interpret and respond to aural phenomena pertaining to this kind of ambiguity. Rather than seeking objectively verifiable truth - the exact cause of a sound - we can interpret Basho's haiku as a provocation to experience the contemplation of possibilities; to bask in the mystery of sound itself. In accepting the mystery Basho underlines the importance of subjective experience, helping to unify subject with object, listener with sound. What we hear and what it means for us is only ever from our own individual point of view; our individual experience of life. Herein lies the great beauty of personal experience, affirmation of life itself.

11 R.H Blyth, *Haiku Vol.2: Spring* (Hokuseido, 1981) 102.

Faith, Seeing and Believing

The ear goes more towards the within, the eye towards the outer.¹²

Ambiguity describes the nebulous, inexactness of a thing. A vagueness of form and meaning that lends itself to multiple interpretations. Sound unbound by a visible source and lingering beyond what we can see suggests a number of interpretations as to its identity and point of origin. It is as if the concrete existence of a sound-emitting event or object is called into question by its very absence in the visual domain. Does the visual provide irrefutable evidence of the existence of a thing? Did not Doubting Thomas refuse to believe unless he saw, unless he touched, Christ's wounds? Does the eye perceive the greatest degree of truth? Can we trust what we merely hear?

We live in a visually mediated world. A relatively modern phenomenon, since sound was once the central transmitter of information and ideas between people. The introduction of the printing press in 15th Century Europe revolutionized the way people understood the world. With the prevalence of a culture of the eye, memory and recitation gradually became less convenient, less economical and efficient modes of communication between people. Much of the modern world began to shift away from oral traditions towards a visual culture of text and images. The industrial revolution and developments in technology moved man into an age of mechanical reproduction. The camera, television, computer and Internet have become essential tools in the creation and dissemination of information and ideas. Does the erosion of an oral culture correlate to an erosion of man's capacity to imagine for himself – the diminishing of diversity, of imagination?

Otherworldliness

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.¹³

Uncertainty about reality inspires the imagination. Unidentifiable or unusual sound phenomena raises questions, cast doubts and conjures up impressions in the mind. As well as our individual,

12 Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography* (<http://filmsound.org/articles/bresson.htm>)

13 William Blake, Extract from *Auguries of Innocence* (London, Penguin Books, 1988) 147.

corporeal experiences, these impressions are informed by associations and images found in myths, stories and religious practices, recreated today in books, films and works of art. They also emerge from the survival instincts and biological mechanisms of our bodies that have evolved over many thousands of years. From this comes forth our emotional responses – fear, anxiety, peace, calm, joy, ecstasy. Feelings that can be triggered by our encounter with things we feel are at odds with our normal, habitual experience of reality; a feeling of otherworldliness – other than this world. In art as in life, encounters with unknown elements or an abstraction of reality can quickly create this sense or mood of otherworldliness. This something mysterious, uncanny, dream-like, appears to transcend everyday life and exist outside our normal frame of reference. It quite literally feels like belonging to a world other than what we call *reality*.

The otherworldliness evoked by sound can be described as a mood that permeates a space. Like the mood that people feel radiates within places of worship or holy sites, where sound helps to create a distinctively spiritual kind of ambience conducive to prayer and contemplation. This otherworldly mood of sound is present in what William Wordsworth and the other romantic poets described as being *Sublime* - the experience of man confronting the insurmountable, impersonal forces of nature: the immersive sonic force of howling winds, tropical storms and the cacophony of forests that inspire a feeling of nature's ineffable power and grace, timeless and all-encompassing. Conversely, at the microscopic level, the minuscule clicks and crunches of a leaf lightly blowing in the wind, the tiny buzz of an insect or the quiet lapping of water equally inspire a reverence of nature's self-effacing beauty. A micro sound world way below our normal levels of perception, ebbing and flowing with the passing of time. In both cases, it is the uncommon recognition of the extreme scale(s) of reality (cosmic-microscopic) as they relate to human existence that provokes in us a sensation that such life may well belong to some other reality. What is unfamiliar here, beyond our regular perceptual framework, becomes otherworldly.

This otherworldliness is present throughout many of Tarkovsky's films. In *Stalker* (1979), *Nostalgia* (1983) and *The Sacrifice* (1986) this feeling is evoked as the director explores the crisis of faith and the search for spirituality in contemporary life. The mood of otherworldliness in these films serves to support various cinematic sequences depicting characters in different spatio-temporal registers. Dreams, memories, fantasies, nature, faith and spirituality are all kinds of psychologically-triggered otherworldly states that sound helps to express in different ways. These sound worlds are intricately orchestrated around the movement of the camera and the rhythms of the picture cut. Tarkovsky often deploys non-synchronous sound to create what Sergei Eisenstein

described as a “contrapuntal relationship between image and sound”¹⁴. Sound events underscoring changes in mood or thoughts often linger outside the frame as offscreen events, placing them in an ambiguous space that allows the audience to question the listening perspective of characters and point of origin of sounds. The conventional boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is regularly obscured and manipulated by Tarkovsky to heighten these moods of otherworldliness. This blurring between perspectives across time, inside and outside of the frame, between concrete (seen) reality and an otherworldly (unseen) plain, encourages us to reconsider our own understanding of the nature of reality.

A Ride Between Two Worlds

The first Tarkovsky film I saw was *Stalker* (1979), and it inspired me to move into film as a sound designer. One scene in particular from *Stalker* left me with a significant impression of how sound can influence our experience of the picture and evoke feelings of a world lingering beyond the frame.



Sequence from the ride into the Zone. From top-right clockwise: The Stalker, the writer, the industrial landscapes and the doctor. Stills from *The Stalker* (1979)

¹⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, *A Statement on Sound* (1928)
http://as.vanderbilt.edu/koepnick/M_f04/materials/presentations2/fritz_eisenstein.htm

This is the railway cart ride into The Zone; a 4-minute sequence near the beginning of the film showing the three main characters riding a small motorised railway cart into the zone. The scene consists of four shots that slowly drift between the anxious faces of the men and the passing landscape behind them. In the soundtrack we hear the metallic rhythms of the cart bumping and grinding along the track. As the journey continues a series of soft electronic sounds, like metallic coils, of unknown origin begin to become audible. At first we detect them as diegetic elements from within the picture, perhaps emanating from the carts rusty surfaces or drifting across the landscape as distant sounds. Gradually they grow in intensity, echoing in odd counterpoint to the steady rhythms of the cart. Slowly we begin to consider the origin of these sounds; they seem to linger outside the frame somewhere between sound and musical score. As the electronic texture continues to swell, so the sounds of the cart slowly change. The heavy weight of its metallic rhythm begins to strangely transform into new timbres that coalesce with the echoes of the electronic sounds. This new soundtrack of electronic tones and processed cart sounds continues until the men arrive at their destination. They have left a decaying civilization and are now in unknown territory, bound up in the enigmatic power of the zone.

Tarkovsky briefly describes the soundtrack of this sequence in an interview from 1979. It is interesting to note his intention to merge the music and sounds together to create an experience which the audience would not completely understand or be aware of:

It seemed to me that it could - that it must even - rely solely on sounds...But this music must be barely heard beneath the noise, in a way that the spectator is not aware of it. Moreover, I would like most of the noise and sound to be composed by a composer. In the film, for example, the three people undertake a long journey in a railway car. I'd like that the noise of the wheels on the rails not be the natural sound but elaborated upon by the composer with electronic music. At the same time, one mustn't be aware of music, nor natural sounds.¹⁵

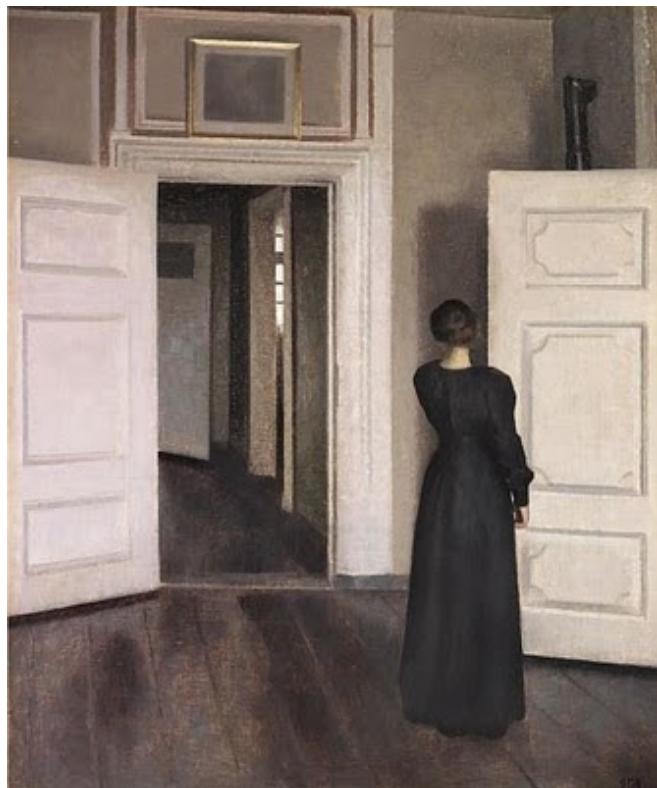
This scene exemplifies the way in which Tarkovsky often used sound throughout his career to serve his more metaphysical and spiritual lines of enquiry. Andrea Trappin in her inspiring essay *And Then There Was Sound: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky* (1992) talks about "sound's potential for ambiguity and abstraction" and how this is deployed by the director to evoke the existence of

¹⁵ Andrei Tarkovsky in interview with Tonino Guerra, 1979
(http://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/nostalghia.com/TheTopics/Tarkovsky_Guerra-1979.html)

unseen objects and to penetrate into the invisible spiritual world. Truppin writes: "Allowing a sound source to remain a figment of our imagination, mystifying rather than orienting, subverts sound's traditional role in film."¹⁶

Sound for Tarkovsky is a mysterious force; a device to help express different plains of reality - the inner caverns of the mind, the material world, nature and the spiritual plain. In film as in life it moves in mysterious ways. Like a gas, sound diffuses in and out of our field of vision, within and beyond the frame of the camera. In doing so it leads us to question the nature of our reality, of our very existence: Where are we? What force is at work here? All is not as it seems. Sound itself is both that of a physical body and of a spirit. Something of this and of another world.

Listening to Hammershøi



Interior by Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864 – 1916)

A few years ago while on a visit to Tate Modern I came across a painting by Jean Dubuffet called *the Busy Life*. Painted in 1953 and part of what the artist called his 'beaten pastes' series, *The Busy Life* is exactly what it says it is: a dizzying array of intersecting textures, shards of bright colour

¹⁶ Andrea Truppin, *And Then There Was Sound: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky* in *Sound Theory Sound Practice* (New York, Routledge: 1992) 234-248.

tussling in motion like the animated activity of everyday life. Abstract shapes reveal the contour lines of human figures and city buildings densely layered on top of one another, while jagged triangles and lumps of paint contort into a mesh of traffic and human life. Next to the painting hung an intriguing text written by Brian Eno:

Certain paintings make me imagine what they sound like as music. This painting does that for me. I see how everything layered and scraped away, figures emerge from the field of hyperactive mess, accidents get muddled up with intentions. I think of a dark, jagged African hip-hop, stray voices shouting in and out of the mix and a mosque with a bad PA system wailing in the background.¹⁷

A fews later I discovered that writer and musician David Toop had begun exploring the representation of sound and silence in paintings. This idea of imagining the sounds of a painting struck me as relevant for my exploration into film sound. The camera, like a painting, appears to contains the world within its frame. This world within implies a world outside, existing beyond the frame. At any given moment sound exists both inside and outside what we see. My research led me to the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864 – 1916) and his somber paintings of interior spaces. Of the many such works, one in particular caught my attention, a piece simply called Interior. It shows Hammershøi 's wife standing alone in a seemingly empty room looking out towards a corridor. Experiencing the painting as much with my ears as my eyes, I let my imagine drift to the sounds of the world inhabited by the woman...

It feels like a quiet space. The rooms appear clean and empty, sparsely furnished with high ceilings that suggest a bright reverberance. From somewhere far off we hear the sounds of a large grandfather clock echoing through the house. A closer listen would reveal the minute sonic details of the machine, each tick sounding different from the last. The house feels sonically magnified, as if microphones have been carefully hidden in every corner of the rooms. Here the subtle movements of its occupants sound with grand gestures. The creaking of expensive floorboards, the soft squeaking of doors and iron handles are all amplified by the rich acoustic of the interior space. The figure in the painting, her back to the viewer, peers down along the empty corridor. What has stroked her curiosity? Perhaps it is a murmur upstairs; the faint sound of a phantom presence roaming the empty bedrooms, the gentle,

17 Brian Eno on Jean Dubuffet's *The Busy Life*, 1953 - *The Bigger Picture*, Tate Modern, London

deliberating creak of wood or the soft rustling of a fabric, like sand, skimming along the floor. Perhaps it is a sound at the front door that draws her attention. The sound of horses hoofs and carriage on the hard stone road outside. Or the momentary flicker of hope upon catching the sound of footsteps outside, the possibility of a visitor to lighten her loneliness; a lonely existence with her silent husband who sits in meditation, absorbed in his work. Beyond the house I hear the busy activity of life in late 19th Century Copenhagen. The old quarter, the hustle and bustle of a local market, sellers calling out to pedestrians, passing carriages and the clammer of horses ferrying aristocrats and businessmen to the city centre. Life goes on. Inside time is still. The women goes about her daily tasks, stopping every so often. What was that? The sound of a presence. A murmur. A creak. The soft caressing sound of brush hairs on canvas.

PART TWO

The Sacrifice (1986) by Andrei Tarkovsky

A Soundtrack Analysis Towards Further Ideas

One has only to take away the sounds of the world that is reflected by the screen or fill this world with incidental sounds that do not exist for this precise image, or which are deformed so as not to correspond to this image, and the film will immediately find full voice.¹⁸

* * *

Overview

The Sacrifice was Andrei Tarkovsky's final work before he died of lung cancer in 1986. The film is set outside a small coastal village in Sweden, in and around a large family house. A television broadcast reports of an impending nuclear war. In the midst of a seemingly prolonged spiritual crisis Alexander, a university professor, retired actor and father of the family desperately prays to God for help. He promises to sacrifice all his worldly affiliations if, through divine intervention, the nuclear disaster can be averted. Alexander's friend Otto, the local postman and self-proclaimed collector of unexplainable events, instructs him to sleep with the mysterious Maria, one of the family servants who lives in the village. Maria, Otto tells him, is a witch "in the best possible sense" and can help him. The following morning after visiting Maria, Alexander wakes at his home to discover that all is at peace. Realising that nuclear war has been prevented, Alexander lures his family outside for a morning walk so that he may fulfill his promise to God. The final sequence of the film sees Alexander setting alight the family house, before his family returns and he is taken away in a hospital car.

As in much of Tarkovsky's previous work, *The Sacrifice* is a film that explores the crisis of faith in contemporary life and man's search for spirituality. Its poetic, immersive beauty and characteristically elliptical narrative offers viewers a range of different interpretations. For myself, I find that the core of the film is an exploration into the crisis of faith in an age of reason, technological progress and geopolitical war. An analysis of this interpretation and the wider

18 Andrei Tarkovsky. *Sculpting in Time* (University of Texas Press, 1989) 279.

philosophical ideas of the film lie beyond the scope of this paper. What does concern us here is how sound, so powerfully associative and yet at the same time so intrinsically ambiguous and elusive, is used by Tarkovsky as a device to express a sense of otherworldliness; the ineffable mysteries of nature and the spirit. It is the very properties and behavior of sound that allow it to so mysteriously evoke a mood of otherworldliness beyond the material order. This use of sound we find is an important stylistic and conceptual feature of all Tarkovsky's films. It is for this reason that I have selected *The Sacrifice* to form the nexus of my exploration into the ambiguity of sound.

Post-Production Sound

The soundtrack to *The Sacrifice* was created in the studio by Swedish sound designer and mixer Owe Svensson. All dialogue was re-recorded in post-production as ADR (Automated Dialogue Replacement), re-performed by the cast to picture. The foley elements – footsteps, movements and surface noises – were recorded by Svensson in the studio and his country house. For the sound effects Tarkovsky provided a list of some 250 sounds which Svensson sourced from published library recordings. These sounds, together with the foley and dialogue recordings were treated with effects and equalisation where needed and mixed together according to Tarkovsky's specific direction to form the completed soundtrack. Tarkovsky himself had his own particular approach to the practical as well as aesthetic treatment of film sound. An approach which remained fairly consistent throughout all his work. Tarkovsky preferred to concentrate on the image alone when shooting leaving Svensson to deal with the sound later in post-production.

By dismissing production sound altogether, Tarkovsky eliminated the possibility of sound interfering with the visual composition of the film, not to mention complicating the practical arrangements of any given setup. In doing so he was free to concentrate his efforts on working with the camera. This allowed him to capture sequences of action which, if he was using location sound recording, might prove problematic. An example of this are the many dialogue sequences in *The Sacrifice* which are presented in wide-shot, observing the characters from distance - a kind of visual composition akin to theatre. Conventionally the boom microphone would be positioned outside the frame, behind or along side the camera. This would capture all sounds from the visual perspective of the camera, responding naturally to the acoustic effects of the space and the position of the actors within. For greater clarity at such distances sound recordists would tend to use radio microphones pinned to the actors clothes, or conceal microphones in the room behind objects or furniture. Tarkovsky told Svensson early on that his principle during filming of *The Sacrifice* was that "his

focus was always on the picture while the sound comes later”¹⁹. In ignoring production sound, Tarkovsky committed himself to a complete re-rendering of all dialogue in post-production. Despite the challenges of capturing the correct performances in ADR, it did afford Svensson and Tarkovsky a greater degree of control over how they would treat the voices in post-production. This allowed them to treat the dialogue naturalistically, creating a convincing impression of the voices emanating from the space and responding to the actors movements. Or, to treat the dialogue in a more stylistic manner that would remove it from the space.

Throughout much of his film work, Tarkovsky makes extensive use of the space beyond the frame of the camera. These sounds often function to create a greater sense of place, allowing the director to create an expansive world that stretches out beyond the immediate environment of the characters onscreen. Often these sounds are not immediately recognisable, revealing themselves through their inherent morphology (e.g. overheard fighter jets) or through repetition over the course of the film (e.g. birds). Repeating such sounds allows Tarkovsky to setup an audiovisual logic unique to the world of the film. The ambiguity that is felt at the beginning becomes part of the language of the film that the audience is familiarised with over time.

In *The Sacrifice* Tarkovsky allows the peripheral offscreen world to impact upon the onscreen action. This is achieved through the careful use of sound. Specifically, this takes the form of vibrating (metallic) bodies onscreen. The revealing of these vibrations follows a specific audiovisual logic. First, we hear the vibrating sounds offscreen, that creates an uncertainty as to what the sounds are and where they are coming from. Next, the camera presents the vibrating objects, often slowly tracking round some other point in the space towards the objects. In the final phase, as the vibrating sounds continue, the actual sound event offscreen causing the vibrations is gradually revealed. These offscreen forces are often sounds with long attacks, that similarly confuse us as to their source and nature. Gradually they appear and we recognise them for what they are. The obvious example of this in *The Sacrifice*, are the fighter jets that fly overhead, causing the wine glasses in the room to vibrate. Another, more subtle use of external forces on local objects, is the ebb and flow of the wind that causes the panes of window glass in Little man's room to bend and creak. The external world impacting upon the onscreen world is a technique made possible through sound. It is something we find in Tarkovsky's other films, notably at the very beginning of *Stalker* where the bedside tray vibrates as the train outside passes by.

19 Owe Svensson Interview (<http://filmsound.org/articles/sacrifice.htm>)

The Voice: Introduction

It seemed...that her voice sounded quite different in the silvery blue of the night...loud, clear and gentle, it had, as it were, arches and curves; he believed he could see the voice and almost catch hold of it. Soon he had the sensation that it made an arch over his head and that he was standing directly beneath it.²⁰

Throughout *The Sacrifice* we hear a female voice calling from the distance. It is a repetitive, playfully melodic call, not too dissimilar to a kind of yodeling that wildly rises and falls in pitch. Almost like the mimicry of some kind of bird song. The physical location of this woman is never made exactly clear in the film, but the voice's particular timbre and quality of reverberence suggests that it is emanating from some distance away, somewhere in the offscreen space. A Swedish audience might recognise this kind of voice and identify it as that of a woman herding sheep or cows, that are grazing across the fields that surround the family house. Nothing is certain though, nothing is made visible. And so throughout the film the actual origin of the voice is shrouded in mystery; its material form restricted to speculation.

The Voice: Across Time and Space

The ambiguity of the voice is heightened when the film moves from the reality of the narrative in the present tense to the dream or apocalyptic vision space of Alexander. As in *The Mirror* (1975), Tarkovsky underlines such shifts by changing the image from colour to black and white. This helps cue our awareness of a new space, governed perhaps by different laws and functioning in a different way. Having situated the voice within a particular space, we might suspect that the woman's voice would become inaudible the moment the geography of the film is changed. However in many significant sequences throughout film this does not happen. Instead the voice is heard as a kind of sonic transition between the two worlds, continuing unchanged in the new space. We first hear this at the beginning of the film after Alexander's monologue underneath the trees.

20 Joseph Roth, *Weights and Measures* (Peter Owen, 2002) 34.



The woman's voice is first heard outside during Alexander's opening monologue. After his sudden collapse, the scene changes to the dilapidated courtyard. All the while the voice continues sounding.

Still from *The Sacrifice* (1986)

The woman's voice is introduced as a part of the natural countryside soundscape. A voice that some might suspect is herd-calling. We detect it from far off in the distance. Its angelic, free-flight quality attracts our attention but we find nothing out of the ordinary with it. Little Man, Alexander's son, jumps out and surprises his father causing him to collapse and enter into what seems like an apocalyptic vision or dream. With a crash of thunder and an eerily sustained rumble, the scene suddenly changes. We are now looking at a black and white image of a brick tunnel flanked by two staircases that opens out on to a dilapidated courtyard. We continue to hear the low rumble of the thunder together with the woman's voice as the camera slowly pans down. Suddenly there are doubts about our previous assertions concerning the material presence of the voice in the countryside. This new sound-image juxtaposition suggests the voice has moved from the diegetic to the non-diegetic acoustic space. Through such a transformation the voice becomes imbued with a magic that permits it to move seamlessly across time and space, a pattern that will reoccur in other parts of the film. This grants the voice a kind of omnipotence, lying somewhere between the objective plain of the world and the subjective space of Alexander's mind.

The Voice: Listening Perspectives

Doubts about what we see and hear occur frequently in *The Sacrifice*. The constant shifting of the voice between the diegetic and non-diegetic space provides clues as to who could be hearing what and any particular time. In the dream sequences in which the voice feels clearly non-diegetic we assume that the voice is functioning more as abstract sound/music outside the hearing of any one character. But if we consider the dream sequences from Alexander's perspective - as *his* dream, *his* sound world - then the voice may become more immanent and private to just him. We notice that

the voice is only ever present in sequences of the film which feature either Alexander alone or Alexander with Otto. Perhaps Otto, in being in touch with the more supernatural elements is also in touch with Alexander's subconscious stirrings. His aches, pains, hopes and faith.

In the diegetic realm we are led to believe that all characters within the story can hear the voice. But the prevalence of the voice as a natural part of the soundscape doesn't draw any notable attention from anyone. And yet, there are three important instances where Otto and Alexander become visibly aware of the voice. The first take places just after Otto has finished telling the family a strange tale about a woman and her son. As he walks towards the window the offscreen voice of the woman is heard. Soon after this sound Otto falls to the ground. The impression one has in this sequence is that the voice seemingly causes Otto to fall down. The second occasion happens during the dream sequence in Alexander's house when Otto instructs Alexander that he go and lie with Maria. As the two men sit talking in a nervous whisper, the distant voice of a woman is heard by Otto. He asks Alexander if he heard anything. Alexander replies no. Was it only Otto who heard the voice? Why not Alexander? The third occasion occurs when Alexander leaves the house, riding Otto's bicycle across the deserted countryside. As he passes along the lane he falls off the bicycle. He gets up, perhaps realizing the absurdity of his actions and turns round as if to give up.



Hearing the voice: Two instances. [Left] On his way to Maria's house Alexander falls from his bicycle. Disgruntled and tired, he turns round and decides to give up and return home. Suddenly the voice of woman echoing across the fields is heard. He stops to listen. [Right] Otto suddenly hears a distant voice. He asks Alexander if he heard it. He replies that he heard nothing. Still from *The Sacrifice* (1986)

Suddenly he stops. The distant sound of a woman's voice echoes across the land. It seems to be speaking to Alexander, or at the very least he is acknowledging its presence. Is it asking him to reconsider giving up? That despite all obstacles – the land, the laws of the physical world, the apparent irrationality of what he thinks his actions can achieve – he must continue onwards to

Maria and their union. Only through faith in such union can he and the world be saved. Is the voice actually sounding from within the landscape? If not is it a voice inside Alexander's head that we the audience are involuntarily eavesdropping on? Or, is the voice simply a sonic metaphor for man's faith, his desperate longing for hope in an impersonal world? This kind of trickery where the origin of sounds and the listening spaces they inhabit are manipulated forms a central part of the film's audiovisual language. This is perhaps most acutely represented in the enigmatic presence of the woman's voice.

The Voice: Between Two Worlds

The equivocal quality of the voice in *The Sacrifice* is not new. Its very much part of a storytelling tradition in which the presence of disembodied voices is used to express the emotional narrative of a character. This commonly serves to render a character's psychological state intelligible to an audience by externalizing her thoughts, memories, reveries, longings, angst, troubles and confusions. In cinema perhaps the most obvious use of the voice in this sense is the voice-over; a device that grants us access to the private thoughts that make up a character's internal monologue. Another common use is the all-seeing, omnipresent voice of a narrator; an objective voice outside of the film, or possibly the voice of a character involved in the story.

There is however, yet another, more enigmatic use of the voice in film that lingers in the region between the subjective space of the mind and the external, objective world. An unsettling place of confusion, disbelief, hallucination and mental trickery. Where individual control becomes vulnerable to the influence of outside forces. Where all personal experience is cast into doubt. All may not be what it seems: "Inexplicable, but true". This discomfort has been richly mined throughout the world through tales of ghosts, haunted houses, phantom spirits and the supernatural.

Evolution has sensitized human beings to respond to sounds that cannot be easily identified. The fear that we might experience under such conditions has been creatively exploited in film. Nowhere is this carried out more with such precision than in horror films. From the start, the very positioning of the audience outside of the film world observing the emotional narrative of a character setups an ambiguity of the senses. This is particularly the case in response to sound phenomena, where the physical presence of a sound-source is visually concealed. Under such conditions the audible presence of a disembodied voice can lead to questions concerning its point of origin: Is it a mental voice inside the head of a character? Is it an actual voice in the environment outside the character?

Or is it neither, but rather a metaphoric expression of mood between the emotions of the character and the atmosphere of place?

One of my favourite British films is Jack Clayton's fantastically atmospheric horror *The Innocents* from 1961. One night while quietly reading next to the fire Miss Giddens, the newly appointed governess, begins to hear strange voices from somewhere. Her curiosity beckons her to the stairs which she slowly ascends. As she climbs up, step by step, forward along the corridor, the voices intensify into a cacophonic whirlwind of whispers, hysterical laughter and shouts. The beginning of this sequence places the voices, quite naturalistically, somewhere within the physical space of the house. But as the tension in the scene slowly increases, a dramatic crescendo of sound is reached. The kind of extreme layering and treatment of sound heard here feels more a part of the expressionist language and atmosphere of the film than anything naturalistic. This sequence illustrates the ambiguity of the voice in how it is used. Could these offscreen voices actually be emanating from inside the house? Or are they the voices in her head? A voice of secrets, mystery, horrors of the past forcing their way into Miss Giddens' conscious awareness and crippling her with mental anguish. Perhaps they are neither of these, but something closer to a sense of dark atmosphere that inhabits the house.

The woman's voice in *The Sacrifice* similarly occupies a place between Alexander's mind and the world around him. This raises questions concerning the auditory experience of him and the film's characters. Who is hearing what? Is it of reality or of something else? Could Alexander be experiencing the woman's voice as an ongoing auditory hallucination? Alexander's string of visions and dreams suggests a singular subjective journey of one character throughout the film. This supports the theory that what we hear in the soundtrack might actually be part of his own hallucination. A purely subjective perspective. At the beginning of his book *Hallucinations* neurologist Oliver Sacks discusses the difficulty in defining what a hallucination is:

Precise definitions of the word 'hallucination' still vary considerably, chiefly because it is not always easy to discern where the boundary lies between hallucination, misperception, and illusion. But generally, hallucinations are defined as precepts arising in the absence of any external reality - seeing things or hearing things that are not there.²¹

21 Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (Vintage, 2013) I x.

The consistent spatio-temporal ambiguity of the woman's voice suggests in Alexander a crossing of boundaries between hallucination, misperception and illusion. This complexity is intensified during Alexander's apocalyptic visions when the voice becomes a kind of musical accompaniment - not merely an article of hallucination but material that is part of the very fabric of the world and his mind.

The Voice: Revelation

Owe Svensson, the man credited with creating the film's soundtrack, revealed in an interview that the woman's voice was from an old wax cylinder recording of cow herding calls. These were treated with varying degrees of reverberation in post-production. Perhaps for Swedish viewers the woman's voice was more easily recognisable as herd calling. For others it maintains more of its mystery. I believe the exact meaning of the voice in the film remains open to interpretation, though Svensson does provide an explanation worth mentioning here in full:

The important thing was that there was this woman and she comes into the film quite early and then she enters the dream and that represents a connection with human emotions which of course [is] a contrast to the threat of war. Both Otto - the actor Allan Edwall - and Alexander are in contact with her Otto seems to receive her call when he suddenly collapses on the floor while walking through the house telling strange tales. One never really discovers what is going on. Somebody asked me long ago if this was a contact with God but I did not want to answer because I do not know - I do not think so.²²

While it remains true that the source of the woman's voice is never explicitly presented in the film – the visible presence of a woman (or women, for could it not also be the sound of different women at different times?) - Tarkovsky does provide us with a few clues concerning the voice. The first of these occurs during Alexander's conversation with Otto outside at the beginning of the film. It is during these moments that we hear the sounds of cows, followed by the faint metallic rattling of cowbells.

22 Owe Svensson Interview (<http://filmsound.org/articles/sacrifice.htm>)



Maria on her bicycle. In the background we notice the cows and the tiny figure of the cow herder.

All the while we hear her voice in the soundtrack. Still from *The Sacrifice* (1986)

Two hours later at the end of the film Tarkovsky returns to the same location. The loud burning of the house is suddenly muted as the scene changes to the idyllic countryside where we hear the woman's voice again. The scene cuts to Maria riding her bicycle and looking into the distance at the ambulance car slowly approaching. In the background we see for the first time the cows, and in amongst them a momentary glimpse of a single figure. It is this tiny figure that we assume is the cow herder and the source of the voice. And so it is that in the final few shots of the film Tarkovsky seemingly reveals the solitary body to which the voice belongs to: sound finally rendered visible; word made flesh and a return to the material world.

Nature: Rumble, Wind and Water

It was like wind, far away, but with a depth like a rumbling of the earth. Thinking that it might be in himself, a ringing in his ears, Shingo shook his head.²³

In *The Sacrifice* the sound of low rumble, wind and water feature prominently. These sounds are used as components of the natural soundscape that the film is set in and as a sonic device to mark changes in time and space. Significantly, the low rumble of the thunder and the fighter jets passing overhead play an important role in transitioning between reality and Alexander's vision states. In each case, an event first occurs, the clap of thunder or the screech of fighter jets that produces a low

²³ Yasunari Kawabata, *The Sound of the Mountain* (Vintage, 1996) 122.

sustained rumble. This extended rumble (artificially treated in the studio) continues over the change in image from the colour space of reality to the black and white imagery of the vision, smoothly guiding the audience into the new space. In doing so it moves effortlessly from a recognisable element within the diegesis, to a dark rumbling drone that envelops the sound space. Its low-register tone helps to evoke a dark, forbidding atmosphere that feels in keeping with the apocalyptic imagery of the vision and Alexander's mental angst. The movement of the sound from reality into vision very much mirrors a similar treatment of the woman's voice. The result is a profound audiovisual experience in which the sustained sounds of the voice and rumble – one high, one low – juxtaposed with the slow panning, slow-motion black and white imagery come together to create an alluring otherworldly impression of civilisation's destruction.

Wind is an elusive force of nature. It defines itself by the environment it comes into contact with; the shape of the land, the forest, bushes and vegetation. It is never really heard itself. Rather its audible impact on the surrounding environment is noticeable at different moments in the film. The wind blowing through the trees at the beginning of the film often reminds me of the remarkable wind captured blowing across the countryside in *The Mirror* (1975). Both evoke a feeling of man's vulnerability in the face of the elements; his inherent weakness in the presence of such an impersonal and uncompromising force. And yet its sheer omnipotent power has filled men with an unshakeable feeling of sublime awe. Elsewhere in *The Sacrifice* the wind penetrates the interior of the family house. This is felt most clearly in Little Man's room. Here Tarkovsky creates a quiet atmosphere of tranquility through the careful control of sound and light. Tiny audible creakings of the window pane motion in unison with the flickering of the sun's light, as the curtains gently blow back and forth. This rhythmic movement of sound and light identifies Little Man's room as a place of great calmness; a delicate sanctuary of peace and hope for the future.

Water is a consistent feature of Tarkovsky's soundtracks. Especially trickling and dripping water (*The Sacrifice*, *Nostalgia*, *Stalker*). It is a life-giving force, always in motion like the flux of life, channeling through the arteries of dirt and vegetation and between the neglected, decaying artifacts of civilisation – coins, garments, boxes, guns. In *The Sacrifice* both trickling and dripping water feature at particular moments when we enter into Alexander's visions. Similar to the way it is used in previous films, water is often first introduced in the soundtrack before it is revealed with the camera. Momentarily devoid of visual verification, the dripping or trickling water sounds feel somewhat surreal, out of place and lead to a sense of disorientation concerning the geography of the scene. This is particularly the case during the first apocalyptic vision. Afterwards, such treatment of

water is recognizable, and we become more familiar with the range of essential ingredients that make up Tarkovsky's sonic palette.

Resonating Bodies

Throughout his career Tarkovsky had a fondness for objects that resonated – metals, glass, china, bells. The sound of such resonating bodies might be described as ethereal. The ability to produce a discernible pitch marks such sounds out as being of some significance; possessing a musical quality that imbues the scene with an aura of otherworldliness, elevated above the quotidian artifacts of the environment. We might associate such resonant sonorities with those commonly heard in rituals and holy ceremonies; the invocation of deities, prayers and the sacred marking of holy rites in time with bells and gongs.

Perhaps one of the most well known sequences where these sounds are used, is when the fighter jets first pass over the house in *The Sacrifice*. As is common practice with Tarkovsky, we first hear the sound and then see it, thereby either confirming or denying our initial responses to how we think the world operates and by what laws. The gentle chiming of vibrating glass is first heard, followed by a low rumble rising in intensity. Julia, one of the house maids, is shown looking upwards, suggesting the sound is emanating from above, possibly chandeliers. The camera however objects, and instead gestures down to a reveal a tray of wine glasses rattling together. In Maria's house, a similar array of vibrating bodies is first heard preempting the arrival of fighter jets flying above. The repetition of this phenomenon across the film sets up an association between the uncanny presence of vibrating objects (the artifacts of civilisation, or perhaps the jewellery of Western decadence) and the fighter jets that usher in nuclear war and the apocalyptic end of days. The sound of the fragile bodies of china, glass and metal come to signal that something (familiar) is about to happen.

Like leaves blowing in the wind, objects that vibrate are under the influence of a greater, invisible force - nature, pure energy. The effect is obvious but the cause less so. The first instance of the fighter jets is cloaked in momentary confusion. This is how I remember feeling the first time I saw the film. I impulsively retreated to what I knew - the threatening sound of an earthquake that I remembered from my life in Japan. Only later once the tail of the jet engine sound had reached my ears, did I register the slow creeping sensation of war and fear. This is life. Through the careful manipulation of sound and images, this also, is film. As Robert Bresson once said in an interview:

“We must let the mystery remain. Life is mysterious, and we must see that on screen. The effects of things must always be shown before their causes, like in real life.” Tarkovsky was assuredly in command at mastering such mystery in his films.

The Ringing Telephone

Finally let us briefly consider the engima of the ringing telephone at the end of *The Sacrifice*. The moment occurs during the dramatic house burning sequence as Alexander's family return from their morning walk. Amidst the cacophonous roar of fire, crackling wood, breaking glass and shakuhachi music, suddenly the faint ringing sound of a telephone from inside the house is heard. No sooner do we recognise it as a telephone than it has quickly been consumed in the violence of the flames. Does this seemingly random sound event bear any significance on the end of the film? I believe it does. Like the birthday mail he receives at the beginning of the film, the telephone represents Alexander's immediate (telecommunication) and historical connection to the social order; work, academia and his past life in the theatre. The ringing telephone in the fire is a symbolic as well as literal event, that expresses the severing of ties between Alexander and his social and professional life. Retrospectively, the significance of this is all the more profound when we contrast it with how Alexander had earlier woken up and quite casually exchanged a few words with his colleague on the telephone before beginning final preparations for the fire. The audible telephone ringing represents the material world's final, desperate attempt to bring Alexander back from the brink of self-annihilation.

CONCLUSION

The Mystery

In every lovely line, in every lovely scene, in every piece of beauty, there is a mystery that goes beyond what we can see with our human eyes. And it's very important that we keep this sense of mystery otherwise we cut off the outreach, we cut off the vast extent, we cut off the joy of our human existence.²⁴

Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on a significant bases of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations.²⁵

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Cinema and the Imagination

The poetic beauty of sound lies in its natural state of ambiguity, which provokes the sensation of one coming into contact with the mysteries of life. The cinema provides the conditions – the ideal sonic setting – that help promote such encounters with the mysteries. Nowhere do we listen and hear the way we do in the cinema.

Cinema. Black cocoon, the cave of forgotten dreams, the space we sit in, together, alone. Our eyes, our ears, sounds and images. A truly mesmerizing listening experience. It nourishes deep listening in a special kind of way. Film sound evokes a sense of mood, heightens a character's psychology or adds weight and meaning to the mundane activity of normal life - a certain quality of footsteps, the placement of offscreen environmental sounds, the minute audible artifacts of everyday objects, surfaces and fabrics. Cinema is a cocoon of sound, hermetically sealed off from the distractions of the outside world. It promotes a heightened private yet strangely shared experience of and sensitivity to a plethora of sonic material. A sensitivity and attention that illuminates the everyday

24 Rollo May interview from Jan Troell, *Land of Dreams* (Sweden 184 minutes 1988) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi9NAzMJbds>)

25 August Strindberg, *A Dream Play* (Theatre Communications Group, 1901) 5.

items of life with a special weight and significance.

Robert Bresson, Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky. These are the kind of directors whose films I find mark me with an extreme sensitivity to sound long after I've finished watching them. As if on leaving the cinema my ears have been cleansed, reawakened, reborn; encountering the world for the very first time. Every footstep, door creak, every passing car and train now suddenly resonates with some mysterious meaning; each individual object existing in its own particular domain of time and space. The everyday ignited by the imagination become divine.

Sound stretches outside the frame of the camera, dissipating beyond the flat screen and out into the air that surrounds the audience. We see synchronous sound - the natural laws of causality that form the fabric of our understanding of reality - the movement of people, dialogue, objects coming into contact with surfaces, passing traffic, doors opening, books closing and their sonic artifacts. But the non-synchronous elements of the environment - the weather, the terrain, the audible objects concealed within it - these remain invisible, lacking visual verification as to their being in time and space.

It is sound detached from a visually identifiable source that inspires our sensibility towards sound in film, that gives flight to our reveries and our imagination and underpins our poetics of an audiovisual cinematic language. The absence of a sound source on the visual plain creates a cognitive gap, into which we the audience, riding on the wings of our own imagination, enter into. The exercising of our imaginations in this way is the investment of our individual selves into the stories of the world. It is the personal discoveries we make on this journey that are our reward:

That's the key to all film for me—both editorial and sound. You provoke the audience to complete a circle of which you've only drawn a part. Each person being unique, they will complete that in their own way. When they have done that, the wonderful part of it is that they re-project that completion onto the film. They actually are seeing a film that they are, in part, creating: both in terms of juxtaposition of images and, then, juxtaposition of sound versus image and, then, image following sound, and all kinds of those variations.²⁶

26 Sound Doctrine: An Interview with Walter Murch (<http://www2.yk.psu.edu/~jmj3/murchfq.htm>)

A Cinema of Atmosphere

A few years ago Kim Cascone, electronic musician and assistant sound editor on David Lynch's *Wild At Heart* (1990), wrote about his experience working with Lynch and how the director's treatment of sound was something Cascone had discovered in Tarkovsky's films. He wrote:

I detected a sound field surrounding the screen similar to the ones involved by Lynch. A layering of unidentifiable sounds defined the space around the screen and deftly drifted to various parts of the theater [...] Foggy off-screen evocations of a type of space always existing beyond our periphery, just out of reach or dismissed as background noise.²⁷

Tarkovsky thought of his cinema as sculpting in time. The manipulation of time and space, light and sound would work together in creating a unique immersive universe. *Immersion* is what Cascone alludes to in his description of how Lynch treats sound in a similarly atmospheric way to Tarkovsky. While modern sound technology such as Dolby Atmos helps to create an immersive sensory experience, the cinematic immersion that we find in Lynch and Tarkovsky's work is not so much an immersion of the senses, but an immersion of the mind, the imagination. The mono soundtracks of films like *The Sacrifice* and Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1979) demonstrate that immersive experience is not dependent on the radical spatialisation of sound. Rather, its efficacy lies in creatively exploiting the ambiguous potential of sound to excite the imagination and tap into the mysteries of life.

That is what we must retain - the mystery, the effect before the cause. For life is a great mystery, the void stretching before us. And it is this that provides us with the experience, knowledge and hope that makes life worth living.

27 Kim Cascone, *Viral Space: The Cinema of Atmosphere* (and/OAR, 2003)

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Filmography

The Sacrifice

(Sweden 1986 145 mins.)

w./d. Andrei Tarkovsky ph. Sven Nykvist m. (from Bach amongst others) ed. Andrei Tarkovsky, Michal Leszczlowski s. Owe Svensson