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Hearing loss: Theoretical absence and visual bullying

MARK EVANS

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

BRUCE JOHNSON

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF TURKU
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

ABSTRACT

The origins of Anglophone cultural theory in the mid-twentieth century were predominantly scopocentric, partly because of its epistemological history, and for the cognate reason that visual tropes are so deeply embedded in the English language. As this scopocentricity comprehensively colonised cultural research, studies of non-visual practices and texts were both marginalised and deformed. The discipline of film studies was dominated by attention to visual theoretical models, centred for example on “the gaze”. Studies of film sound have burgeoned in recent times, but often have been hobbled by inappropriately scopic theoretical models, or they have eschewed these models by withdrawing into more purely empirical approaches, such as genre studies or atomised “case studies”. While disclosing what E.P. Thompson called “the poverty of theory”, such studies have often found themselves in a conceptual no-man’s land. Without proposing a return to theoretical “master narratives” which compromise the integrity of the text, we argue that studies of film sound should build on the work of scholars like Philip Tagg to develop further theoretical modelling based on the specificity of sound and its deployment in film.

KEYWORDS: theory; film sound studies; case study.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt popular music studies have achieved a great deal in thirty years, setting up numerous disciplines and sub-disciplines with rigorous intellectual tropes. It is from one of those disciplines, namely film sound studies, that this paper was birthed. However, it is not concerned with film sound *per se*, but rather with observations about the theoretical directions that film sound, and by implication, popular music studies, have followed. In reflecting on thirty years of academic enquiry in film sound studies, what becomes apparent is both the loss of theoretical foundations in some areas, and a reliance on visually constructed theory in others. The latter is not surprising given that the rise of theory was based on scopic models of knowledge, and could be considered a further tactic in distancing the intellectual from the intractable Other, developed because of the increasing auralisation of social practices and interactions, through which control over that distance was lost. Acoustic properties are characterised by leakages within and between material and intellectual spaces. The more powerful and pervasive those orders become, the more desperately is experience modelled scopically, and the urge to theorise the acoustic is, like the score, an attempt to deprive the acoustic of that constitutive essence that threatens discursive control. That is, the rise of theory is the latest manoeuvre in the war waged on the sonic by the scopic for control of the meanings of culture. This paper argues for a return to theoretical endeavour in popular music studies. But rather than depending once again on scopic frameworks, IASPM and popular music studies generally need to birth our own sonic theories that are wholly relevant to our disciplines.

LOSS OF THEORY

While film sound studies are now clearly established as an active international discipline, there is a need to take stock of previous approaches and examine the current sound of film music scholarship. That sound, this paper argues, is an immanently deconstructionist one. The majority of current scholarship analyses film sound via one of a few descriptors; nationality, genre or historical agendas to name a few. And while the scholarship has moved away from constantly defending the field in which it exists, the predominance of analytical material has resulted in a detached, non-referential body of research. To use a musical analogy, we have become treble-heavy, focusing only on melodic contours – those more easily construed – with no regard for the structural elements that lie underneath the melody and allow it to take shape. What is needed, we would argue, is a return to theoretical baselines, similar to those promulgated in the early years of the discipline, yet rather than importing theoretical paradigms from other disciplines and especially from scopocentric models, perhaps it is time to consider more broadly where the theoretical leitmotif of film sound studies is going to come from?

While this paper remains firmly a work-in-progress designed to stimulate conversation, debate and contemplation, it draws its origins from Mark Evans's involvement with the *Encyclopedia of film music and sound* (Evans forthcoming). This project,

a two-volume encyclopaedia, has given many of us involved in film sound studies pause to consider the shape, direction and focus of our now well-established discipline. What became apparent to the Advisory Editors was the difficulty we had in designing a taxonomy for volume one, the volume dealing with theoretical concerns central to the discipline. The other volume, however, essentially about the how and the who, was much easier to delineate. As a discipline, we are good (and getting better all the time) at talking about the how of the industrial process. We have even begun to consider genre and, through more recent scholarship, notions of regionality, nationality and race. Yet many of these terms remain bounded by visual tropes. Genres, for example, are visually delineated for the most part. Where are the sonic genres of film? Even the musical film, perhaps the strongest candidate for such categorisation, is discussed and dissected according to notions of spectacle; that is, visually. Within film sound studies we have struggled to build one, homogenised, linear progression of theory. We have rather, largely out of necessity, utilised a multifarious, fragmented, multi-discipline approach drawing from various theoretical realms. As we shall document later, in the theoretical battle between the sonic and the visual, the latter remains firmly dominant.

A conference, and conference theme, such as that provided here in South Africa, gives one the opportunity to think in broader historical strokes. What became apparent in doing so was that film music/sound studies actually began with theoretical concerns. So in very clear ways we have made moves away from these initial leanings. That may well be fine, but it is important to understand why, and what we have replaced them with.

What of early scholarship? Even the briefest consideration reveals that many of the earliest theorists in film music were mainly concerned with the impact of sound, and whether sound would in fact ruin the purity of the cinematic art form. Indeed the introduction of speech, sound synchronisation and the like, was continually more contentious than the nature of the music or sound itself. Here we are particularly thinking of the Russian theorists as well as Hungarian Balázs¹ and others. As we will discuss below, this fear and condemnation of sonicity theoretically led to the enforcement of scopocentric ideals, a hierarchy that still prevails today. Of course in the more purely sonic realm, there was Adorno and Eisler's treatise on film music, *Composing for the films* (1947). Despite its uncompromising and blunt assessment of film underscore, as Binns (2009, p. 731) points out, the volume "did not spur on a wave of responses or provoke more critically considered scholarship in the decades following its publication". This lack of engagement and critical discourse within the discipline is, sadly, a continuing characteristic.

Jumping forward, and post-synch sound theorists, mainly in the 1970s, finally began to acknowledge sound as equal with the image track. With that acknowledgement came the ensuing concentration on sound's influence over our cinematic experience. Christian Metz (1982) became particularly concerned with how we experience sound (a discussion still important today). For Metz, sound as socially constructed was a perceptual object, thus perception was theoretically important. Mary Ann Doane's work covered several theoretical regions, mainly the threat to

unification that came with sound, but also she was first to theorise the spatial relationships at work in cinema, and their gendered biases (see, for instance, Doane 1980). And her work took place before the current proliferation of individualised 5.1 (or 7.1, or 10.1) channel viewing environments. Yet today spatialisation theory remains so undeveloped it is hard to have a conversation about. Graeme Harper (2009, p. 6) notes that:

Listening, in the case of the visual media, also includes the ‘hearing’ of the visual – by which is meant that [sic] the positioning of sound in the temporal and spatial worlds of the image. The image then asks the audience, both viewer and listener, to place it in conjunction with the acoustic realm, with a more or lesser degree of mutual occupation. And this acoustic realm is not on a single plane or related in only one way to the listener.

We find it curious that theory around reception, particularly our physical reception to sonic images, so crucial to early film sound theorists, is so absent today, despite the fact that our reception of audio-visual texts is going through its most tumultuous upheaval since the introduction of synchronised sound.

There obviously have been other theoretical voices in the discipline, especially the likes of Michel Chion (1994) and Phillip Tagg. The latter’s work in musematic analysis usefully allows for the identification of musical signifiers, which in turn can lead to theorisations and observations based between different musicians, different texts, or even culturally similar phenomena (see Tagg 2009). And even through his keynote address at the IASPM 2011 conference (“Caught on the back foot: Musical structure, ethnicity and class”, subsequently revised and published in Tagg 2011), Tagg has reminded us that popular descriptors of music are required. Moreover, music remains a cross-domain phenomenon and thus we need to be able to refer to other structures (be they dance, space or whatever) in order to adequately analyse it. The ability to do so relies heavily on theoretical models that are robust enough, and *sonic* enough, to allow such interdisciplinarity.

RISE OF THE CASE STUDY

I [Evans] have previously documented what I see as the proliferation of “case study” material within film sound studies (Evans 2007). One need only look through the latest anthologies in the discipline for proof that this form, above all else, dominates the scholarly landscape. Perhaps there is nothing wrong with this; perhaps it is evidence of an established discipline. I must confess culpability myself, as the series editor for an eight volume series largely based on generic case study material. Yet the call is there for authors to contribute more than mere analytical detail, and to connect their work to a broader theoretical canvas. However, none chooses to do so. What marks out recent scholarship is absence – the absence of theoretical baselines that would allow the discipline greater interdisciplinary strength. It is curious that we so often implore students to ground themselves in relevant theoretical con-

cerns, yet constantly find ourselves directing them back to the 1970s and 1980s to find such grounding. The more we direct students to be theoretically grounded the more they “observe” it is difficult to be so.

Perhaps, though, the whole tenor of this paper is wrong and film sound studies have always been weighted towards the case study. In weighing this up we went back to Weis and Belton’s seminal 1985 collection: *Film sound: Theory and practice*. In this, still, essential anthology, Claudia Gorbman (1985) provided an annotated bibliography of film sound studies. If we dissect this bibliography we find the following statistics: of the 195 articles/books listed, 86 of them (that is, 44%) are classified as “Theory and Aesthetics”; 21% are “Analyses and Case Studies”; 19% “History Style and Technology”; and 16% “General Technology”. In other words, theoretical discussions constitute more than double any other category of entry. And in these descriptors, decided by Gorbman, she has placed those articles “whose emphasis on the technical or pragmatic outweigh their theoretical interest” (ibid., p. 428) within the non-theoretical delineation. Film sound studies have changed, the focus has shifted away from the theoretical.

Once again, taking a broader brush stroke might reveal some of the possible reasons for the proliferation of case-study material. Many of the tertiary institutions (both private and public) around the world devoted to film sound studies are predominantly practical. Students become skilled in the craft and expertise of film sound creation. While some contextualisation and theory are obviously useful, the bulk of their time is spent analysing examples and applying creative ideas. Detailed analytical material is thus at home in contemporary pedagogical environments. In a sense, well-written case studies become the perfect lesson plans. Students are happy, so publishers are happy and thus forces conspire to propagate more of the same. Of course this is inexorably linked to pressures within academia to publish, meet research targets, and generate all-important research money. Guaranteed publication of individual case study material becomes the easiest way to satisfy this employment requirement.

One should also acknowledge the role of technology in the (mass) consumption of the case study approach. The change from “paper-only” analysis, often conducted in real-time, to a technological analysis – involving stop, start, replay, rewind and ever more impressive tools for sonic isolation – is a considerable one. Furthermore, we might postulate that “paper-only” approaches lent themselves somewhat naturally to more theoretical musings. Even if the idea of academic with pen in hand, clean paper in front and cigar in mouth is a romantic one – it is also one that we might (re)discover does allow for a certain thoughtfulness in approach. Nonetheless, technology has already contributed enormously to the shift towards case study analysis. The move to greater interactive and multimedia-type publishing will only further heighten this. The ability to click on a soundbyte, manipulate its sonic properties, while simultaneously watching the vision that would accompany it may well supersede our desire to critically evaluate the structures underlying our discipline.

SCOPIC OVER SONIC, AND OTHER PROBLEMS WITH THEORY

We are not asserting “blindly” here that theory holds all the answers, or is without fault of its own. Indeed, many of the problems associated with theory have revolved around its colonising, consuming, dogmatic application. One need not recall too far to remember a time when the actuality of the text as a social production was deformed in the interests of a “theory”. The only point of interest to be found in a literary work was to confirm (rarely if ever to test) a theoretical presupposition. The subjects therefore tended to become an abstract homogenised mass. This is not something to aspire to again.

Furthermore, Bruce Johnson (2009) has noted that the obsession with theory is a suggestive intensification of a specularisation of knowledge that is built into the English language itself and, this paper suggests, a reaction to the “aural renaissance” that announced the modern democratisation of culture. This prompts the question as to just how useful “theory”, as currently understood and deployed, is in the study of a cultural field so pervaded by sonic experience. Theory arises from, and operates most persuasively, within a scopic field. Yet the wholesale importation of cultural theory from visual into sonic space has, for example, produced serious yet authoritative deformations of the character and meaning of popular cultural practices and artefacts like music and film.

Both culturally and physiologically, sound constitutes a distinctive phenomenology which is scarcely tractable to scopocentric models of analysis, tending to sabotage the various quasi-positivistic categorisations upon which theory rests. Sound in the contemporary world confounds distinctions which are deployed by power blocs to preserve their hegemony. It blurs boundaries between public and private, mind and body, objective and subjective, art and nature, aesthetics and sociology. Acoustic orders are characterised by leakages within and between material and intellectual spaces. Throughout the twentieth century these orders became more pervasive and powerful, while theory primarily modelled culture as visual. The urge to theorise popular culture is perhaps to miss one of its distinguishing features, as well as the constitutive essence of sound.

Rather than abandoning theory though, in light of these leakages and this general liminality, shouldn't we, particularly those in IASPM conferences, particularly those in film sound studies, or popular music studies, be seeking to theorise the sonic, not in reaction to the visual, but as independent cultural phenomena? In doing so we will activate richer discourses than even those afforded by the visual and the gaze. Sonicity has, and has long had, a resistance to scopocentric theorisation but that is not to say it has resistance to theorisation at all. In fact, it might be the opposite that rings true. Johnson (2009) notes that sounding and hearing constitute a distinctive phenomenology which are, finally, dangerously intractable to scopocentric models of analysis. Once released, however, sound passes beyond control. It floods *external* space, and *internally* the physiological relationship constructed is decisively different from visual processing. In particular sonority destabilises the distinction between cognition and biology, culture and nature.

CONSIDERING A FUTURE

Obviously the easier part of this paper is documenting the lack of sonically based theory in the discipline of film sound studies (and perhaps popular music studies more widely). What is harder, and remains still to be done, is to begin conceptualising this new theoretical terrain. Where, in fact, might new theoretical discussions come from? The answer to that question is no doubt multifarious, but we would suggest a couple of possible entry points. The first would be to recognise the importance of new technologies in analysing a technological medium. The very nature of these new technological tools might open up new analytical methods and theoretical underpinnings to go along with them. Alternatively it might be other (perhaps emerging) theoretical areas that film sound studies can draw from in building their own theoretical models. One such candidate would be phenomenology, which certainly works with the spatiality, perception and reception of film sound. The danger is, of course, that once again we merely jump on the newest or latest theoretical fashion, once again ignoring the possibility of developing that which works for film sound studies. Although to be fair, there is no doubt much within other theoretical paradigms that could assist us in our own quest.

Terry Eagleton [2003, p. 2] has claimed recently that the era of 'high theory' has come to a close and with it, the sense of critical freshness and abstraction that it engendered. What followed this period was one of contextualisation – one of absorption of those groundbreaking ideas that had preceded the current critical scene and an interpretation and application of them. (Binns 2009, p. 737)

What Alexander Binns is concerned with here in citing Eagleton, is the effect of this contextualisation period on the discipline of musicology. However, it is worth considering whether in film sound studies specifically, and popular music studies more generally, we have absorbed, contextualised and commented as much as we can within our current frameworks. We may well need a new bass line before we can begin layering in the rest of the sound.

ENDNOTES

1. Writing in the 1920s, Béla Bálazs was one of the early film theorists to modify his opposition to the role of sound within motion pictures. Many of his observations about the integration of sound with the image track still have relevance today.

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