

CINEMAS' SONIC RESIDUES (2014)

The sound of film infiltrates and refigures the city. For many decades, a pivotal experience during the course of urban walking was to pass the foyer or side-doors of a cinema and abruptly hear a blurred cacophony - film-dialogue, noise or explosions from films of conflicts, music - expelled from that space. Especially in summer heat, with the opening of windows, doors and emergency exits, that sonic eruption into the adjacent urban environment, from cinematic orifices, was accentuated. The walls of a cinema auditorium form the carapace reinforcing the concentrated experience of the film-audience, exempted, for a few hours, from the imperatives of exterior urban space; that experience, especially in its corporeal dimensions, was primarily a sonic one, amalgamated from the elements emitted from the cinema's sound-system, together with the voices and noises of spectators which - in such environments as all-night cult-movie screenings or those occupied by audiences culturally oblivious to any need for spectators to watch a film in silence - formed an incessant counterpoint to film-soundtrack elements: voices of seduction, voices of outrage, voices of adulation.

The first auditoria constructed specifically for the celluloid projection of films, from the 1900s (following several years, from 1895, in which film-projection had inhabited the space of pre-existing venues, such as variety-halls, ballrooms and theatres), were not conceived as environments for sonic projection, since film itself remained silent, even if the auditorium itself was saturated with multiple strata of noise. But from the late 1920s, cinema auditoria, such as those designed by the influential architect S. Charles Lee in Los Angeles, formed film's acoustic receptacles, intended to transmit sound as immediately and physically as possible to the audiences seated within them. In 1929, the Surrealist film-theorist Antonin Artaud underlined that corporeal aspect of film-sound in its emergence, together with its active diminution of the film-image: 'The image presents itself only in one dimension, it's the translation, the transposition of the real; sound, on the contrary, is unique and true, it bursts out into the room, and acts by consequence with much more intensity than the image, which becomes only a kind of illusion of sound.'⁽¹⁾ The pervasive sonorisation of film from the early 1930s - resisted only by experimental film movements - consolidated worldwide film industries' vast cultural power, as important instigators of human experience and perception, via the medium of film and through film-spectatorship in sound-sensitised

cinema spaces, for the remainder of the twentieth century. All technological experiments of the following decades, especially the 1950s and 1960s, designed to magnify infinitely the presence and propulsion of sound in enclosed spaces, as with IMAX in Canada and Astrorama in Japan, are simultaneously experiments with space and corporeality. Such experiments, often requiring extravagant and expensive technological specifications, also necessitated the engagement of an urban population attuned to entering specialist auditoria, such as IMAX cinemas or projection-spaces created for world's fairs and expositions, primarily to experience the corporeal dimensions of film-sound, even in excess of their desire for film's images. An exception to that concentration of film sound within the enclosed space of the cinema auditorium is the phenomenon of open-air film projections, often using the exterior facades or firewalls of buildings as screens, in which the intermediation of the cinema's walls, between urban space and auditorium, is removed, and the noises of the city and the noises of film directly mesh or collide.

In the spaces of abandoned cinemas, sound possesses a unique, spectral and still-corporeal presence, in intimate rapport with the urban space around them. Cinemas have always formed potentially obsolete spaces, from film's origins, imminently subject to being technologically surpassed, or vulnerable to shifts in urban dynamics such as population changes or the transformations of their surrounding districts. To avert urban obsolescence, cinemas were often intentionally constructed in constellations, on avenues such as Lisbon's Avenida da Liberdade or Los Angeles' downtown Broadway, in sonic competition against one another (through such vocal media as barkers situated outside their entrances to entice passers-by inside), but architecturally amassed in alliance against the volatile flux of urban space. Even the most immense and technologically sophisticated cinemas - such as New York's Roxy cinema, constructed in 1927 as a miniaturised city in its own right, with its own restaurants, shops, hotel and hospital - could be razed without trace after only several decades as the city mutated around them and rendered them financially moribund. Cinemas that have endured in uninterrupted operation, from the origins of cinematic space in the 1900s through to the contemporary moment, such as Szczecin's Kino Pionier (opened in 1909 and still in operation), form temporal aberrations in their rapport with city space. A special urban entity emerges when a cinema auditorium is abandoned but not demolished, and may be entered, in that state of suspension, either covertly or after negotiation with its guardians. The dereliction of cinema auditoria accelerated worldwide in the 1980s with the onset of home-video

consumption and the transferral of cinematic sound into domestic environments; digital media, with the capacity for film-sound to accompany its iPhone-wielding, earphoned spectator on traversals of city-space, further accelerated the mass-abandonment of cinematic space from the 2000s, thereby creating new architectural sites, in their disintegration, for the analysis of sonic post-cinematic detritus.

In exploring the interiors of such derelict environments, two divergent sources of noise can be isolated. Firstly, film-projection always leaves behind its distinctive, ineradicable sonic residues. These can take the form, among others, of tiers of seating which gradually splinter and sink; projection-screens that collapse and disintegrate, eventually subsiding; film-projection equipment that, in obsolete cinemas in which it has not been stripped-out, gradually corrodes, releasing rivets and screws; discarded film-celluloid reels, primarily stored in the cinema's projection-box, which, notably when exposed to extremes of cold or humid heat, release elements of their emulsions, and undergo striations and fissurations; decorative elements, such as chandeliers and mirror-balls, that disintegrate and fall to the ground. Alongside those film-focused sonic components, abandoned cinema interiors remain inhabited particularly by the noises of auditorium-transiting rodents and small animals, and by the traces of ephemeral human inhabitation, in such forms as bottles splintered underfoot. Often, projects to reactivate such cinematic spaces, either for illicit parties and art-events or for economically-oriented redevelopments sanctioned by their owners, leave their own intricate regimes of detritus, in the forms of accumulations of debris, materials left-behind from interrupted construction-works, and generally unidentifiable or unclassifiable artefacts, each of which emits its own sonic traces of deconstitution. Secondly, abandoned cinemas are also inhabited by incessantly shifting sonic presences originating in the urban environment outside the auditorium, able to enter and permeate the cinematic space through their volume and pitch or via the material fragility of that space's residual infrastructure: unhinged exterior doors, broken or left-open windows. That internally-directed sonic infiltration, from the exterior urban environment, forms the contrary one to the experience of hearing, from the outside, the disgorging of filmic cacophonies from the still in-use auditorium.

In the way that the late nineteenth-century science of optography investigated the potential for the final image registered on a human retina (the face of a victim's murderer, for example) to be embedded there, recoverable by

dissection and the replication of the resulting eye-image, the final soundscape imprinted into the fabric and infrastructure of a cinema auditorium may also be explored, in its residues and traces, and through the resonance, in that space, of sonic elements infiltrating it from the city outside. In many ways, that optography-era's instigators of film - Etienne-Jules Marey with his mobile camera-gun, Eadweard Muybridge with his many thousands of glass-plate moving-image sequences, Louis Le Prince with his first film of spectral figures traversing Leeds Bridge in 1888 - experimented with the same preoccupations as Wilhelm Kühne's optography: the registration, on the eye, of death, and death's revivification in the image. Similarly, abandoned cinema spaces form the optimal experimental site in which to map film-sound's death, in the digital era, and potentially reactivate its acoustic detritus. All derelict cinemas worldwide, in that sense, form variants of the distinctive constructions known as 'sound mirrors', or 'listening ears', as with those installed in concrete in the 1920s and 1930s on the south coast of England, close to Dungeness, in the form of vast lenses for sonic registration, designed to receive and magnify, for the attentive human ear, the sounds of an oncoming enemy invasion; rendered obsolete and consigned to a ghostly, voided status even before their first use, those sound mirrors still listen, in the contemporary moment.

In the auditorium of the abandoned Patria cinema, on the Stefan cel Mare avenue of the Moldovan capital city of Chisinau, in March 2013, the soundscape experienced formed an intricate, conflicted one. The ornate cinema building pre-dated film, constructed as a college for women in the mid nineteenth century, before being largely destroyed during successive German and Soviet wartime incursions through the city, then reconstructed as a cinema by German prisoners of war in the late 1940s. It had only closed as a cinema a few months earlier (I arrived expecting it not to be abandoned, but to still be showing films), and the large auditorium, with its banks of plastic seats, had not had time to endure the deterioration prevalent in abandoned cinemas. Its projectors remained intact, and it appeared still to be exhaling its final pulses of sound, along with its own history of destructions. A pizza restaurant had already opened in one of the foyer areas, and the sounds of patrons' voices and clanging cutlery entered that space, along with police sirens from the avenue outside, punctuated by burnt-out buildings from Chisinau's 2009 episode of urban unrest; the cinema was situated directly alongside the Russian Embassy, and police vans had parked in rows outside, as though the cinema were a riotous source of revolutionary turmoil.

In the auditorium of the abandoned London cinema, on Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok, in June 2012, the detritus of cinematic sound was overlaid, again, by restaurant noise. The 1960s neon signage above the cinema's foyer remained intact, but the auditorium itself, while still occupying its former parameters, had been comprehensively gutted, that space improvised into rows of packed tables for the restaurant's fast-moving clientele, evidently preoccupied with inhabiting the auditorium for the most abbreviated possible interval, and saturating that space with maximal vocal content, in contrast to its previous cinematic clientele's durational experience and relative silence. That vocal sound itself formed a subsidiary strata to the incessant noise from the gridlocked avenue outside, overseen by vast digital-animation corporate screens. The London cinema was one of several named after European and North American cities, constructed along Sukhumvit Road and the now-demolished Washington Square in the 1960s and 1970s, for US soldiers on leave from the Vietnam war; the London cinema aberrantly survived, while most other cinemas of that era vanished, razed without trace, or transformed into sex venues, or, as with the Siam cinema, burned-down in a frenzy by street-protesters in the Bangkok unrest of 2010.

In the auditorium of the abandoned Alcazar cinema, in the medina alleyway area of Tangier, in May 2013, the residues of film formed a phantasmatic presence, among the dust-encrusted rows of seats facing a long-collapsed screen. The cinema was built in the late 1920s, in the style of a Paris neighbourhood cinema, such as the Studio 28 in Montmartre, where Artaud delivered his Surrealism-era lecture denouncing film-sound. It had been abandoned for exactly twenty years, according to its guardian; before that, its full-on sound-system had propelled cacophony into the surrounding nocturnal alleys at maximum velocity, as I remembered from my last visit to that cinema, in 1990. Through apertures of broken window-panes in the auditorium's facade, the dense soundscape of the alleyway outside entered the auditorium, in an intermeshing of city-noise and residual cinema-noise. Its sign was intact but the foyer had been shuttered and its projectors already stripped-out, along with the speakers once affixed at either side of the screen; even so, the infiltrated noises of the city - fragments of music, chants, sudden eruptions of voices, the gratings of machines - appeared capable of conjuring elements of a cinematic sound-track, and film images to accompany that sound were then only a hair's-breadth hallucination away.

In the auditorium of the Volksbühne - not a cinema, but a theatre, and not abandoned, but in active use - in Berlin, in November 2012, the film-director

Werner Herzog gave a performance that marked the release, thirty years earlier, of *Fitzcarraldo*, his film, shot in the Peruvian jungle, about film's own seminal hallucinations and obsessions. But the film itself was not projected, or even present in any way; instead, Herzog projected pre-cinematic magic-lantern glass-slides from the end of the nineteenth-century, of luridly-coloured, European-imagined jungle landscapes; intermittently, he read extracts from the journals he kept at the time of the film's shooting (journals focused on his incessant travels and incidental encounters, rather than on the film-making process itself), or stood alongside vocalists from Sardinia and Senegal, as they improvised chants of loss.⁽²⁾ In such a performance, the entity of film - at least, film as it had been conceived in the era of *Fitzcarraldo* - is irreparably gone, supplanted by the digital, or else propelled backwards in time, beyond its mid-1890s origins, into the media of glass slides whose capacity for mutation into moving-image sequences, for projection to spectators in auditoria, preoccupied Marey, Muybridge and Le Prince (along with the Skladanowsky Brothers, who shot Berlin's first cityscape, from a Prenzlauerberg-district rooftop close to the Volksbühne). All that remained of cinema, in that auditorium, denuded of filmic images, was Herzog's own body, surrounded by a wailing vocal soundscape, performing corporeal gestures of film's detritus.

Film, sound, and the auditoria for film's conjoining with sound, always inhabit liminal zones of disjuncture, most intensively so with the abandonment of film's distinctive spaces of projection. But, from those disjunctures, and their detrital traces, new experiments with sound and image emerge. David Lynch shot the Club Silencio sequence of his 2001 film *Mulholland Dr.* in the auditorium of an abandoned cinema on Los Angeles' Broadway: the Tower cinema, constructed by S. Charles Lee in 1927 as the first cinema in Los Angeles (and one of the first, worldwide) to be equipped for sound synchronised with film projection. In that sequence, film has vanished and the cinema auditorium's screen is gone, but an audience has gathered, to experience a performance. The vocalist Rebekah del Rio, performing the song *Llorando*, at the site where the cinema's screen had been located, abruptly collapses, and is carried unconscious from the auditorium, but her voice endures beyond her disappearance, in a sonic hallucination or ineradicable spectral residue of film, still inhabiting that space.

Notes

1. Antonin Artaud, lecture on film-sound given at the Studio 28 cinema in Paris, 29 June 1929, *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud*, Gallimard (Paris), 1956-92, 3: 377.
2. Herzog's journals were published as *Conquest of the Useless*, Ecco Press (New York), 2004; in his previous published journals, *Of Walking in Ice*, 1974, film is similarly absent.