“Feeling comes first.” Music and Sounds as Entertaining Forces in *The City, The River*, and *One Tenth of Our Nation*

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Entertaining Forces in *The City, The River, and One
Tenth of Our Nation*
The ear figures as a form of embodied knowledge,
as something we think with.
Veit Erlmann

Introduction

- 1 In his preface to Holly Rogers's volume on music and sound in documentary films, Bill Nichols points to the fundamental role musical accompaniment plays in non-fiction films. To explain his argument, he recounts an anecdote about the in-class projection of a silent version of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) followed by the subsequent screening of the same movie, this time with the accompaniment of the "remarkable" soundtrack performed by the Alloy Orchestra. The results were quite divergent: while the students appeared sleepy and uninterested during the first screening, in the second version, the audience seemed fully involved, beguiled by the new liveliness brought on by the soundtrack.¹ With its capacity to give "sensory embodiment"² to the viewer's perceptions and cognitions, the musical accompaniment had a primary role in the process of experiencing and understanding the messages conveyed by the images.
- 2 Nichols further asserts that the documentary tradition can be defined through the concept of authenticity:

The documentary tradition relies heavily on being able to convey an *impression of authenticity*. It is a powerful impression, made possible by some basic qualities of moving images in any medium. [...] When that movement is the movement of social actors (people) not performing for the camera and not playing a role in a fiction film, it appears to attest to the authenticity of the film.³

- 3 In documentary films the sense of an authentic representation of the world is often considered a requirement coming from the documentarists themselves, who tacitly assume that their audiovisual texts will be judged according to their adherence to reality claims.⁴ This assumption involves the unspoken agreement between filmmakers and spectators on the meaning and value of what they see on the screen. As Holly Rogers notes, it is because of this notion of authenticity that sometimes a cautious use of creative sounds was advocated and prescribed. As a mode of inquiry, generally adhering to the rules of "minimum creative intervention",⁵ documentary filmmaking traditionally tends to avoid any soundtrack that might get in the way of the full manifestation of this impression of authenticity referred to by Nichols as a core characteristic of non-fiction movies. The soundtrack, often associated with fiction films and mass-market products, can be superfluous. It can also influence the audience's cognitive response to the reality conveyed by the movie, making its ideological message less clear or minimizing the discourse of sobriety.⁶
- 4 Nonetheless, the objection against the excessive use of creative sounds that Holly Rogers correctly analyses in her volume may best describe the criteria and conditions of the observational mode, rather than those of documentary in general: think about Direct Cinema's gritty realism and its obedience to dogmatic rules in its sonic approach. Many documentaries, both in the past and today, do not support this assumption. With very clever use of musical soundtracks, several non-fiction films demonstrate that this critique is highly debatable, and the three films considered here represent a good case in point. The sonic approach adopted by *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939), *The River* (Pare Lorentz, 1938) and *One Tenth of Our Nation* (Felix Greene, 1940) involved an intimate connection with music and voices that engaged the listeners on a deeper level. The expository mode, to which the three movies belong, traditionally had (and still has) a more flexible relationship with sound: it does not avoid the use of non-diegetic music; rather, the musical soundtrack takes on here essential qualities while the voice-over commentary serves the important function of explaining what the listeners see in the images. Indeed, the expository mode gives to sound the important task of controlling the visual code. Still, the nature of this relationship between sound and image was explained in the past years, both by Bill Nichols and Brian Winston, in relation to the ideas of didacticism and propaganda, as quintessential characters in the exposition.⁷ The result of the association between sound and image was considered preordained within the joint task of persuading the audience about the merit of a specific solution, idea, or program as, for example, about the value of the projects proposed by the Tennessee Valley Authority in *The River* or by other sponsors in *The City* and *One Tenth*. I do not want to suggest that the presence of music always contradicts the propaganda efforts or the didacticism adopted by the images, but only point out that, in these three films, sounds and images do not always work together as if they were a merged unit, or a product of the sum of the two added together. Instead of simply doubling the effects of images, the music – perhaps because of its abstract quality – is, at times, able to create new configurations and significations that clash with the supposedly servile condition of sounds. A more pervasive, independent, and

untamed force is at work with its own reasons and resonances, in some way conflicting with the rational premises and means of the strategic use of information.

Soundtracks in fiction and non-fiction films

- 5 In their works on classical soundtracks in fiction films, Gorbman and Kalinak point out that the first purpose of the musical score is to connect the spectators to the fictive reality, encouraging the suspension of disbelief. With its "inaudibility" (its subordination to the visual), the other attribute of the classical soundtrack is "continuity", the ability to bridge sequences, filling the gaps and helping the construction of formal and narrative unity.⁸ Music holds sequences together, making what is overly fragmented appear more homogeneous, a task that cannot be considered a prerogative of fiction films. The connective role played by music is all the more essential in documentary films than in fiction, if we consider the higher degree of potential ruptures in documentaries' visual tracks.⁹ Documentarists can employ musical accompaniments in their works following the same set of ideas and motives that uphold the presence of a musical score in Hollywood filmmaking.
- 6 Two other points reveal the similarity between fiction and non-fiction films in terms of the strategic roles of music. As in the use of leitmotifs associated with characters in Hollywood musical scores, the soundtrack in non-fiction films guides viewers to feel strong empathy for people inside the movie, independent of the fact that they are, as Nichols writes, "social actors", meaning real people. The second point is the use of conventions. Classical Hollywood's musical scores began to take shape around 1910 when music publishers started issuing cue sheets for silent movie pianists; yet it was in the 1930s that the works of three major composers, Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Alfred Newman, paved the way for a set of practices and norms in composing for films.¹⁰ These practices went on to establish deeply recognizable techniques and styles, later followed by other composers. Mostly, it was the new romanticism in music, which held a strong appeal on general audiences throughout the 1930s, that became the most recommended style in composing for films, leading musicians – outside or inside mainstream productions – to follow the legacies of Wagner and Strauss more than those of Schönberg and Stravinsky.¹¹ Even if, out of the three composers under study here, only Aaron Copland (*The City*) worked for both fiction and non-fiction films, the same new romanticism extremely appreciated in Hollywood also inspired the other two composers, Virgil Thomson (*The River*) and Roy Harris (*One Tenth of Our Nation*). This approach, as well as a set of musical conventions, became codified and was thought to be able to activate a predictable set of responses in audiences. Working under time pressure, the composers used familiar conventions to conjure up geographic places or historical times, often using previous stereotypical sound tropes.¹² Martial scenes suggesting heroism were generally associated with horns while the string instruments were used to elicit a melancholic mood. Sometimes the correspondence between emotions and music was even more specific: tremolo sounds for suspense, pizzicato in cases of ambiguity, dissonance for crimes.
- 7 As previously mentioned, the musical accompaniment of films has been sometimes the object of criticism, especially in the context of the observational mode or within the legacy of the theoretical perspective of the Frankfurt School. This form of critique occurs because music has the potential to disturb the spectators or make them digress,

hiding the true ideological message of the film or making it palatable. Indeed, music provokes strong emotional responses in the viewers, and most of its power depends on the pleasure that music elicits in them. Aspects directly related to pleasure have been profoundly underestimated in academic discourse, almost invariably positioned in negative terms. Music or laughter, jokes and satire¹³ are often considered trivial elements, judged as potential obstacles to the achievement of the truth or considered morally corrupt or politically incorrect.¹⁴ Music gratifies the emotional part of human nature, its irrational and sensitive part, rather than its rational one. A possible explanation for this comes from ancient Greek theories of cognition, which differentiated between the ear and the eye. While the eye dominated the cognitive de-codification of the outer world (i.e., the graphical perspective), the ear was associated with emotional responses. The cavity of the ear was a perfect metaphor to explain its magical power to reverberate and transmit the emotional reactions directly toward the soul, in an unmediated way. The eye was otherwise compared to a sponge: it "was absorptive and porous, containing a rudimentary cognitive apparatus which facilitated the processing of knowledge".¹⁵ These ancient theories demonstrated that hearing, unlike sight, was a more spherical and immersive sense. Although too rigidly confined to a static schema based on the opposition of two distinct sensory cultures, similar theories have endeavored to explain why the filmic spectator is so profoundly engaged in listening, occasionally at the expense of the visual approach.

8 For example, psychoanalysis has offered fascinating insight into the role of music in the development of subjectivity. Psychoanalytic critics generally agree there is a correlation between the sense of hearing and the acoustic realm of the maternal womb. The fetus experiences the world primarily as a sonorous ambiance, composed of the voluntary or involuntary sounds produced by the mother's body (breathing, heartbeats, pulses, vocal emissions) as well as external sounds, like music, albeit muffled. Those sounds represent the primal musical elements characterized by the same qualities of music: rhythm, pitch, timbre, tempo, dynamics.¹⁶ The profound pleasure involved in listening to music originates here, in the remembrance of the imaginary and lost fusion with the mother's body. Using the psychoanalytic model, Flinn and Gorbman insist on the ability of film music to activate a psychic register, a "semi-hypnotic trance" that lowers the "threshold of belief" and bypasses the "usual censor of the preconscious", facilitating the process in which the spectators slip into the movie and accept its pseudo-perceptions as their own.¹⁷

9 In the previously mentioned introduction to Holly Rogers's work on music in documentary films, Bill Nichols argues:

Giving sensory embodiment to the historical world means finding a way to represent reality so that we will entertain if not adopt a particular way of understanding or explaining some aspect of this world. [...] In a way similar to how our own bodies and sense organs receive the world around us as far more than a conglomeration of facts and much more as a force field of intensities and lures, *focal points and empty spaces*.¹⁸

10 The task is two-fold: not only finding pleasures associated with the experience of listening to a piece of music but also expanding the effect of concreteness in the discourse conveyed by the movie, bringing it to life through vivid perceptions. Two aspects that are much more dependent on each other than we may think. Because we are dealing with documentary films in the 1930s, this introduction to the weight of "sensory embodiment" and the pleasure brought on by music acquires even more

importance. In his notable study of documentary expression, William Stott remarks that in the 1930s most Americans felt that the essential human faculty wasn't reason. The emphasis on the importance of feelings involved in the act of understanding, which Stott thoroughly endorses (revealing the legacy that the 1930s had on the idealism and romanticism of the 1970s, the period in which Stott wrote *Documentary Expression*), obliquely explains the rationale behind what Nichols suggests in the expression "giving sensory embodiment to a representation". Quoting Sophocles, Tolstoy, Henry Adams, and Grierson, Stott engages his reader in a long piece of writing full of the same empathy it wishes to describe: "feeling comes first"; "emotion counted more than fact"; "one must learn to feel"; "understanding is not a fact but a feeling", and so forth.¹⁹ I do not want to imply that the musical score is the only instrument that can activate this kind of emotional intelligence, this embodied knowledge, yet if credence is given to Stott's outline, one ought to recognize the value that the task of giving "sensory embodiment" to thoughts and representations might have had in the 1930s cultural scene. Listening to very well chosen soundtracks – an entertaining experience *per se* – increased the understanding of events and characters the audience was invited to see. Hearing was synonymous with deeper understanding, a form of consistent and complete, rounded and holistic comprehension of the outer world.

The musical counterpoint in *The City*

- 11 Due to its widely recognized connection with emotions, music is associated with the sense of human feeling, availing plenitude and harmony within the film, both in fiction and in non-fiction contexts. Further, the musical score and the voice have played a significant role in leading the audience to discriminate between "focal points" and "empty spaces", as the previously quoted excerpt remarks. A process that in fiction and non-fiction films occurs through consonance or dissonance between sounds and images. When music and images drift apart in order to call attention to a controversial issue via dissonance though, the results are different when dealing with a non-fiction film. This is the first substantial difference in a general horizon of similarity between composing for fiction and composing for non-fiction films. In the former, when the soundtrack cannot be 'squared' with the image, the audience's credibility is threatened, and this tends to disrupt the cinematic illusion. On the other hand, if the deviation occurs in the latter, it is legitimate because it makes a strong impression on the spectator by juxtaposing two contrasting elements in their mind (for example when the images are showing events that are recontextualized by a piece of dissonant music). This particular condition makes the eventual drift more justifiable in non-fiction films, where the dissonance occurs without jeopardizing the sense of continuity. This is particularly noticeable in *The City*.
- 12 Produced by the American Institute of Planners and backed by a \$50,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation, the film describes the transformation of small community villages into a huge metropolis plagued with poverty and polluted air. Lewis Mumford wrote the commentary, revealing a hint of the same conservatism that characterized several expressions of 1930s American culture. Many intellectuals searched for alternatives in new models of community – as the greenbelt houses of *The City* – that offered a response to the current issues of that time. Writers and artists openly condemned capitalism, often emphasizing that the progress brought on by civilization

was too profit-oriented and too individualistic. During the decade, what Richard Pells defines as the "rural utopianism" of many intellectuals led them to glorify the wholeness and harmony of older agrarian communities or to claim the importance of hidden or forgotten folk cultures against the dominance of scientific and technological standards.²⁰

- 13 Aaron Copland's musical score for *The City* partially reflects this cultural moment displaying traditional values and rural perspectives, an inclination visible mainly in the first and the last parts of the movie. The film is, in fact, divided into three parts reproducing historical development. While the second is dedicated to the city and its plights (traffic jams and pollution), the first and the last describe, respectively, a rural 18th century village and the project of the Greenbelt community. For the opening pastoral scene, evoking peaceful moments attuned to the slow passage of time, Copland creates a sonic correspondent to the lifestyle of a small village using harmonic voicing and melodic phrases developed in horizontal arcs. Later, in a crescendo of intensity with the high pitches of woodwinds and strings, he illustrates in the most literal terms the corresponding images. Matching the beats of music to physical actions, he provides a cheerful nuance to the acts conveyed by the images: water springing up from an old mill wheel, three boys jumping in the creek, the drum-like cadence of a horse's gait. Almost the same approach is noticeable in the last part, which opens with a sweet, low theme sustained by a flute solo, aimed at reproducing the same peaceful quietness of the New England village. Displacements of rhythmic pulses are sometimes used to break up the monotony, commenting on the new town's activities: the martial character of horns ironically teases the baseball players while the muffled sonority of the bassoon, with its lower register, signals the clumsy movements of a toddler playing with a ball. The leitmotif here suggests the harmony of a new dimension where nature and men peacefully coexist.
- 14 The sponsor wanted the message conveyed in these two parts to be as clear as possible, to promote its vision unequivocally.²¹ Copland agreed to conform to the sponsor's premises, offering a typical example of the post-romantic idiom that was introduced in the previous paragraphs. According to Caryl Flinn, the post-romantic style of the 1930s soundtracks wished to suggest a more perfect, integrated, idealized past, offering illusions of integrity, abundance, and community.²² The utopian flavor expressed in these parts of the movie was required because the task of persuading the people to move to the greenbelt suburbs would have been more easily accomplished through it. The new romanticism of the 1930s musical scores serves here a precise project: offering the alternative of the greenbelt community as an appealing solution and a feasible plan. The illusions of abundance and community become the outline of a dream realized, a response to what was deeply needed and desired during those hard years of the Depression.
- 15 The second part of the documentary expresses the criticism against the shattered and polluted metropolis. Three sections ("Industrial City", "Metropolis", and "Highway or Sunday's Traffic Jam") constitute this part. Copland's score is here strongly influenced by hectic and jazz-inflected sonorities, which produces dissonant musical phrases. In the first section, "Industrial City", images of melted metals poured in long strings of fire are associated with a drum-like beat reproducing in syncopated rhythms the relentless advancement of progress. The voice-over imitates the crescendo of the musical pace:

Machines! Inventions! Blackout the past! Forget the quiet city! Bringing in the steam and steel! The iron-men! The Giant! Open the throttle! All aboard! The promised land! [...] Machines to make machines! Productions to expand productions! Wood and wheat and kitchen sinks and calico! [...] Millions! Millions! Faster and faster! Better and better!²³

- 16 This is a mimetic reproduction of the horizontal conquest of the West, the story of the American civilization translated into sounds. Influenced by Vorkapić's aesthetic of montage, the second section dedicated to the city, "Metropolis", uses several dissonances and timbral effects. Anticipated by loud noises (the clash of car-fenders and the breaking of a glass window), this section starts with a fast slapstick piece combining within the music the noises of alarm bells, sirens, and whistles. The beautiful montage sequence in the crowded coffee house, where people are busy eating their breakfast, revolves around keen visual motifs – jawbones chewing pieces of bread, mouths swallowing coffees, automatic machines throwing out toasts and pancakes – organized into a formalist sense of rhythm.
- 17 What is interesting is that the entire part, split into three sections, appears much more intriguing than the other two, mainly because of its soundtrack. If compared to the static evocation of the rural parts, the jerky, nervous score of this section seems to enhance the metropolis' exalting quality. The orchestration is no longer subservient to the images; rather, it reigns over them, controlling temporal spaces in a frenzied and rapturous rhythm led by brass and percussion. The metropolis induces people to act as machines – this is the theoretical basis for moving to the greenbelts – yet the modern quality of Copland's work slightly changed the perspective. It has a grandiosity in it, a kinetic vitality that somehow collides with the sponsor's message. According to Dickstein, one of the reviews that set the terms of Copland's appreciation was a 1929 essay written by Paul Rosenfeld showing the glorification of movement and excitement contained in Copland's rhythm and melodic breadth. Rosenfeld explains it as a "motoriness, a strong kinesis, a taut, instinctive 'go'. Wistful or burlesque, slow or fast, his pieces have enormous 'snap'". Dickstein suggests that this modern quality has a strictly American character, connected to "the machine, the new architecture, with its wiry steel skeleton, and American energy in general, all that's swift and daring, aggressive and unconstrained in our life". Gratifying the tastes of audiences and their desire to be entertained, the musical score of this part of *The City* refuses to express a decadent and ruined atmosphere, showing instead the 'mad mechanic joy' of the crowd. The supposed alienating lack of authenticity of the city turns out to be the ecstasy of proximity, synchronous energy: "all that's swift and daring, aggressive and unconstrained in our life".²⁴
- 18 In this light, it should be reminded that *The City* was one of the focal exhibits that premiered at the 1939 New York World's Fair. In the reconstruction offered by Wolfe, the pavilion holding the exhibition was an array of optical displays, where the documentary was sent back to the roots of cinema "as a turn-of-the-century fairground amusement in which movies vied for attention among rival attractions."²⁵ The primary purpose of the Fair was to make goods and services available to consumers, and *The City* was, among them, an entertaining product able to attract masses of people as the other features (bands, parades, pageants) were doing with their colors, loud sounds, and lighting. In the proposal of its planners, the Fair had to be articulated around a strong message regarding the concept of people, both in terms of political agenda and marketing strategy. The People's Fair – as it was called by its planners – was projected

without apparent contradictions into what appeared to be the 'world of tomorrow', in a fully optimistic and coordinated vision of industrial automation. In this new horizon, a growing mass of consumers would soon have bought technologically advanced products following the gigantic commercials arranged around the pavilions. The notion of 'people' was not only an object in the rhetoric offered in the Fair's pamphlets: images and sounds of people became a proper attraction in themselves. An editorial that appeared in a 1940 issue of *Architectural Record* stated that "the greatest discovery in New York was the discovery of the crowd both as actor and as decoration of great power. The designers found out that the crowd's greatest pleasure is in the crowd."²⁶ This statement suggests the emphasis the entire decade placed on optical configurations and images of organized masses of people (cf. Busby Berkeley's famous top-shots of girls), establishing a formal analogy with social theories of functionalism. With its complicated patterns of contra-punctual colorations, modernist dissonances, and asymmetrical rhythms, Copland's score for the second and central part of *The City* became the primal reason of delight and enjoyment for a mass of people amused by its own image reflected in a mirror.

Voices of *The River*

- 19 As Bill Nichols argues, the stentorian voice of commentators informing the audience from an impersonal point of view was typical of 1930s documentaries. This surrogate of God or master, the perfect embodiment of an institutional discourse, was always unseen and never incarnated, a condition that intensified the perception of authoritative omniscience.²⁷ Nichols deeply insists on what he calls the "prerogatives" of the expository mode: didactic reductionism, argumentative logic, evidentiary editing. He admits that sometimes the "exposition" tends to evoke or hint rather than declare or explain, avoiding the argument's logical explicitness to make room for issues of tempo, rhythm, and juxtapositions of sound and image with more ironic or incongruous results. Nonetheless, this lack of logical explicitness happens for persuasive purposes and inside a rhetorical tradition that provides a strong foundation for this way of speaking in documentaries. The exposition can embrace evocation and poetry only because it strives to instill convictions about the validity of a perspective.²⁸
- 20 *The River* adheres to this style of talking, this self-validating, didactic tone for just one part of the movie, the last half of the third reel. Here, Thomas Chalmers directly describes the programs of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as well as the general involvement of the federal government in land conservation projects. For the other parts, many scholars have already discussed the Whitmanesque splendor of the commentary. Like Whitman, Paula Rabinowitz writes, "Lorentz had succeeded in imagining the nation as landscape and language."²⁹ With its lyrical character – reaching its peak when it is not read but heard – this commentary is quite poetic. However, beyond that, another reason for its seductive power is its peculiarity, its strangeness. There is something atypical in it, sometimes sounding hefty and thunderous, at others soothingly quiet. Long parts of this commentary consist of lists of names recited in a chanting litany: streams and rivers, towns bordering the levees, different types of trees. Chalmers engages us in a hypnotic – almost experimental – list-poem that has no didactic inclination but a

bizarre slant, that even surpasses the lyrical intention to create a zany, off-beat ambience.

- 21 In his work *On Native Ground*, Alfred Kazin declares: "how strange that anything so seemingly descriptive could be so beautiful!"³⁰ a perception not only due to Chalmers's voice but also to the hypnotic rhythm of the prose. It is shown, first, in the litany of the names of rivers with its spellbinding cadence built around the repetition of the word 'down' (and reproducing the poetic form of a sonnet with an ABAB scheme). It is worth quoting for its strange sonorous beauty:

Down the Yellowstone, the Milk, the White and Cheyenne;
The Cannonball, the Musselshell, the James and the Sioux;
Down the Judith, the Grand, the Osage, and the Platte,
The Skunk, the Salt, the Black and Minnesota;
Down the Rock, the Illinois, and the Kankakee,
The Allegheny, the Monongahela, Kanawha, and Muskingum;
Down the Miami, the Wabash, the Licking and the Green,
The Cumberland, the Kentucky, and the Tennessee;
Down the Ouachita, the Wichita, the Red, and Yazoo.³¹

- 22 There are a few other examples of repetitions, which assume rhythmical intonations and musical cadences, reproducing the mounting escalation of a river, from a gentle cascade to a flood seething with frenzied violence. It is almost like an imitation, through Chalmers's voice, of the sound of a river, with its gurgling, flowing current. Still, what is bewildering here is the grain of his voice, what Barthes called "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue".³² The richness that some names assume in his musical diction is impressive: 'Cannonball', 'Musselshell', 'Kankakee', 'Monongahela', 'Wabash', 'Ouachita', 'Wichita', all have a soft, velvety texture, making his mouth resounding as a sonorous chamber with its proper instruments: tongue, teeth, mucous membranes. The unmistakable Americanness of his pronunciation of the trees, 'Black Spruce', 'Douglas Fir', 'Red Cedar', 'Shagbark Hickory', with their gurgling guttural 'R' or the sensuous delay over vowels ('O' of North, 'A' of Shagbark, 'E' of Lumber) are the material quality that allows our escape from the tyranny of meaning. A peculiar quality challenges the assumptions of what a voice-over commentary should do. It encourages us to deviate from the simple level of didacticism to take a different road: if it is not entertaining, it is fairly seductive and enchanting.
- 23 Bill Nichols points to the numerous voices speaking through a documentary: voice-over commentary and interviews are not the only points of emission. At least, two other kinds of voices speak in it: first, the textual voice, which is "the style of the film as a whole"; second, the surrounding historical context that, according to Nichols, cannot always be "fully controlled or outdone".³³ For instance, the section of the recorded voices in *The City*, which begins at minute 12, is introduced by a quotation of the title of Carl Sandburg's prose poem, *The People, Yes*, repeated twice, and, after that, common people's voices overlay in a chaotic babel of sentences fading out into indistinguishable murmurs. Employed four times in the movie, these excerpts, based on urban, chaotic vocal sounds, represent a total break in the persistent flow of voice-of-God commentary (in this case, the narrator was the actor Morris Carnovsky). A similar break happens in *The River* when Chalmers opens a new litany associated with the images of floods: "Coastguard patrol needed at Paducah / 200 boats wanted at Hickman / Levee patrol: men to Blytheville / 2000 men wanted at Cairo". The litany mimics the journalistic style of newspapers' headlines (all sentences are plausible titles of

newspapers printed during the flood: "Coastguard Patrol Needed at Paducah!", "2000 Men Wanted at Cairo!"), yet recited with a constricted, deadpan vocal timbre, which seems at odds with the impression given by capital letters within sensationalist tabloids. The somber tone and lower pitch of Chalmers' voice distort the informative nature of each phrase, frustrating our expectations. Its minimalist synthesis gives sound to an intention that cannot be explained and discarded through the concepts of didactic reductionism and authoritative omniscience and that almost steers the film toward experimentation.

- 24 So, it seems that the main speaker here is the 1930s cultural and social context. The obsession of recording sentences and folk idioms equaled that of taking pictures in this decade: Sandburg's *The People*, Yes was entirely based on popular sayings and newspapers' titles registered and gathered from different sources, written or spoken, authoritative and common. It is well known that Dorothea Lange cultivated a general obsession with writing down what people said during her shooting. Her assistant, Rondal Partridge, mentioned the radical importance of the notebook she carried around all the time: "Dorothea was very conscious of the exact words people said. She suddenly broke off in the middle of our shooting to rush back in the car and write down this note". During a 1960s interview, she added a few statements about the excitement of writing the notes as quickly as possible, "while the rhythm of it was still there in my mind".³⁴ Because of its ability to convey authenticity, the camera became the prime symbol of the 1930s mind; still, the recordings of human voices would prove to be valued commodities during the same period. Hearing voices speak from various locations through radio receivers or phonographs gave the listeners a sense of a direct relationship with the world outside. Reports, news, common people's voices were instantaneously coming from the very scene of events to enter into American homes, through radio sets and phonographs, embracing the listeners in a sonorous environment. Radio programs and recordings of voices intensely influenced the sonic approach of *The River*, breaking the oneness of emission, with its reductive didacticism, in the heterogeneity and multiplicity of diverse utterances.³⁵

The divided soul of One Tenth of Our Nation

- 25 The history of the production of this movie is quite troubling. The project of making a picture dramatizing African-American progress since Emancipation was proposed by a black man, Claude A. Barnett, the founder of the Associated Negro Press. Later, the project involved two other actors: the newly-established American Film Center, financed by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Film Associates, a production company established in New York and comprising many radical filmmakers. The goals of their projects were not fully congruent: while the American Film Center wished to avoid images of the racial segregation in the South, Film Associates preferred to emphasize that in the Southern states African-Americans were still suffering social inequality, poverty, and lack of access to quality education. The growing war in Europe finally affected its content, encouraging a more 'democratic' depiction of race,³⁶ a tendency openly demonstrated by its musical score.
- 26 From the beginning, the project was supposed to have included African-American writers, musicians, and filmmakers. This was initially carried out when Maurice Ellis, a young black actor who had just played the role of Macduff in Orson Welles' *Voodoo*

Macbeth (1936), was hired. For the musical score, however, the choice fell on Roy Harris, a composer associated with what was considered authentic American music, 'white music', pruned of the frenzied rhythms of jazz. Representing a counterpoint both to European Modernism and to African-American musical traditions, Harris' music appeared as the incarnation of the 'white hope' in the musical context of the 1930s in a way that was impossible for Copland or Gershwin, both Jewish composers strongly influenced by black musical heritage. Harris' music, on the other hand, was fully identified with the Western Frontier spirit.³⁷

- 27 The desire to gratify the general public with pure entertainment, avoiding any serious or gloomy atmosphere, is therefore present in his piece. Choosing Harris as a composer for this film was part of a strategy to pander to the general public's desire to be entertained and persuaded about the righteousness of American democracy. All the qualities attributed to Harris himself – his good humor and a healthy dose of physical masculinity and self-reliance³⁸ – were exploited to grab the audience's attention and gratify their love for the country. In 1941 the composer and novelist Paul Bowles stated: "the film was made by whites for whites".³⁹ Consider, for example, the second movement, dedicated to the joyful walk of children toward school: while Maurice Ellis mentions the length of the journey, the music acquires a faster pulse to lighten the burden of this statement evoking the lengthy trek (from 3 to 6 miles). A sweet melodic line is rendered through the piano and then delivered to the upper strings bringing a sense of hope to noble youth aspirations. Later, a cheerful melody opens up in a crescendo assigned to woodwind instruments with brass motifs soaring above, echoing the aspirational attitude of the piece. Harris's musical score expands the joyful nature and positive mood of the images of children playing basketball in the yard or jumping in the river, resonating with his typical melodic tendency to describe the contact with nature in the grand open spaces of the West.
- 28 In his essay about the iconic process in musical communication, David Osmond-Smith points out that music seems incapable of communicating something beyond what is conveyed in its formal structure and linguistic syntax since – as the author states – "no general system of codification is available for emotive communication in music".⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the ability of music to produce specific effects is undeniable, and nobody could say that classical music is not able to communicate on an emotive level. A possible solution to this impasse is the focus on iconic codes and synesthetic elements in musical scores, which are deemed objective measures when dealing with the issues of communication in music. According to Osmond-Smith, examples of iconic musical idioms comprise:
 - the trilling flute figures that so frequently represent bird-song (Wagner's *Siegfried*, Beethoven's 6th *Symphony*); the repeated arpeggio figures that represent flowing water (Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* cycle); the outbursts of kettle-drumming in representations of thunderstorms and of flashes of lightning (Rossini's *Il barbiere*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*).⁴¹
- 29 These iconic renditions are the essential elements involved in musical communication beyond the formal structures of music. While the formal level of a musical score ought to be analyzed in terms analogous to those of linguistic syntax, the semantic level might be approached in terms of iconic processes like those listed by Osmond-Smith. The iconic elements primarily indicate a 'referent' – as in his examples, where onomatopoeic references are connected to a wide variety of experiences (water, birds, thunderstorms) that we might define as extramusical – but they can also reproduce

perceptual models associated with socio-historical connotations. In one of the six talks Leonard Bernstein gave at Harvard, for example, the renowned composer described the frivolous, lightweight material that Stravinsky drew from the coeval popular culture to create his theatrical work, *L'Histoire du Soldat* (*The Soldier's Tale*). Stravinsky used these connotations in order to create an effect of parody or mockery, as Bernstein said, a music of "wit and humor".⁴²

- 30 Classical music has always been capable of communicating humor by applying these iconic processes. Think about the capering and farcical harmonies used in Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas at the expense of a serious operatic style, as another example of reproduction of models associated with socio-historical connotations. Many composers use imitations of noises (slapping, yelling, loud horns) and changes in rhythms (accelerando and sudden pauses) to make listeners laugh. We might extend Osmond-Smith's list adding some examples in this direction: in *Mosquito Dance*, from Paul White's *Five Miniatures* (1934), the music imitates the buzzing of a flying bug to create an amusing effect. In Gershwin's *An American in Paris* (1928), the listener receives the musical idea of a big town, with car horns and traffic noises, vehicles rushing around and hurrying away in a chaotic and frenzied rhythm, again with an enjoyable purpose. Copland's *Burlesque* (from *Music for the Theatre*, 1925) was partly inspired by "the vulgar but irresistible singing and mugging of Fanny Brice".⁴³ According to Bernstein, Copland aspired in *Burlesque* to destroy the right rhythm; he argued that this piece constantly "loses its balance, like a clown pretending to be drunk and missing a step".⁴⁴
- 31 Harry's musical score for *One Tenth* did not employ the same burlesque and humorous iconic elements, yet it was fairly engaged in the task of bringing a cheerful sense of hope, steering the audience toward a brighter state of mind. Upon Harris's music lies the hopeful voice rising above the political and radical discourse the film wished to bear. This is even more noticeable if we compare it to the gloomy atmosphere of the commentary, both in the sense of the content conveyed and in that of the form of Maurice Ellis' voice. At the end of the second reel, when the film comes back to the sharecroppers' fields and rural sites, the prose starts a litany on cotton while images of bare feet on the ground and ill-clad shoulders are passing through, recalling that goods do not belong to those who produce them. A litany that evokes the prose poem Richard Wright wrote for the volume *12 Million Black Voices* published in 1941, describing the plight of the sharecropping system and urban living conditions.⁴⁵ Many elements point to the similarities between these two texts, Wright's volume and Ellis' commentary. Mostly, it is the use of the first-person plural, as if both authors tried to speak for their people using a collective voice to denounce the political reasons behind their stark and vulnerable lives.⁴⁶ As for the form, the timbre of Ellis' voice is entirely different from what the audience was used to hearing. From 19th century minstrel shows, the black voices were indexed through a raw, throaty rasp and a nasal, whining timbre and accompanied by other marks, such as stage dialect, occasional whoops, bursts of laughter, syncopated delivery. The raspy tone used by Eddie Anderson for his famous role of the chauffeur Rochester in *The Jack Benny Program* (1932-1955) might be a perfect example.⁴⁷ None of the features usually associated with the African-American voice are otherwise present here: there are no guttural, harsh timbres nor raspy voices but a solid regularity of pitches and pauses, so firmly part of the cultivated and trained genteel intonation. An absence that put Ellis' performance fully outside the racist

conventions and, therefore, outside the audience's expectations on what had to be considered an 'authentic' black performance style.

- 32 All these elements demonstrate the high level of complexity and ambivalence of *One Tenth*. Isolating the aural codes from the visual part, we can see how multileveled and ambiguous even a classical non-fiction film could be. Suspended between the entertaining purpose brought by the iconic elements of Harris' musical score and the criticism of the commentary, proudly conveying the unorthodox vocal timbre of Maurice Ellis, *One Tenth* hinted at a possible complexity beyond the perimeter of didacticism.

Conclusion

- 33 The three films considered here may be compared to the documentary directed by Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister in 1942, *Listen to Britain*. All these movies are highly poetic (Nichols places *Listen to Britain* in the poetic mode⁴⁸) and, at the same time, highly propagandistic. Nonetheless, the differences between the British and the American films are also evident. In *Listen to Britain*, we see the formal abstractions and expressive/poetic qualities chiefly assigned to the images, whose connections sometimes appear erratic, while the sounds are entirely diegetic suggesting much more realism. In the American examples, we have exactly the opposite situation: the poetic, expressive, and entertaining effects are exercised by sounds and musical scores while the images appear didactic and expository. If it is true that the voice-of-God commentary gives more transparency to the images, we may also accept the idea of its temporary ruptures: as we have seen, the oneness of its emission is sometimes broken while the musical scores appear, at times, insubordinate. In *The City*, the modernist idiom of Copland's score acquires an ambiguous connotation when compared to the visual track, which tries to persuade viewers to move outside the urban center. In *The River*, Chalmers's voice is charged with an intrinsic ambivalence and eccentricity at odds with the general didacticism. In *One Tenth*, the music has an unpredictable freshness, wit, and humor in spite of the criticism conveyed by Ellis's commentary and voice. Despite their noticeable differences, the cases studied in this article demonstrate how the fiercely untamed emotional value of vocal expressions and musical scores refuse to be contained in the sheer framework of propaganda and didacticism. Judging by their sonic approach, the three documentaries demonstrate that even in classical examples of the expository mode the boundary between amusement and argument can be fluid and indistinct, giving a wide array of combinations that matches in complexity those produced by contemporary practices.

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ENDNOTES

1. Bill Nichols in Holly Rogers, ed., *Music and Sound in Documentary Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), ix-xi. Nichols does not clarify if the second screening of *Man with a Movie Camera* also took place in class or at a movie theater. However, he compares the effects the second screening had on "audiences" pointing to "the remarkable music performed on a striking mix of non-traditional and traditional instruments." Bill Nichols in Holly Rogers, ed., *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ix.
2. The expression "sensory embodiment" is often used in Bill Nichols' preface to Rogers' volume: Nichols in Holly Rogers, ed., *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ix-xi.
3. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), xii.
4. The "reality claim" is discussed in Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 116-118 and problematized within the contemporary cultural context in Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), ix-xv. Nichols briefly described "discourses of sobriety" in *Introduction to Documentary*, 26.
5. Holly Rogers, ed., *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, 1.
6. Similar arguments are expressed in John Corner's essay "Sound Real: Music and Documentary" where the author argues that British TV documentaries generally employ soundtracks more

frequently if the topic is lighter, as in nature or travelogue films, and when the contents are less political or ideological and the tone less persuasive than "relaxed and slightly amused". The documentaries analyzed by Corner demonstrate that musical soundtracks and serious topics can be in some cases considered at the opposite ends of a spectrum representing the seriousness of a documentary film. When the documentary deals with controversial topics and assumes political and ideological perspectives, the music is generally avoided as an insidious presence. John Corner, "Sound Real: Music and Documentary" in *Popular Music* 21, (October 2002): 362-364.

7. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Third Edition, 104-131; Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real. The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations* (London: BFI, 1995), 69-74.

8. Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 33; Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 109.

9. "People and places can appear in a manner that would be disturbingly intermittent in fiction. An intermittent representation of people and places, based on the requirements of logic, can, in fact, serve as a distinguishing characteristic for the documentary". Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 19.

10. Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 74-76.

11. Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 18-27.

12. Consider, for example, the stereotypical representation of Indians in Hollywood: "a rhythmic figure of four equal beats with the accent falling on the first beat played by drums or low bass instrument." Kathryn Kalinak, *How the West Was Sung: Music in the Westerns of John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 72. Furthermore, in terms of voice-over and narration, one of the most important conventions borrowed from classical Hollywood was the rule that imposed clarity. The classical Hollywood hallmark of comprehensibility was generally respected in the 1930s documentaries in which clear and post-recorded sounds were the usual routines. Jeffrey K. Ruoff, "Conventions of Sound in Documentary," in *Sound Theory / Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 217.

13. In "13 Rules for Making Documentary Films", Moore rehabilitates laughter and satire in documentary films. What is interesting is the fact that Lorentz had the same ideas about the documentary, refusing to be confined in the category of 'documentary'. When *The River* premiered along with Disney's newest cartoon character, *Pluto*, in New Orleans in October 1937, he praised the choice arguing that a film was a film, cartoon or documentary, because the same dramatic logic was at play. With the obvious differences, the same rationale employed by Michael Moore against keeping the labels separated (fiction and documentary) was possible almost a century ago. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 97; Michael Moore, "13 Rules For Making Documentary Films" <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/09/michael-moores-13-rules-for-making-documentary-films-22384/> (last accessed April 2019).

14. R. L. Rutsky and Justin Wyatt, "Serious Pleasures: Cinematic Pleasure and the Notion of Fun," in *Cinema Journal* 30, (Fall 1990), 5-9; Alan McKee, *Fun! What Entertainment Tells Us About Living a Good Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1-29.

15. Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 21-22.

16. Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 3-19.

17. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 64; Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 36-37; Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 3-12.

18. Bill Nichols in Rogers, *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, xii-xiii.

19. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 11-12.

20. Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 105-110, quote about "rural utopianism": 104; Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 150-183.
21. Charles Wolfe, "The Poetics and Politics of Nonfiction: Documentary Film," in *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, ed. Tino Balio (New York and Toronto: Scribner / Macmillan, 1993), 377.
22. Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 24. In *Only Entertainment*, Richard Dyer (who is often quoted in Flinn's volume) describes the relationship between entertainment and utopia pointing out the escapist power inherent in the act of seeing and hearing what was deeply desired and hoped for in the U.S. during the Depression. Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 19-35; particularly Table 5.2.
23. *The City* [6' 55" - 7' 22"]
24. Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York and London: Norton, 2009), 451.
25. Charles Wolfe, "The Poetics and Politics of Nonfiction," 376.
26. Quoted in Susman, *Culture as History*, 218-19.
27. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 42-43, 46.
28. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 22-23, 54-56, 59-60.
29. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 101.
30. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Cornwall Press, 1942), 500-501.
31. *The River* [2' - 2' 29"]
32. Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*. Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 182.
33. Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, (Spring 1983): 27.
34. Both quotes are in *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*, by Dyanna Taylor, PBS-American Masters 28, episode 5, aired in 2014.
35. The centrality of the concept of people (voices, expressions, sayings) can also be measured in terms of musical scores. During the 1930s, the modernism in music moved toward a more accessible, more attainable, wide-spread public idea of art. Stott points out that "Copland began writing music for the people, for as large an audience as possible, music in the simplest possible terms, music based on folk melodies, music one could whistle, because he feared that composers were in danger of working in a vacuum". Clarifying and simplifying became the new imperatives for Thomson, Copland, Harris, all equally interested in reaching a wider audience and promoting communal bonding. In composing the score for *The River*, Thomson did the same. He found in cowboy songs, war ditties, and other folk tunes something paltry and forgotten, old features that he would have rearranged in new adaptations, bringing a renewed vitality to old tunes. Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 104-105; Richard Kostelanetz, *Virgil Thomson: A Reader. Selected Writings, 1924-1984* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 212.
36. The U.S. had to appear as a stronghold of freedom and democracy against what was happening in Europe, an urgency that overshadowed, in the end, a more radical and controversial discussion of sensitive racial issues. Too much emphasis on the 'plight of Southern Negroes' would have depressed the citizens and dwarfed the perception of the country as the right and good exception in Western civilization. Julie Hubbert, "Race, War, Music and The

Problem of 'One Tenth of Our Nation' (1940)," in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 57-60.

37. Beth E. Levy, "'The White Hope of American Music'; or, How Roy Harris Became Western," *American Music* 19, (Summer 2001), 142.

38. Beth Levy, "The White Hope of American Music," 134-44.

39. Beth Levy, "The White Hope of American Music," 165.

40. David Osmond-Smith, "The Iconic Process in Musical Communication," in *VS, Quaderni di studi semiotici*, 3, (September 1972), 31-35.

41. David Osmond-Smith, "The Iconic Process in Musical Communication," 39.

42. About Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* Bernstein writes: "the joke of the 'wrong note' tickles us: it's the snark being a 'boojum', it's Groucho being the Prime Minister of Freedonia." Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question. Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 365.

43. Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 449.

44. Leonard Bernstein, *Young People's Concert: Humor in Music*, CBS-New York Philharmonic, aired on February 28, 1959.

45. Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States of America* (London: Drummond, 1947), 49.

46. Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 186-87.

47. Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008), 134-45.

48. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 97.

ABSTRACTS

The nonfiction filmmaking that burgeoned in the U.S. in 1935 was deeply committed to the issues of truth and authenticity, in strong opposition to the commodities delivered by entertainment industries. However, the pervasive use of non-diegetic music at the expense of mere facts and scientific inquiry reveals how blurred the boundaries between historical data and creative storytelling were. As in the soundtrack of mainstream fiction films produced by Hollywood, the musical scores of *The City* (1939), *The River* (1938), and *One Tenth of Our Nation* (1940) dealt with the purpose of entertaining the audience not only adding humor and aural pleasure but also revealing some hints of a poetic quality apparently at odds with the films' expository purposes.

INDEX

Keywords: Documentary, Classical Hollywood, American History, New Romanticism in Music, Voice, Aaron Copland, Thomas Chalmers, Roy Harris.

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