AESTHETICS OF EARLY SOUND FILM

Media Change around 1930

Edited by
Daniel Wiegand

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1. The Aesthetics of Early Sound Film: An Introduction

Daniel Wiegand

Abstract: This introduction outlines the emerging field of early sound film studies, arguing that the transitional era around 1930 should be conceived in terms of a specific aesthetics characterized by gradual processes of renegotiation and reorientation. Rather than a period of aesthetic restrictions, it is one of aesthetic options and experimentation, less a unidirectional break than a protean and polymorphous period, which is embedded in film history in complex ways. In addition, more global and transnational perspectives on the media change are needed, along with increased visibility of early sound films, including those often marginalized in scholarship.

Keywords: media change, film history, early sound film, aesthetics

"What is this and what does it mean for us?" These might be two of the questions running through Greta Garbo's and Clarence Brown's heads as they suspiciously, but somewhat benevolently, look up at the microphone suspended above them in a 1930 set photograph for *Anna Christie*, Garbo's first talkie, which was directed by Brown (see cover image). Looking at the picture today, we might be reminded of our own encounters with new technologies and apparatuses, some of them quite recent, others already a little older: holding a smart phone in our hands, scrolling down a website for the first time; or looking at a video conference 'set-up' on our computer screen, with a small mirror image of ourselves next to the other participants.

New technologies are usually greeted with a mixture of scepticism, hopeful expectation, dreams and musings about their possible futures, and even more importantly, about *our* futures *with* them. When images and sounds

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are involved, especially in the realm of art and entertainment, aesthetic issues necessarily play a part in these transformations and projections into the future. Thus, the large-scale introduction of sound technologies into the film industry around 1930 resulted in major changes for film aesthetics, when the look and sound of films and the ways they were perceived by spectators were undergoing profound shifts. Take the beginning of *Die Nacht gehört uns* (*The Night Belongs to Us*) (1929, dir. Carl Froelich), one of the very first 'all-talking pictures' produced in Germany and, presumably, for many spectators in Europe the first feature film with sound they ever saw. After the music for the opening credits has faded away, there is a brief close-up of one of the characters, company boss Marten, played by Walter Janssen, who puts a cigar into his mouth and inhales (Fig. 1.1); next is a long shot, in which Marten stands in his office, blows out the smoke (Fig. 1.2), then abruptly turns around and walks away from the camera. During the first shot and the beginning of the second, no recorded sound can be heard, just the obtrusive ground noise *resulting* from the recording.[1] Then, a faint sound is audible, which could be the actor's exhaling breath, followed by sounds that are more clearly identifiable as footsteps, with their reverberation indicating that they were most likely recorded on the set.

Clearly, the addition of synchronized sound alters this sequence of shots and its potential perceptions in crucial ways. Imagine sitting in a cinema in 1929, full of anticipation of watching a film with sound, a *talkie*. During the credits, you listen to the recorded score coming from the loudspeakers recently installed in the auditorium – interesting, perhaps, but a far cry from the voluminous sound of the live orchestra you are used to. Then the music fades away and you hear … not talk but *silence*; you look at the man's close-up and listen attentively; when he inhales inaudibly, you might hear your own breath of expectation, or your attention might be drawn to the ground noise coming from the speakers, which obtrusively foregrounds the new sound technology even at the moment of silence.[2] Finally, you hear the character's breath and his footsteps, in perfect sync with his movements. The effect of lifelikeness is astonishing, and you may feel even more immersed into this now sonorous world on-screen, the sounds filling the auditorium and mixing with your own sounds and silence.

1 On the problem of ground noise and the development of the first noise reduction systems in Germany, see Müller, *Vom Stummfilm zum Tonfilm*, 208–12. For the USA, see Jacobs, "The Innovation of Re-Recording."

2 On the relation of early sound films and acoustic silence, see O'Rawe, "The Great Secret: Silence, Cinema and Modernism," Moure: "Du silence au cinema," and my own Wiegand, "The Delightful Paradox" (forthcoming).

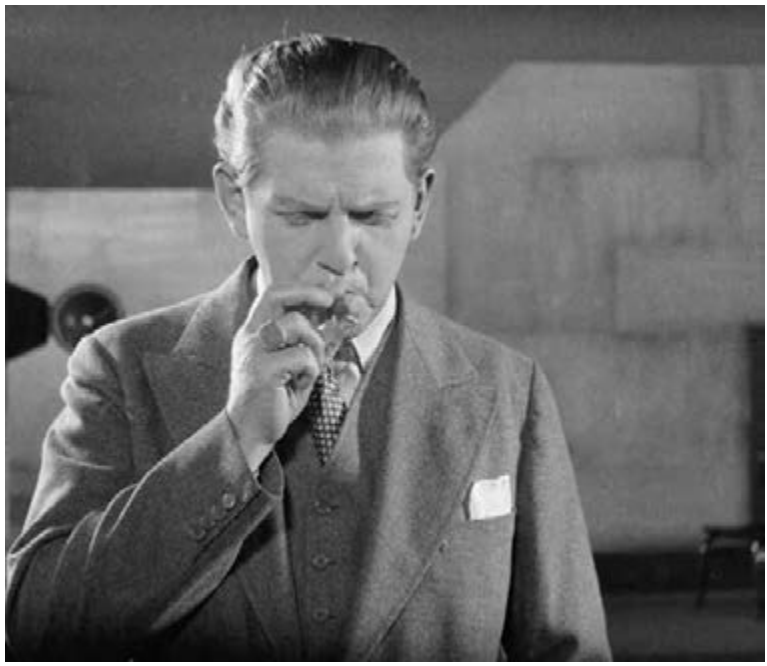

Figure 1.1: Walter Janssen as company boss Marten draws on his cigar.

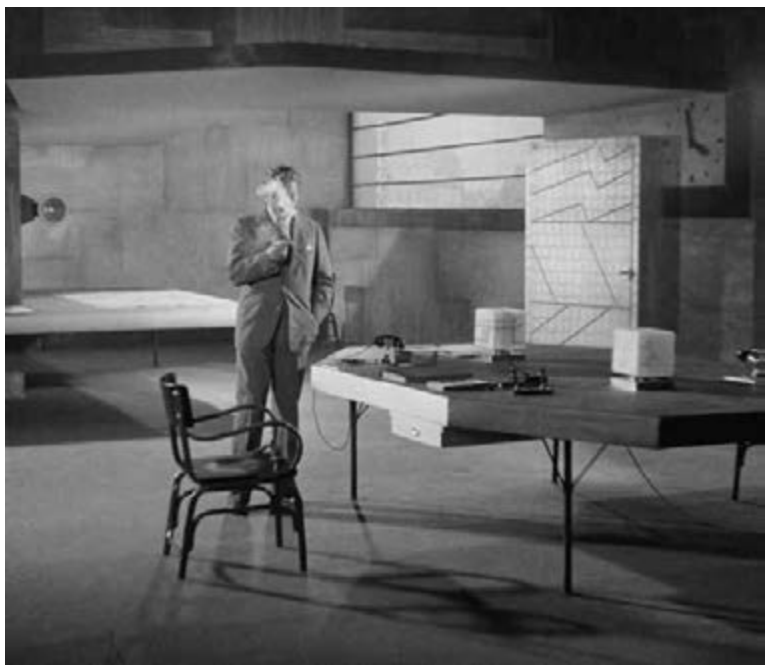

Figure 1.2: Marten blows out the smoke.

The emergence of synchronized sound in global cinema around 1930 and throughout the 1930s introduced new forms of audience address as well as new potentials for film style, and, more specifically, for the juxtaposition of images and sounds – be it dialogue, music, background noises, or silence. As Béla Balázs optimistically remarked in the midst of the period: "Technical innovation is the most effective inspiration. It is the muse itself."[3] However, the specific ways in which these new potentials should and would unfold were by no means obvious. Rather, the future of sound film aesthetics was still undefined and subject to constant renegotiation and redefinition in written discourse as well as in practice. What precisely *was* sound film, or rather, what *could* it be? Filmmakers, audiences, exhibitors, technicians, critics, and theorists worldwide were faced with questions such as: how much dialogue should be in sound films? Should dialogue and music be heard at the same time? How does sound alter the 'nature' of film and its status as an art form? Which formal features of silent film should and could be continued? In all the major film-producing countries we find a wealth of writings that reflect this "crisis of transition"[4] and document the manifold debates about the future of sound film and its aesthetics, and research has only partially reappraised and explored this rich body of work.[5] Thus, even though the conversion happened significantly faster than other media changes in film history (at least in some countries), these debates show that the coming of sound was neither a sudden rupture nor a pre-planned and linear transition but rather a gradual process of renegotiation and reorientation.

This volume wishes to draw attention to the various aesthetics emerging internationally in this protean and polymorphous period that we often refer to as 'early sound film.'[6] While the era has often been reduced to the status of a mere pathway into 'classical cinema,' no more than a brief interruption between two more consolidated phases – the 1920s and the 1930s – one aim of the volume is to look at early sound film as a distinct phase

3 Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 184.

4 Balázs uses this term as early as 1930 (ibid., 207). For a use of the term "crisis historiography," also in relation to early sound film, see Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 15–23; and Wedel, *Pictorial Affects, Senses of Rupture*.

5 English translations and discussions of source texts from the sound film debates can be found in Kaes, Baer, and Cowan, *The Promise of Cinema*, 549–755 (Germany); Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism* (France); Weis and Belton, *Film Sound: Theory in Practice*. Additional studies dealing with the aesthetic reception of early sound film include Crafton, *The Talkies* (USA); Szczepanik, "Sonic Imagination" (Czechia); Porter, "Okay for Sound?" (UK); Mühl-Benninghaus, *Das Ringen um den Tonfilm* (Germany); Wiegand, "Islands of Sound in the Silent Flow of Film" (Germany).

6 Of course, sound films were produced even earlier than that, e.g., Oskar Messter's Tonbilder. The term here refers to the media shift around 1930 that affected the film industry at large.

in film history, which merits scholarly investigation in its own right. The individual chapters in this book take a closer look at films from the period to find that aesthetic practices were more heterogeneous than has often been assumed. Such an endeavour, I feel, is still needed. Some preconceived assumptions about early sound film aesthetics – such as the predominance of static cameras and stilted acting – are quite persistent, and while these are certainly true to some extent, they do not tell the whole story. *The Night Belongs to Us* is a case in point: the opening sequence is a bravura piece of fast crosscutting that uses the various voices and sound devices present in the scene (e.g., a telephone, loudspeakers, a switch board, headphones) to connect the different shots and localities, thereby self-consciously displaying its fascination with modern technology and speed (the scene shows a car race). The entire film reveals a strong interest in the use of sound effects, linguistic diversity, and partly unintelligible dialogue, which – rather than being 'stilted' and 'theatrical' – betrays a shift towards everyday realism.[7] The film thus reveals that, rather than being merely inhibited by technology, filmmakers in the early sound film period explored the new resources offered by synchronized sound from the outset.

As this volume seeks to flesh out, then, through an array of in-depth case studies, the early sound film era should be conceived less as a period of aesthetic *restrictions* than one of aesthetic *options* and *experimentation* – a richness that is most apparent at the intersection of historical research and formal analysis. Understood as a period of 'fruitful uncertainty,'[8] the years of the conversion to sound are, to some extent, comparable to the years of early cinema around 1900, another period of experimentation and fundamental change. Thus, when several commentators during the early sound film period feared that synchronized sound would lead the cinema back to its 'primitive' origins, this was perhaps somewhat true; in a sense, early sound film *was* a return, only not to some kind of supposed 'primitivity' but to the openness and plurality that we can still sense in many films from the time before cinema became institutionalized around 1910.[9] That cinema was also ripe

7 For an analysis of the opening sequence, see Wiegand, "Listening to Faint Sounds and Silence." Jessica Berry discusses this film's reception in Switzerland; see her article in this volume. For its reception in Germany, see Wiegand, "Entdeckungsfahrt in die Welt der Geräusche."

8 I am taking my cue here from Donald Crafton's notion of the "uncertainty of sound" (*The Talkies*, 1–18).

9 From the multitude of texts dedicated to early cinema studies, let me just mention Lewinsky, "The Best Years of Film History" and Gunning, "From the Bottom of the Sea" from the same volume, both of which stress the "aesthetic and narrative possibilities" and the "'anything can happen' aspect of early cinema" in relation to film programming (Gunning, 39; Lewinsky, 25).

with the infamous "dead ends"[10] that media archaeology has so persistently striven to unearth, and which we find abundantly in the early sound film period, too. Some of these 'unpursued paths' have only received scholarly attention recently, for instance, the various hybrid formats between silence and sound, among them part-talkies and so-called "sound versions," which were a widespread phenomenon in 1930s Japanese cinema.[11]

Another parallel that we might draw between early cinema and early sound film is the abundance of carryovers from earlier media practices and intermedial exchange in general. As David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins have suggested, phases of media change often develop an "aesthetics of transition,"[12] which is usually characterized by "impulse[s] of continuity" and "holdovers of old practices and assumptions" but also by heightened forms of "self-reflexivity and imitation" of other media.[13] As some of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, these overlaps can be observed in the early sound film period. Many conversion-era films were 'infiltrated' by expressive devices usually associated with silent film, while others emphatically displayed their connections to other sound media such as radio or the emerging record industry.[14]

If I agree, then, with Martin Barnier that the early sound film period as a whole constitutes a heterogeneous field of aesthetic experimentation that cannot be fully integrated into a seamless evolution towards "classical cinema,"[15] we nevertheless find in many early sound films the beginnings of an aesthetics that would emerge more fully in the consolidated era of the late 1930s. In fact, several chapters in this volume point to such 'germs.' In sum, however, rather than reflecting a unidirectional 'change' or 'break,' the corpus of early sound films is embedded in film history in more complex ways, with films often consisting of several layers and varying speeds and directions, betraying elements of both continuity and disruption, simultaneously pointing backwards and forwards, sometimes into several periods at once. For instance, part of the perceived newness of *The Night Belongs to Us* lay in its radical renunciation of the type of musical accompaniment that had characterized 1920s silent film screenings (and even some early

10 Huhtamo and Parikka, *Media Archaeology*, 3.

11 Nordström, "Between Silence and Sound"; Wiegand, "Islands of Sound." See also Johan Nordström's chapter in this volume.

12 Thorburn and Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition.*

13 Ibid., 7, 10.

14 For early sound film's intermedial connections, see e.g., Crafton, *The Talkies*; Wurtzler, *Electric Sounds.*

15 Barnier, *En route vers le parlant*, 215.

sound film efforts) in Germany. This 'disruption' led the way for German talkies for the next few years and came to be associated with modernity and realism. However, nondiegetic music and dialogue underscoring increased steadily over the next few years, so that from a later perspective, many early talkies seem unusually quiet and even 'cold.' But if relinquishing the musical score seems like a 'dead end' with regard to 'classical' cinema, the trend reappears at later historical moments, for instance, in some of the emerging new wave cinemas. Thus, the sparse musical style of early sound films should be seen neither as *the* future of sound film (as often argued in contemporary discourse) nor as a dead end but more like an access point connecting to several other moments in film history, be it by similarity, congruence, or sharp contrast.

While this book attempts to take a fresh look at the aesthetics of early sound film, all the chapters necessarily draw on substantial research from the past decades, even though 'early sound film studies' as a clearly demarcated, international research field does not seem to exist yet. If studies of the transition from silence to sound have often focused on technological and economic developments,[16] aesthetic implications of the media change were also studied early on – in English, most notably in the works of Kristin Thompson, David Bordwell, and Barry Salt, often within the framework of a historiography of film style.[17] Recent years have seen a notable increase in book-length studies in English, dedicated, at least in part, to the aesthetics of early sound film, focusing on a range of specific aspects, such as music and songs,[18] the voice,[19] rhythm,[20] reception aesthetics,[21] sound and colour,[22]

16 Standard works in the field include Crafton, *The Talkies*; Gomery, *The Coming of Sound* (USA); Müller: *Vom Stummfilm zum Tonfilm* (Germany); Barnier, *En route vers le parlant* (France); Christie, "Making Sense of Early Soviet Sound"; Iwamoto, "Sound in the Early Japanese Talkies." More recently, an edited volume has brought increased attention to the transition in Japan for an English-language readership: Raine and Nordström, *The Culture of the Sound Image in Prewar Japan*.

17 Among the pioneering texts are Wood, "Towards a Semiotics of the Transition to Sound"; Thompson, "Early Sound Counterpoint"; many of the articles in Weis and Belton, *Film Sound: Theory in Practice*; as well as sections in Salt, *Film Style & Technology*; Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*; and Weis, *The Silent Scream*.

18 Spring, *Saying It with Songs*; Fleeger, *Sounding American*; Slowik, *After the Silents*; Lewis, *French Musical Culture and the Coming of Sound Cinema*; Wedel, *Pictorial Affects, Senses of Rupture*; O'Brien, *Movies, Songs, and Electric Sound*.

19 Kaganovsky, *The Voice of Technology*.

20 Jacobs, *Film Rhythm After Sound*.

21 Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*.

22 Street and Yumibe, *Chromatic Modernity*.

and sound engineering.[23] Some recent edited volumes and special issues of journals as well as individual articles have examined specific national contexts.[24] Additionally, the growing number of books on the cinema's aural dimension in general has also contributed to our understanding of early sound film.[25] The idea for the present volume grew precisely out of the wish to bring together some of this recent scholarship and to thereby increase awareness of early sound film studies as a growing international research field.

Not least for practical reasons, early sound film has often been studied with regard to specific national contexts, while comparative, global, and transnational perspectives are rare.[26] It is one of the premises of this volume, however, that such perspectives are necessary if we want to achieve a broader understanding of the global cinema's shift to sound. *Aesthetics of Early Sound Film* is therefore not limited to one national context but assembles studies on a range of different national cinemas, including the Soviet Union, Japan, the USA, Germany, France, Italy, the UK, and Switzerland. It goes without saying that this scope remains limited and needs to be broadened further in the future. Moreover, taking this perspective bears risks of its own. For instance, the period that one could define as 'early sound film' differs from country to country, or region to region, in some cases even considerably.[27] Therefore, looking at the transition from silence to sound globally should not be seen as an act of homogenization but, on the contrary, of sharpening awareness for differences, similarities, and specificities.

23 Hanson, *Hollywood Soundscapes*.

24 Davidson and Rippey, *Early Sound Cinema in the Late Weimar Republic*; Helmers, "The Transition from Silent into the Sound Era."

25 Some examples are Cooke and Ford, *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*; Buhler, Neumeyer and Deemer, *Hearing the Movies*; Nasta and Huvelle, *New Perspectives in Sound Studies*; Beck and Grajeda, *Lowering the Boom*.

26 Notable exceptions are O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound* and *Movies, Songs, and Electric Sound*.

27 Even for each national context, it is quite difficult to define when the early sound film period begins and when it ends. Nonetheless, many scholars have felt an urgency to do so and have proposed specific dates, such as 1926–1931 for the USA (Crafton, *The Talkies*) or 1926–1934 for France (Barnier, *En route vers le parlant*). Most often, such periodization is based on criteria relating to film production (e.g., the numbers of silent films still produced), specific technologies (e.g., widespread use of rerecording or noise reduction systems), and exhibition practices (e.g., numbers of theatres wired for sound). However, the proposed periodization is often based on fiction feature films, whereas the inclusion of other genres and formats such as documentaries or short films complicates matters further. Finally, one could ask if the period should perhaps be divided into even shorter phases. In Hollywood, for instance, 1926–1928 was arguably a completely different phase than 1929–1930.

Regardless of national context, films from the tranitional period are often marginalized, in research as well as in public discourse. Except for a few 'classics' that have made the leap into the canon of film history, relatively few films from the transitional period are shown in cinemas, re-released, or discussed in scholarship. One reason for this is their lack of availability and often poor state of preservation. As with many silent films, some of the earliest and historically most important sound films have to be considered lost, including many part-talkies. Seen as mere 'test runs' from the outset, many of these transitional films were never properly archived, yet these are precisely the works that could help shed light on the media change today.[28] The neglect of early sound films continues to this day in the general reluctance to properly restore and make accessible existing prints of films that are often deemed uninteresting or tedious for a modern audience – even one that is cinephile and historically informed. International collectors' circles, now increasingly active on the internet, sometimes offer access to films, albeit often at low quality or in otherwise problematic versions (for instance, when their provenance is unclear). That said, the situation *is* improving, with more films from the early sound film period becoming officially available[29] and being screened at international festivals.[30] It is one aim of this volume to contribute to this growing visibility of early sound films, by drawing attention to their aesthetic specificities and their complex imbrications in one of the most profound transformations in the history of the cinema.

The fifteen chapters in this volume are grouped together in five thematic sections. Section I, "From Silence to Sound," looks at transitions from silent to sound film and the aesthetic challenges involved by focusing on three distinct phenomena: the staging of dialogue scenes, the deployment of expressive visual effects, and animation's shift from the use of icons and picture-words to that of synchronized music and sound effects.

Through a close reading of several American transitional films, in particular John Ford's *Arrowsmith* (1931), Lea Jacobs traces the filming of dialogue scenes from the late silent into the early sound era, when multiple-camera

28 An example is Germany's first sound film containing audible dialogue: *Das Land ohne Frauen* (*Bride Number 68*) (1929, dir. Carmine Gallone).

29 Some officially available versions should be treated cautiously though, as when (mostly commercial) restorations remove ground noise, add sound effects and even music, or otherwise alter the films in ways that make their historical analysis difficult.

30 One recent example is the retrospective "The Last Laugh: German Musical Comedies, 1930–32" at *Il cinema ritrovato*, Bologna 2022.

shooting and long takes were used to record whole scenes continuously rather than breaking them up into parts. While both multiple-camera shooting and static long takes in early sound film have often been regarded as a 'return to canned theatre,' as a deficiency that had yet to be overcome, Jacobs demonstrates how some directors, like Ford, used these techniques in intriguing ways. Long takes in particular "offered an attractive alternative to the stylistic infelicities of staging and framing for multiple cameras [...] freeing up the actor's movement and allowing for inventive staging in depth." In this perspective, the long take in early sound film does not so much appear as a 'step back' in the development of film aesthetics as an anticipation of later realist film styles.

Katharina Loew examines what she terms "montage shots" (superimpositions, split screen mattes, and prolonged lap dissolves) as stylistic devices that span from early cinema into the sound film era. As Loew states, these techniques attest "to a far greater consistency between silent and sound aesthetics than is usually acknowledged." Moreover, challenging the traditional conception of "montage sequences" as a device primarily used to compress time and space, she argues that in Weimar films like *Der brave Sünder* (dir. Fritz Kortner, 1931), scenes with montage shots were most frequently deployed to depict interior states and to "encourage viewers to forge conceptual connections between simultaneously presented images."

In the last chapter of this section, Donald Crafton demonstrates how pre-sound animation embraced "lexigraphic" devices such as "sound-suggestive hieroglyphs," *toponyms*, word and thought balloons, and "emoji *avant la lettre*," whereas the introduction of sound saw the demise of these techniques, with films now relying on what Crafton terms "melomania – an obsessive preoccupation with syncing screen action to a pre-recorded sound-track." Moreover, while pre-sound animation filmmakers primarily assimilated graphic traditions, such as comic strips, and adapted them to the specific affordances of film, *sound* animation capitalized on new kinds of "convergences" with live performance traditions, such as vaudeville. Crafton concludes that, at least with animation, the introduction of sound was indeed characterized by "disruptiveness," causing "a rapid and irrevocable change in styles, modes of production, and reception."

Section II, "From Theory to Practice," explores how film-theoretical conceptions about sound that were being formulated resonated in or were taken up by actual filmmaking. As is well known, the period was ripe with theoretical ideas surrounding the possible futures of sound films, but many of them did not immediately translate into film production. For instance, there was a five-year interim between the famous Russian

"Statement on Sound," which extended montage theory into the realm of sound by propagating its "contrapuntual" use,[31] and the release of the first sound film by one of its authors (*Dezertir*; dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1933).[32] Some examples of more immediate transpositions are well known, such as the writings and films by René Clair in France, who advocated for a continuation of silent film aesthetics in the sound era through a sparing use of dialogue and sound.[33]

The chapters in this section present two very different case studies of lesser-known carryovers from theory into practice, demonstrating that theoretical propositions for sound film aesthetics would often come from unexpected directions: here, from the writings of a Russian emigré director in Hollywood and from an oral report by a Soviet film student and developer of sound film technology, who evokes the theoretical ideas of Russian Futurism.

In a case study of the early Hollywood talkie *Applause* (1929), Michael Slowik shows how director Rouben Mamoulian's formal resourcefulness was grounded in his theoretical conceptions of medium specificity. Drawing upon Mamoulian's published as well as unpublished writings preserved in the Library of Congress, Slowik argues that the director's devotion to stylization in the arts led him to conceptualize sound in terms of narratively expressive selection and organization rather than the mere recording of a pre-existing aural reality. Thus, as Slowik shows, *Applause* announced an unorthodox set of possibilities for film sound: overtly manipulated recorded voices, background music distorted to the point of grotesquerie, a "symphony" of noises to express a character's psychological state, and even on-location sounds selected and manipulated for narrative purposes.

Theoretical conceptions of sound as "meaningful expression" are also at the heart of Oksana Bulgakowa's chapter, which argues that several early Russian sound films drew on theoretical assumptions that are quite different from montage theory. She cites a report by Nikolai Anoshchenko held before the Association of the Workers of Revolutionary Cinematography, the transcription of which is preserved in the Russian State Archive. Invoking the expressive ideas of Russian Futurist poetry, Anoshchenko argues for a merger of music and voice in sound film and for phonosemantic practices in which words are chosen less for their actual meaning than for

31 Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov, "Statement on Sound."

32 It is perhaps even debatable how much this film can count as a realization of the ideas put forward in the manifesto. See Thompson, "Early Sound Counterpoint."

33 Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*.

the expressive sonic values of certain consonants and vowels. Bulgakowa traces reflections of this concept in films and uncompleted film projects by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, as well as in four lesser-known productions by the state-run company Soyuzkino, all of which relied on the "phonetic expressivity of intonation" and on "musical vocalization." She interprets these efforts – derived from both theoretical thoughts and technological restraints – as a "homogenizing technique" that "levelled" all voices to a common standard and that would define Soviet sound films well into the 1940s.

Section III, "National Contexts," explores early sound film in Japan, France, and Germany, showing how the future of sound film aesthetics in each country was negotiated in written discourse *and* in practice, often in relation to silent film, theatre, and other electric sound media in the respective national contexts.

Johan Nordström traces efforts to develop a new aesthetics for Japanese sound film during the transitional period (which lasted as late as 1936), focusing on the production and reception of films from two major studios: Shoshiku and Nikkatsu. He concludes that "the Japanese film industry's extended transition facilitated aesthetic experimentation and a gradual shifting of representational styles and thematic concerns." Hybrid films, such as part-talkies or post-synchronized films (called "sound-version" films in Japan), were produced for a longer time compared with other major production countries and were debated widely by critics and filmmakers. Language and voices, in particular, were at the centre of practical experiments and critical debates, as more natural styles of elocution, using modern language and different dialects, were pivotal for a new form of "everyday realism" in modern melodrama, but they seemed at odds with the intended effect of historicity in the *jidaigeki* (period film) genre.

In a survey of some of the earliest sound films produced in France in 1930 and 1931, Martin Barnier demonstrates that even though contemporary critics such as René Clair and Georges Vial frequently dismissed French films from this period as a return to "canned theatre" and claimed a loss of silent film's visual eloquence, several of the films produced by the major production companies were in fact highly "experimental" in their deployment of sound and especially in their juxtapositions of sound and images. Fluent and elaborate camera movements, inventive use of direct and off-screen sound, as well as complex editing patterns characterize these films, especially at their beginnings. Moreover, several films self-consciously display the new medium of sound film, for instance in spoken opening credit sequences, and

address its relation to other sound media of the time, such as the thriving record industry.

Jörg Schweinitz picks up the topic of early sound film's intermedial connections and outlines how both radio and early sound film figured prominently in the general enthusiasm for the period's new "audio culture" in Germany. As Schweinitz illustrates against the backdrop of contemporary discourses on the radio, the new mass medium was staged as a "visual sensation" in several German sound films of the early 1930s and thus "became part of the imagery of modernity." Often, radio functioned as a narrative device by providing "diegetic bridges" between narrative spaces, most notably between broadcasters and the modern "dispersed" audience as a (potentially) transnational listening community. Specifically, Schweinitz shows how the character of the radio reporter appears in several early sound films and how famous real-life reporter Alfred Braun, who plays himself in several productions, quickly became established as a "transmedial star" in Germany and as a "presenter of modern life, […] who helped shape the imaginative world of urban modernity."

Section IV, "Speech and Language," is dedicated to issues of speech, language, and translation in early sound film. Irina Leimbacher traces the use of what she terms "individual embodied speech" in early Anglophone nonfiction films. While speaking subjects were common in newsreels of the early 1930s (if often 'faked' by reenactments and post-synchronization), the directors of the British documentary movement mostly strove to set their work apart from newsreels by relying on what they perceived as more artistic "treatments of reality," such as collages of noises and vocal fragments or modernist musical scores. Leimbacher discusses Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* (1935) as a singular example of a documentary from this period, in which sync sound voices are given "expository agency" by allowing working-class people to speak into the camera, addressing their own concerns and "lived experience." Interestingly, while the film was derided by some for a "lack of any aesthetic," Leimbacher points out that other contemporary reactions attest to "early recognition that embodied voices speaking from the screen *could* provide a profound experience." This opens up an interpretation of the film as a turning point in documentary's aesthetic, "eliciting other listening opportunities and affective engagement."

The next two chapters in this section explore the reception of multiple versions in the early sound era. As is well known, language barriers posed a severe problem for the international distribution of early talkies, a problem that producers initially aimed to overcome by shooting the same film in

several versions (even if dubbing and subtitling also existed early on).[34] Primarily driven by economic imperatives, the practice had aesthetic implications, too. After all, what is "the" film in this case, how do the respective versions differ from each other aesthetically, and how did they affect different viewers from the respective language areas? The last two articles in this section tackle these questions from quite different perspectives and partly using different terminology.

Jessica Berry is interested in the reception of multilanguage versions (also known as multiple language versions or MLVs) in the multilingual context of Switzerland, where several versions of one film were shown, sometimes even in the same cities. As Berry explains, "local populations in Switzerland were receptive to foreign-language films due to the multilingual background of the country." But her study also shows that versions were not necessarily compared to each other, and that critics from each region regarded their version as 'the' film. In her examination of contemporary reviews of *Die Nacht gehört uns*/*La nuit est à nous* (1929), Berry also addresses the topic of noises in film, finding that Swiss critics from either language region were often (though not always) intrigued by the film's sounds of machines and engines rather than by its dialogues, which were often considered unnatural and dragging. Noises, on the other hand, were seen as "a quintessential reflection of the contemporary modern era" and as a move away from theatre-like productions.

Maria Adorno investigates the transcultural mediation processes involved in the production of European versions at the beginning of the sound era. She argues that film versions "tailored to the respective target 'mentalities'" involved not just linguistic but also – and even more importantly – cultural issues. As she illustrates with several film examples, omissions, mutual substitutions, and other forms of modification, as well as considerations regarding the specific actors' and actresses' voices and appearances played a role in adapting versions to diverging audience expectations. This leads Adorno to use the term "multiple versions" rather than "multilanguage versions" or "multiple language versions" and to construe the practice as a "mimetic technique," in which "each version has its own status of originality and its own impact in its respective target context." In a discussion of the aesthetic concept of mimesis, she argues for MVs as "simultaneously *one* transnational film and *many* national(ized) versions," comparable to a polyhedron, "whose unified structure is constituted by multiple interconnected faces."

34 See e.g., Wahl, *Multiple Language Versions Made in BABELsberg*; Vincendeau, "Hollywood Babel."

Finally, Section V, "Music and Noise," explores the uses of music and background noises in early sound film, again focusing on specific national contexts and film genres. While the initial and primary fascination with sync sound rested on the human voice,[35] music and noises played a crucial role for new audiovisual aesthetics as well, even if that role was by no means clearly defined. Critics and filmmakers debated widely what the place of music and noise in sound film should and could be, while films tried out several of these options, opening up a whole range of different meanings ascribed to specific sounds.

While music in early sound film has most often been studied in relation to the musical genre and songs,[36] Daniel Wiegand explores how the general handling of nondiegetic music in early German sound films changed over a relatively short period of time. Examining a large corpus of more than sixty films, he finds that after an initial reluctance to use nondiegetic music (except in a limited set of genres and specific types of scenes), films from mid-1931 on began to score scenes more often and more liberally. This change was also reflected in the trade press, where several authors argued against nondiegetic music at first, before growing accustomed to the changes in film production.

The other two chapters in this section address the topic of noises in early sound films. Martin Holtz looks at the "sounds of war" in American and German war films of 1930, arguing that they constituted a "counter-discourse" to the notion of film sound as "progressive and utopian 'electrical entertainment'" (the latter a term by Donald Crafton). By contrast, Holtz interprets the harrowing sounds of warfare in productions like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (dir. Lewis Milestone) and *Westfront 1918* (dir. G. W. Pabst) as "an encounter with technological modernity, only not in form of benevolent scientific advancement, but as traumatizing shock." As Holtz demonstrates, often in these films, individuals are silenced by sound and subordinated to machines of sound production (such as the telephone) that they are forced to listen to.

Nadine Soraya Vafi explores urban noise as a vital part of the soundtrack in early Italian sound films. Based on the assumption that the "sounds of modern city life were characterized by simultaneousness and a fast-paced rhythm, and sound film, in particular, offered an apt sonic representation of these modern realities," Vafi construes the metropolitan noises in the urban

35 This is an early instance of what Michel Chion has termed "vococentrism" in the cinema (Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 5–6).

36 See e.g., Altman, *The American Film Musical*; Spring, *Saying It with Songs*; O'Brien, *Movies, Songs, and Electric Sound*; Wedel, *Der deutsche Musikfilm*.

comedy *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni …* (1932, dir. Mario Camerini) as a reflection of Italian modernity through sound, especially of the socio-political changes emerging under fascism. Among other things, she discusses the expansion of highways and the showcasing of 'Italian strength and power' during large trade fairs. As she argues, rather than promoting fascism, the resulting soundscape should be seen as "part of a realist aesthetic that acknowledged working-class everyday life and concerns."

The articles by Holtz and Vafı highlight that the "world of noises"[37] opened up entire new, formerly excluded areas to filmic representation, almost as if to confirm Béla Balázs' utopian romanticism expressed in 1930: "What the sound film will now uncover is our acoustic environment […] everything that has something to say over and above human dialogue."[38] With the city and the war, two crucial spheres of experience became audible in a fresh manner for 1930s spectators, albeit in different ways, each of them complicating Balázs' anticipation of a harmonious interchange between humans and their environment through sound. While war noises arguably functioned as a way to cope with memory and trauma, the city noises in urban comedies brought a contemporary soundscape from just outside the cinema back into the auditorium, ironically one that was simultaneously shut out by the sound insulation of modern architecture.[39] And while war films staged the 'drowning out' of the individual through sound, city noise had the potential to situate the individual (especially from the working class) more firmly in lived urban space and thus to reaffirm it as a visible and audible part of modern society.

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37 This is the expression used by an anonymous critic in the German trade journal *Deutsche Filmzeitung*, January 10, 1930 (in the original: "Welt der Geräusche").

38 Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 185.

39 See, for instance, Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*.

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