REVIEW: BEYOND THE VISUAL. SOUND AND IMAGE IN ETHNOGRAPHIC AND DOCUMENTARY FILM (IVERSEN AND SIMONSEN)

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This review essay gives an overview over the book's primary contributions on "sound", a yet neglected aspect of anthropological filmmaking, discussing the theoretical foundations on which the book's chapters are based and proposing some possible directions for future research.

Keywords: visual anthropology, ethnography, ethnographic film, sonic research, anthropology of the senses, anthropology of performance

With its fifth publication, the Nordic Anthropological Film Association (NAFA) fills a vacant spot in the existing literature in the subfield of visual anthropology. Sound (throughout this book defined as aural information, man-made as well as environmental, consisting of speech, music or noise) is ubiquitous. Anthropology – the scientific enquiry of being in an environment, whose investigation at least to some extent relies on an observational method – requires as much of the available information as possible to be taken into account. The authors of this reader concur that the existing body of literature on visual anthropology in general and on ethnographic film in particular suffers from a peculiar lack of useful texts considering sound. Their thirteen contributions try to bridge this gap by a serviceable variety of means. Each author contributes experience from a specifically sound-related background, be it in theory or in practice, describing or analysing the exposure to sound, or last but not least, by empirical deductions or philosophical thoughts. It is this bountiful grazing across some usually respected thresholds which make this reader a valuable starting point for further research on the topic. After some preliminary remarks, the present review will give short abstracts of some of the germane chapters. Finally, it will be attempted to draw some preliminary conclusions for further research.

Ethnographic film is not the only occurrence to be affected by the aforementioned lack of theory, but it is particularly useful as a point of departure. Following the implicit definition of many of the contributing authors, film on the one hand is a means to do research (i.e., to scrutinize something) and on the other hand film can be used to communicate the findings (i.e.

to convey information about something). Film can be denoted as anthropological if the sought-after information is of scientific relevance in this field. Further, it can be labeled ethnographic if the method to attain such information calls for ethnography. The extent to which the information brought to attention is congruent with „whatever is out there“ – being referred to as reality, pro-filmic event or other – is still subject to considerable debate. Nevertheless, both the visual and the aural are constituent parts of filmic communication. Hence a comprehensive theory of ethnographic film has to consider both of these properties. Sound (as well as image) has to be dealt with in all phases, i.e. while capturing, while processing and while playing back the data. The concept of sound therefore not only encompasses the objective aural manifestation but equally all possible effects it has while being perceived as audio-visual media.

The thirteen contributions united by this book were presented at the 27th annual conference of the Nordic Anthropological Film Association in June 2007 held at the University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway, in a panel entitled „Sound and Image“. The books' first section is entitled „Audio-Vision“, an avowed commitment to the writings of the eminent French sound artist and scholar Michel Chion. Preceding the present publication by almost twenty years, Chions' aim consisted in directing the attention on sound in film by stating that sound is not only an object, but at the same time has a function, and that sound is more than a mere accessory, but in combination with the (moving) picture brings into being „une valeur ajoutée“ (Chion 2008:8f.; see also Chion 2003:436).

In the opening chapter „Sounds of Silence: The aural in anthropology and ethnographic film“ Peter I. Crawford starts with the definition of research as a special form of interaction with the world, often described as perception. This interaction, for which anthropology often synonymously uses the term „observation“, is both determined and directional. Anthropological research, with its predominant method of participant observation, is a prime example of such interaction. Interaction functions through an application of the senses. As Merleau-Ponty had already discovered in 1945, the different senses are not independent of one another. Instead, they join onto what is to be perceived. „Added value“ (*valeur ajoutée*) is the result of such interaction between visual and aural perception. Building on the aforementioned distinction between film (used to inquire) and film (employed to demonstrate the findings), Crawford finds theoretical support for the first within the relatively new field of sensual anthropology. In film as a mode of communication, the lack of theory on sound is more dramatically obvious. Crawford recognizes the challenge not to lapse into an information overload as a reaction against the fear of silence or emptiness and instead cautions against the filmmaker's addition of incongruous addenda. He concludes that the acknowledgment of sound in ethnographic film could bring anthropology in general to open up towards the other, until today rather neglected senses.

„Sound Rendering“ by Asbjørn Tiller states the fact that sound in film necessarily is composed or „rendered“ or artistically manipulated. This manipulation can be considered as a form of translation or interpretation. In order to understand the extent to which sound in film is manipulated, Tiller compares (natural) sound occurring in everyday environments and (created) sound in film. Both categories of soundscapes consist of similar elements. Tiller tries to categorize these elements and assumes that the audience prefers sounds which express the feeling of a given situation. Because sound does not inherently imply feeling, rendering is necessary. Feeling can only be infused by manipulation.

With David Toop the distinguished group of contributors is broadened by an exceptional

musician, writer and sound curator, renowned as the author of „Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds,, (2001) and „Haunted Weather – Music, Silence and Memory“ (2004). His article „Beyond the Visual: Inside and Through Sound“ – which lends its title to the reader at hand – shifts the debate to a rather philosophical level. The chapter starts with an overview of modern appearances of sound in everyday life, such as soundscapes projected in public spaces, cell phone ring tones, or art projects. Toop challenges the predominance of vision by stating that the heightened attention towards the visual is learned and thereby culturally determined. He remediates the notion that visual perception precedes aural perception (which stems from the false presumption that aural communication is connected to speech/language, instead of touch). Toop states that the availability of technology to objectify (record) sound and thereby to neutralize its transience does not lead today's society to a more valuable appreciation of the aural – despite the fact that more and more artificial sounds are distributed in an ever faster pace. By referring to a specific sound project recently curated by himself, Toop concludes that the aural is beyond the visual and not merely complementary.

The discussion of sound in film necessarily needs to consider the technical innovation of synchronous sound and image recording and to this effect the notorious notions of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema. In her text „Seizing Novels from Life – Oral/Aural self-mythologizing in ‘Pour la Suite du Monde’” Marit Kathryn Corneil – based on a comprehensive bibliography – discovers a third variety of the synchronous sound film method and calls into question the validity of the canonical dichotomy of synchronous documentary styles.

The first section of the book is closed by Paul Henleys „Seeing, Hearing, Feeling: Sound and the Despotism of the Eye in ‘Visual’ Anthropology”. Henley constrains his focus of attention on the soundscape, clearly delineating his efforts from the two other modes of sound in film and thereby taking a clear stand in his aesthetic decisions (extra-diegetic music is categorically rejected, the spoken word is unconditionally supported). According to his text, sound in film is problematic as soon as it is manipulated. Since film practice always implies manipulation, Henley proposes to tolerate manipulation (only) as long as it “simply [...] enrich[es] the description of the acoustic environment or [...] fulfil[s] certain functional requirements within the structure of the film” (137). For Henley the value of the aural in ethnographic film consists in “thickening’ the ethnographic description”, in “enhancing the spectators’ understanding and vicarious experience of the subject”, or in “enhancing the modes by which the filmmaker can propose an interpretation” (131f.). The first is instrumental in conveying information on which the filmmaker’s argument does not necessarily rely upon and whose conveyance thereby is not directly intended. Henley – by quoting MacDougall – considers the observational mode as being predestined to leave room for such additional information and therefore as more apt than other modes in communicating anthropologically relevant meaning. The second (the enhancement of understanding) aims at including information, which usually is neglected in traditional anthropological research. As a current example, Henley mentions the relatively new field of the anthropology of place in which sound could play a significant role because sound (in film) is supposed to be apt to convey a sense of space. In the third section of his article this thesis is expanded onto the visceral quality of sound.

The second part of the book, “Case Studies”, unites four examples, focussing on performativity, reenactment, contextualization, and the interplay of images and sound respectively. Jouko Aaltonen, the author of the sections’ first article, graduated as a film director and specialized in the theory of documentary film. He has been involved in practical film work as

director, production manager, producer, scriptwriter and film editor. Accordingly, his descriptive text “Something Else – Indexical features of sound from the point of view of filmmaking” is written from a practitioner’s perspective. For Aaltonen, sound is a creative and expressive element of filmmaking. Consequently, he does not linger on formal or ethical considerations, but instead avouches free manipulation.

The following two articles do not directly consider sound. Mats Jönsson examines the anthropological relevance of some historical films about nature by the Swedish filmmaker Arne Sucksdorff. Bill Nichols on the other hand investigates the role of reenactment in contemporary documentary film. In his article “Documentary Reenactments: A Paradoxical Temporality That Is Not One” reenactment is defined as a style or aesthetics of documentary filmmaking, which in his view has had a difficult time because of the “*vérité* boys’ of the 1960s (Ricky Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, David and Albert Maysles, Fred Wiseman and others)” but is currently going through a period of revival (190).¹ Nichols explains the necessity to influence pro-filmic events in order to capture the absent as a reflection of film’s function as fantasy, as establishing an imaginary relations to actual social events. Reenactments help to retrieve lost objects, that is, scenes that are absent because they have happened in the past or because they are not accessible for other reasons. Nichols proposes a rather tentative typology of different classes of reenactments. The compelling benefit of this article lies in Nichols conjecture that the audience of an ethnographic film usually does not accept this form of interference.

Carrie E. Daniel discovers yet another indirect access to sound and a fascinating parallel between doing ethnography (field work) and watching a film. Her text “Access or alienation? Subtitling in ethnographic films” stresses the experience of immediate contact in both these occurrences of observation. In both forms the style of communication is of utmost importance. As communication often relies on verbal expression and because, in ethnography, the audience is likely not to be able to understand the informant’s tongue, ethnographic filmmakers have relied upon the medium of translation by subtitling. But subtitling is more than a mere technical help to facilitate understanding. By their sheer presence in the frame of the moving picture, subtitles are an important element of style of filmic communication. The extent to which they contribute to evoke immediacy remains open to debate. Although they purport a certain direct access (by preventing the adding of an extra-diegetic layer of sound) it cannot be ignored that subtitles are far from being objective conveyance of data. Subtitles are authored and their authorship more often than not does not correspond with the informant. The inclusion of sound into the visual of a film implies certain stylistic decisions and it is those that should be focussed upon when discussing a film.

The book’s third part, titled “Sound and Image in Performance and Ethnography”, further expands the scope by including three ethnographic studies. Hans Hadders’ “Picture recitations of the Jādopatiās in North East India” is based on the assumption that scroll painting is a form of proto-cinema. Although the analogy between the Santal’s narrative performance and cinema is somewhat problematic (acknowledging scroll singing as a primary stage of the movies would mean to recognize filmic ancestry also in, for example, theatre productions as well as in the comic strips of the yellow press) it is compelling to see a connection between these two modes

1 At this point it is worth mentioning that the group of filmmakers referred to would more aptly be termed “direct boys” since *cinéma vérité* – as Nichols would surely know – is the continental variety of this technologically based movement and vehemently opposed by the promoters of the US-American variety. In this sense, to call the Drew associates “*vérité* boys” is not only misleading but is simply wrong.

of communication. The succession of pictures does create additional information which is not inherent in the separated pictures per se (see also: Thurnherr 2011:178). On the other hand, it has to be considered that the inherent movement (of the singers and of the situations sung about) is unlikely to be the only defining factor, neither of the Santal's tradition nor of film. I would presume that it is rather these alternatively defining factors which more specifically characterise both of these cultural manifestations and thereby disclose the distinctive differences.

The second ethnographic example is based on fieldwork on ritual performances among Mambwe-speaking peoples in Zambia. In his article "Ephemeral images in Chisungu female initiation ritual" Jan Ketil Simonsen takes the reader to one of his personal experiences in the field by giving a detailed description of the different stages of the initiation ritual. Ritual is regarded as a visual form of the tradition of knowledge. This rendering leads the researcher to the insight that meaning is not simply explicitly expressed and transferred but that it is instantly produced by exploiting the discrepancy between what is explained (to the initiatee) and what is experienced, in other words, between what is heard and what is seen. In a corresponding application of Chion 2008 [1990], and with an apt reversal of sound/voice and image, Simonsen advises the fieldworker not only to ask but also to observe.

The concluding article was written by the late Mapopa Mtonga, professor in oral literature and language at the University of Zambia. In "Seeing the beat, and hearing the dance" the ethnomusicologist Mtonga observes the symbiosis of music and dance. By means of a healing ritual of the Tumbuka of Zambia, he shows that music is a means by which the body is stimulated to dance, invoking movement and thereby releasing and assisting the process of healing (to cleanse of illness). This example shows how two seemingly separate modes of communication (i.e. music and dance) can freely be translated from one to the other.

CONCLUSION

The collection of articles in this book is a useful coverage of the current debates on sound in visual anthropology. Sound (in life, in anthropology, in visual anthropology, and in ethnographic film) matters. Therefore a framework for its analysis is required.

As already mentioned, many of the texts in this reader heavily rely on Chion, whose writings stressed that a discussion of film necessarily has to include sound. Chion, of course, was not the first to consider sound as being of utmost importance in the production (recording as well as editing) and the reception of film. Early film theoreticians like Arnheim (2002), Eisenstein (2006), Balázs (2001a; 2001b), and others had already devoted at least some of their efforts to consider the necessity or the effects of sound in the seventh art. An early reluctance to welcome the advent of technological innovations that allowed the simultaneous production of visual and auditive effects therein should not be misinterpreted as a rejection of new and modern layers of filmic communication. A detailed analysis of Arnheim, for example, shows that his reservation towards the "talkies" was guided by the realization that too strong a reliance on language would deter from the powers of the other layers of information inherent in film (see for example Arnheim's revealing programmatic exclamation "Nicht Tonfilm sondern Film!");

2002:256)². Seen in this light, these early sceptics appear to be more visionary than pessimistic observers of their contemporary developments. Their writings deserve to be acknowledged by a contemporary theoretical evaluation. On a more formal level, Ken Cameron, Sound Supervisor to the Crown Film Unit, contributed a small treatise as early as 1947 with mostly practical advice for the aspiring sound technician of “the documentary movement”. Later, writers like Christian Metz (1985) and Noël Burch (1981) realized the exigency to include sound in their general theories on the interpretation of film. Nevertheless, according to the authors of the book at hand, it is Chion who is of capital importance for the discussion of sound in film.

However, as some fundamental discrepancies between the individual chapters in the reader demonstrate, not all current debates in visual anthropology seem to be gainfully advanced. For example, while some of the contributing authors implicitly seem to regard anthropological research by technical means as devoid of interpretation, others acknowledge the interpretive manipulation of sound as inevitable. Still others acknowledge an inherent problematic and suggest some sort of prescriptive solution. In contrast, I propose that the quality of a film in anthropology should not be measured by the amount of manipulation (of the auditive or the visual) or by a lack thereof. Since meaning in film, at least to a certain extent, is produced at the event of viewing and by involvement of the viewers, the quality of filmic communication should be measured by the possibility for the audience to discern the contribution of the filmmaker. A film is scientifically useful according to its transparency as to when, to what extent and by which means the data has been manipulated.

Even if most of the authors seem to agree that sound adds value, the question remains, at what instance in the act of communication or by whom this extra value is added. In order to answer this question, I propose to pan away from “film as declaration” and direct the gaze to the receiving side of filmic communication. Filmic communication broadly consists of two sequences: on the one hand film is produced and on the other hand film is watched in a situation that could be referred to as “the viewing”. The analysis of film is at least to a considerable extent determined in this latter stage of filmic communication. Communication by film – as are all kinds of communication – is an ambiguous venture. Exactly which information is conveyed is highly dependent on factors which lie beyond the sole influence of the filmmaker and therefore cannot be guided only by his intent. For example, the well-known opening scene in *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929) can be seen as an impressive example of surrealist expression. The same scene – watched by an uninformed eye or an audience with different intentions – could be considered as the depiction of an act of utter brutality. Without taking into account *who* is watching a film and under what *circumstances* it is screened, a description of the information communicated remains ambiguous – there simply is not only one meaning. The analysis of film therefore necessarily has to include variables which help handle this intrinsic ambivalence.

A closer look at Chion shows that his theory can also be read in this regard, as he goes beyond a descriptive analysis of (film as) a technically based method of communication. Instead, Chion situates his observations on the recipient’s side as he presupposes a particular perceptive state of the viewer. The French term “audio-vision” does not describe the merely passive reception of information. “Audio-vision” is a perceptive attitude of the “audio-spectateurs”, it is “une *attitude* perceptive” (Chion 2008 [1990]:3, emphasis added). By attributing an active role to the viewer,

2 Not sound film, but film!

Chion includes him into the framework of analysis. In the second chapter of the same book, Chion demonstrates that the (filmicly conveyed) information depends heavily on the mode of listening. It is in this sequence of filmic communication that the activity of “synchrèse” (Chion 2008 [1990]:9; Chion 2003:433f.) occurs. “Synchrèse” – a mergence of the incident of synchronicity and the activity of synthesis describes the inextricably conjoined interpretation of elements of sound and moving image, whose effect – following Chion – at least to a certain extent depends on the individual spectator: “L’effet de [la] synchrèse est évidemment susceptible d’être influencé, renforcé et orienté par les habitudes culturelles.” (Chion 2008 [1990]:56). “La valeur ajoutée” therefore does not exclusively originate in joining sound with film, but is at least partially constructed by the spectator at the moment of perception. Accordingly, exactly what value is added escapes the firm grip of the filmmaker’s intentions (Chion 2003:436). The audience has its equal share in constructing meaning.

In a similar way, Rick Altman – another frequently cited source in the reader at hand – considers the inclusion of the viewing situation as equally important. While he acknowledges film as an “autonomous aesthetic entity” he questions the “assumption that differing audiences nevertheless shared the same basic film-viewing experience, regardless of differences in gender, class, or viewing situation” (Altman 1992:1f.). Film as an event is characterized by a multiplicity of receptors and its meaning may only be grasped by way of applying a model which allows differing perceptions to be incorporated. Altman (1992:4) states an even dozen attributes which help in uniting the possibly differing perceptions in order to find the common denominator on which an objective analysis can be based upon.

In closing, I would like to apply these findings and attempt a preliminary clarification of my tentative notion of “the viewing” and thereby try to identify some of the variables deemed relevant. Variables have to be introduced as to where the preconditions and the circumstances vary. Ambiguity occurs on the one hand because the individual *prerequisites* of a spectator may differ. These could be: previous knowledge, preconceptions, motivation and attitude (towards a subject and for viewing a film), expectations, and so on. On the other hand films can be viewed in manifold *contexts*. Films can be viewed by one person alone or in public, in the confines of an adequately equipped cinema or on a small portable device in an unquiet environment. Films can be viewed as “speaking for themselves” or in combination with other information (introductions, discussions, other films, and so on). Films can be viewed at the time of appearance or at a later date encompassing a historical dimension. This preliminary enumeration of possible variables will have to be elaborated in further research. Although this concept does not seem to be referred to explicitly in the reader at hand, the authors contribute to such a catalogue of variables by melding many different ways in which sound (in film) has been looked at so far. Further research on sound in ethnographic film can build on these examples by including “the viewing” into its focus – and doing so with open eyes and ears!

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