

The Spaces Beyond: Experimenting with the Theory of Audiovisual *Concrète*

Holly Rogers and Heather Britton

Abstract

Sonic elongation is an audiovisual process found throughout the history of experimental filmmaking: sounds that are clearly connected to a visual source within the film's world are gradually de-familiarised through sonic manipulation. This video essay acts performatively, subjecting the written and spoken text to a similar process of elongation to highlight how meaning can unravel and reform in complex and powerful ways.

Biographies

Author: Holly Rogers is Reader in Music at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK where she convenes the MA Music (Audiovisual Cultures). She is author of *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music* (OUP, 2013) and *Studying Twentieth Century Music* (CUP, 2021) and editor of *Music and Sound in Documentary Film* (Routledge, 2014), *The Music and Sound of Experimental Film* (Bloomsbury, 2017), *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Bloomsbury, 2019), *Cybermedia: Explorations in Science, Sound and Vision* (Bloomsbury, 2021), *YouTube and Music*, Vols 1&2 (Bloomsbury, 2022), and the *Cambridge Companion to Music Video* (CUP, 2023). Holly is a founding editor of the Bloomsbury Book Series *New Approaches to Music, Sound and Media*, and is director of the creative research journal *Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture*.

Filmmaker: Heather Britton is a multi-instrumentalist and audiovisual composer, working across multiple mediums and genres. She completed her MA in Creative Practice at Goldsmiths, where she produced her first audiovisual album and a documentary film exploring the effects of ageing on the identity of a nonagenarian musician. Current projects include a political audio piece for the BBC, ICA and NTS radio and composing music for film and TV. Her extended research interests and practice covers a broad range of topics from sound design to video editing, with a special interest in sychresis and incongruousness in audiovisual composition, as

well as being a cinephile with a passion for experimental filmmaking. She is on the editorial board for the journal *Sonic Scope* and lives in Brighton with her pet rabbit, Zissou.

Supporting Statement: Holly Rogers

Sonic resonance emerges slowly through timbre shifts, echoes and reminiscences. It is ambiguous, dissonant, subtle and powerful. It emerges when the sounding objects within a visual world become untethered from the images that seem to have generated them, becoming adrift, noisy, musical: this is the process of *sonic elongation*. Sounds, first heard in sync with a corresponding image, slowly lose their referentiality through de-synchronization, manipulation and composition, moving from the onscreen to the ambiguous space between film world and audience. Memory is important here: we must remember the visual source for sonic elongation to work. Set adrift, these unsynchronised sounds tap into and generate meaning and affect unique to themselves: they might comment on the visual objects or actions that generated them; they may defamiliarise the image, question its signifying potential, comment on it, undermine it. Either way, slowly but surely the source sounds of an experimental, mainstream, arthouse or documentary film transform into musical *concrète*.

Sonic elongation is not a technique or aesthetic local to one discrete artform or genre: it is a process that roams freely between styles and platforms. In some genres, the noise of sonic elongation is embraced: this can result in audiovisual textures that are contradictory, ruptured and difficult to navigate. In others, the manipulated real-world sounds integrate with existing music to create tightly-knit yet complex soundscapes. Using the practice of extended sound as a new way of thinking about cultural listening and audiovisual dissonance allows us to explore the transmedial resonant gaps of elongated sounds as they move through and between contemporary moving-image media.

Sonic process, rupture, noise. These are things that take a lot of words to describe: and in so doing, the describer pins down an interpretation. In many cases, it is possible to comment on sound through a web of language that translates sensory experience into another form. Film Music scholars have developed a complex and nuanced vocabulary to enact this translation, while being careful to take

into account the historical and cultural contingencies of hearing as a situated practice. Moments of sonic elongation, however, are especially nebulous, particularly when they appear in the already ambiguous practices of experimental film.

If sounds become music through a process of sonic elongation, when does this process begin? For me, music emerges early because I like noise and its disruptive, empowering potential. Because of my taste, listening habits and engagement with radical forms of noise through the work of my students, real-world sounds quickly flip into music as my mode of attention shifts from hearing—an involuntary process of reception—to listening—an attentive, interpretative form of engagement. But when does this happen for you? How can I explain this process adequately knowing that this sonic transference is so personal; so cultural? And that this individual contingency is so significant and welcome? How can I explain this while also listening through your ears? The best answer is for you to also listen.

This short piece of creative research—a collaboration with filmmaker Heather Britton—allows us to listen, through our individual sonic vocabularies, to sonic elongation as a progression governed by process, time and memory. While allowing us to listen directly, it also acts performatively, subjecting words and language to the same process of elongation and defamiliarization that stretch the soundtracks we hear. In moments of sonic elongation, sound lengthens away from the image but our memory of the original audiovisual connection is maintained. When it reaches a certain rhythmic and aesthetic distance, however, the stretched sound no longer tells us what the image is, but rather encourages us to speculate, interpret and rethink what it might be. To respond to this process, this video is in two sections that elongate from one another. The first section outlines the theory through prose and analysis: the second unravels this prose until the semantic roots of the words become untethered; elongated. Sentences are reconfigured, common words repeated, connections foregone: a string of haiku emerges; a textural reconfiguration appropriate to the cinematic poetry of its subject.