

## Sonic Icons Prominent Moments of Cinematic Self-Reflexivity

Winfried Pauleit

Published: November 21, 2018



Figure 1. *THE KING'S SPEECH*, Tom Hooper, UK/USA/AUS 2010

History produces sound recordings. And sound recordings shape history in turn. This interrelationship is clearly attested to in recordings of historical voices, such as that of John F. Kennedy's speech before the Schöneberger Rathaus in Berlin on June 26, 1963. Sections of this recording have taken on a life of their own, becoming iconic sound bites over the course of their frequent rebroadcasting, not least Kennedy's famous phrase "Ich bin ein Berliner". In the context of his thoughts on the history of Weimar and Nazi era music, Brian Currid introduced the concept of "sonic icons" to describe phenomena such as these, which function as acoustic markers for political history or serve to represent it, such as Hitler's characteristically bellowed speeches.<sup>1</sup> Currid's term essentially adapts an art historical approach that draws on political iconography for subsequent use in musicology and cultural history.<sup>2</sup> My focus in the following is to apply the concept of the sonic icon to film and film studies. The emphasis here is less on the sort of iconic film quotes that have become removed from the context of their respective films via repetition and thus left their mark in collective memory as independent

1. Currid, Brian. 2006. A national acoustics. Music and mass publicity in Weimar and Nazi Germany. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 102.

2. Warnke, Martin. 1992. "Politische Ikonographie", in A. Beyer (Ed.), *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst. Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie*. Berlin: Wagenbach, pp. 23-28.

aesthetic sound figures, but rather on self-reflexive moments in specific films where the sound comes to the fore and reveals specific references to history and contemporary history. In order to make the concept of the sonic icon suitable for use in cinematic contexts, several prerequisites need to be sketched out to this end, which concern the history of how film sound is produced on the one hand and certain theoretical considerations on sound and modern film on the other.

## 1. Film Sound as a Historical Trace: Prerequisites

My hypothesis is that the reciprocal relationship between media history and history can also be observed and investigated by looking at the treatment of film sound. The production of film sound forms part of the aesthetics of film, while at the same time using procedures whose techniques and cultural practices are subject to historicity. These procedures do not only produce sound of differing acoustic qualities, but are also marked by periods of large-scale upheaval, such as the introduction of standardized techniques to govern sound film, stereo sound or sound design. Since the very introduction of sound film, one such technique has been the recording of voices, music and sounds via microphone, which are produced as an intentional way of shaping the sound of a film—and also for use in digital sound design. Historical markers and sound events also find their way into these recordings, including, for example, the voices of actors or known historical personalities, pieces of music, but also inevitable aspects of the recording process one might refer to as “the noise of the real”, such as hiss or feedback noise, i.e., the parts of the sound production process that emerge at random or unintentionally based on the technology used during the recording and what actually happens while it’s being carried out.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, such noises enable inferences to be made about the time and circumstances of the respective film’s production, as well as about the history of technology, which is both a part of the production history of the film in question as well as a part of history itself. In modern productions, both of these areas fall under the heading of sound design. Voices, music, and sounds in film production are also subject to historical modes and conventions that are in turn in constant interaction with history.

“Soundtracks” for the film are then produced from these procedures together with subsequent processing. The fact that one talks likely to do with the original placement of sound on the analogue film strip used for sound film. In order to ensure that sound was played in sync, an additional track was set up next to the image track which, alongside creating a fixed connection between sound and image along the film strip, also set out a unified gauge—akin to those used in train tracks— i.e., a fixed distance between the sound and image tracks. Yet adding a soundtrack to the film strip during the introduction of sound film also changed the temporality of the entire production practice for sound. Until the end of the 1920s, the sound was created by way of live performances put on during the film screening itself, which made use of a film narrator, sound effects, and a musical accompaniment. With the introduction of sound film, this sort of performative sound production became separated from the actual screening situation. Since then, the sound for a film (much like the images) has been produced in advance at a different location and then scanned from the film strip at the screening or

3. Kittler, Friedrich. 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 14.

read from digital data packets as the trace of or track left behind by a production process inscribed into it in the past. The concept of the soundtrack thus expresses this aspect of the temporality of sound (i.e., inscription and scanning) in appropriate fashion.

When microphones, loudspeakers, and sound recording appliances appear in films, it creates a self-reflexive potential which links the reception of the film back to the cultural actions carried out during the production process. This serves to characterize film sound as the product of sounds from the real world which are recorded and subsequently processed. These forms of self-reflexivity bear historical witness to and provide historical models for the set-ups and techniques used in film sound production and enable them to be experienced via the film itself. They also verify these cultural actions, that is, the history of the performative process of working with the techniques and different apparatuses used for creating sound. This sort of cinematic self-reflexivity is to form the starting point for the following investigation. The analyses are aimed on the one hand at the idea that listening is an integral component of film perception. On the other, they emphasize that what is heard can be decoded and reflected upon in view of its historical production, that is, this investigation examines film sound both in terms of the complex aesthetic of film as well as in terms of how it taps into history. This dual perspective on film sound enables an audio history of film to become conceivable. It places a focus on the relationship between aesthetics and history and while the film examples and the discourses surrounding them may not allow it to be “heard” directly, it can certainly be studied, tapped into, and described. In this way, the approach presented here is fundamentally different from the sort of proposals that assume history exists directly and can be accessed just as directly in sound recordings, such as, for example, the approach taken by Gerhard Paul and Ralph Schock in their book *Sound des Jahrhunderts*.<sup>4</sup>

Rick Altman explicitly points out that film sound cannot simply be reduced to sound events from the outside world.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of this discussion, he mounts a fundamental critique of the idea of the indexical film sound. According to Altman, this debate has been marked by the idea that the conception of indexicality employed in photography can be transposed to the procedures used for film sound without the need for any further reflection. The basic assumption here—which is itself hardly uncontroversial—is that photography is generally accepted as a historical trace of past occurrences and has already entered into the study of history in the form of visual history.<sup>6</sup> In photography discourse, the idea of the historical trace of an event has been expressed in most pointed fashion by Roland Barthes’s dictum “this has been”.<sup>7</sup> Without wanting to discuss the validity of such postulations here, it can be noted that the presence of microphones, sound recording equipment etc. (that is, the characteristics of cinematic self-reflexivity) form an obvious analogy to photographic and sound recording for film. For microphones in particular demonstrate, for example, that a similar quality of inscription or indexicality is attached to sound recording as to the recording of photographic images—if nothing else due to the fact that film sound is produced in advance (and at a different location).

4. Paul, Gerhard / Schock, Ralph (Ed.). 2013. *Sound des Jahrhunderts. Geräusche, Töne, Stimmen 1889 bis heute*. Bonn (bpb).

5. Altman, Rick. 1992. Four and a Half Film Fallacies, In: *Sound Theory Sound Practice*. Ed. Rick Altman, Routledge: New York/ London, pp. 35–45.

6. Paul, Gerhard. 2006. Von der Historischen Bildkunde zur Visual History. Eine Einführung. In: Ders. (Ed.): *Visual History. Ein Studienbuch*. Göttingen 2006, pp. 7–36.

7. Barthes, Roland. 1989. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 96.

In his critique *Four and a Half Film Fallacies*, Altman emphasizes the broad reach of conclusions based on this analogy under the section entitled “Half a Fallacy”.<sup>8</sup> Altman’s fundamental criticism here is aimed at the sort of conceptions of indexicality based on a naïve representational realism which are then subsequently transposed to sound. He also brings the theme of digitization into play, which makes actual image and sound recordings increasingly unnecessary, which for him means that the era of indexical inscription by the use of the camera or microphone increasingly belong to history and are thus losing their validity. Yet Altman’s criticism is still only couched as a “half fallacy”, since it doesn’t apply to more complex conceptions of indexicality which assume that historical events don’t simply remain accessible in image and sound recordings like events of the present, but can only actually be tapped into in the sense of a difference—as past events that are thus not directly accessible. Roland Barthes talks of a “madness” here in relation to photography, in the sense of a dual temporal codification.<sup>9</sup> When this idea is transposed to sound, the implication is that film sound can indeed reveal historical traces in certain circumstances. At such moments, what is heard during film perception is encoded in dual fashion and thus grasped at once as a sound in the present and an (inaccessible) trace. Altman’s hypothesis is that the use of the camera and the microphone loses its relevance over the course of digitization thus also remains a half fallacy, as to this day, digital sound design hasn’t yet bid a full farewell to working with sound recordings. In order to create specific sound effects in particular, sound recordings of the physical world (vocals, screams, animal voices, or other sounds) are still made and/or processed further.<sup>10</sup>

Prominent examples from film history can also be invoked as a further argument for this kind of complex conception of indexicality, such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *THE CONVERSATION* (USA 1974), which has itself contributed to discourses of indexicality. The film grasps sound recording as an indexical trace analogous to photography, a trace which blends intentional inscriptions with unplanned ones. At no point are the various sound recordings assumed to be an identical reproduction of the past, but are grasped instead as something inaccessible and non-identical that still relates to the physical reality of voices, sounds, and noises in that place at that time. The plot of the film develops based on this understanding of indexicality. The voice recording originally made intentionally morphs in the process into an increasingly abstract sound structure that moves further away from the event of the recording with each new playing of the tape and detaches itself from the speaking bodies that created it, producing a roving, constantly shifting sonic icon as a result.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, *THE CONVERSATION* formulates a similar critique of naïve representational realism to that expressed by Altman and develops the concept of indexicality further as it does so. At the same time, the general acceptance of such analogies has only been strengthened by historical events such as cases of tapping or bugging or video surveillance scandals—with their obvious reference to historical recordings, which have as a result become a central subject of legal debate, such as in the case of the Watergate tapes.<sup>12</sup>

8. Altman 1992, loc. cit., pp. 42–5.

9. Barthes, Roland. 1989. *Camera Lucida*, pp. 113–6.

10. Flückiger, Barbara. 2006. *Sound Effects – On the Theory and Practice of Film Sound Design*. In *Sound Art. Between Avant-Garde and Pop Culture*. Anne Thurmann-Jajes, Sabine Breitsameter, Winfried Pauleit (Eds.), Bremen/Cologne: Salon Verlag, pp. 228–236.

11. Greiner, Rasmus/Pauleit, Winfried. 2016. “Sonic Icons and Histospheres: On the Political Aesthetics of an Audio History of Film”, in: Leif Kramp et. al. (eds.): *Politics, Civil Society and Participation. Media and Communications in a Transforming Environment*. Bremen 2016, pp. 311–321.

12. U.S. Columbia District Court 1974, last accessed 29.3.2017, <http://www.aes.org/aeshc/docs/forensic.audio/watergate.tapes.report.pdf>

The present chapter pursues precisely this sort of complex conception of indexicality and places a focus on interrogating film sound with respect to aesthetics and history, taking forms of cinematic self-reflexivity as a starting point. Film sound is not regarded in isolation here but rather as one element of the texture of a film, which is what produces the actual experience of viewing. In line with the work of Michel Chion, this can be referred to as “audio-logo-visual”.<sup>13</sup> Chion’s term describes “all the cases that include written and/or spoken language” before going on to describe the five relations between the said and the shown.<sup>14</sup> In this process, Chion’s considerations emphasize the simultaneously unified and hybrid nature of film perception and thus point the way for the following considerations. This chapter attempts to use the concept of the sonic icon to expand upon Chion’s film theoretical concept, moving beyond classification in order to refer to specific moments within films which forge and maintain connections to history beyond the context of the works themselves. This expanded concept links in turn to Tom Mitchell’s invented term of “imagetext”.<sup>15</sup> Mitchell grasps imagetext less as a concept for classifying hybrid aesthetic forms and more as a theoretical figure (analogous to Derrida’s ‘différance’), as a place of dialectic tension and transformation which connects aesthetics with history. In reference to thoughts such as these, sonic icons can be described as aesthetic moments of cinematic self-reflexivity whose hybridity is manifested as a relationship of aesthetic tension. They form aesthetic figures within the film and cannot as such be reduced to their sound, functioning instead as a hybrid category full of tension, as “soundimagetext”.<sup>16</sup> They reveal their relationship to history by conjuring up the past or by remembering or recalling something, becoming themselves a site for the potential transformation of history in the process.<sup>17</sup> The term neither refers to the re-staging of historical sounds, nor to the assertion that authentic historical sounds can be made accessible or carried into the present. The quality of a sonic icon lies instead in the reference to something from the past, in a trace that enables something absent to be identified.

The investigation of sonic icons as moments of cinematic self-reflexivity is linked to a particular understanding of modern film, for here too it’s possible to identify the autonomy of sound, image, and text as unfolding within a form of aesthetic play equally full of tension, whereby sound can seemingly be heard out of sync from or independently of the image.<sup>18</sup> The way in which modern film makes this aesthetic play visible and audible or even treats it in discursive fashion in certain cases emphasizes the importance of sound as a part of film aesthetics. The intention behind this chapter is thus heavily indebted to an aesthetics of modern film. Sonic icons are therefore grasped as aesthetic figurations first and foremost, albeit ones which are marked or pervaded by historical inscriptions. The investigation of sonic icons thus aims to develop this connection between aesthetic production and historical inscription in order to lay the foundations for an audio history of film—an approach that differs from merely registering and describing iconic film sounds.

The films to be discussed to this end have been chosen in such a way that they crisscross different genres and forms, moving all the way from avant-garde film to the Hollywood musical and taking in documentary and essay films along the way, before ending with a contemporary historical drama.

13. Chion, Michel. 2009. *Film, A Sound Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 468.

14. Chion, Michel. 2009. *Film, A Sound Art*, p. 473, 489.

15. Mitchell, William J. Thomas. 1994. *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

16. For a discussion of Mitchell’s concept of “imagetext” and how it can be extended into the idea of “soundimagetext”, see Nessel, Sabine/Pauleit, Winfried. 2013. *Constructions of the Digital Film: Aesthetics, Narrative, Discourse*. In: Bernd Kracke, Marc Ries (Eds.) *Expanded Narration*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2013, S. 219–234.

17. In her book about Alain Resnais’s *NUIT ET BROUILLARD*, Sylvie Lindeperg makes reference to Alain Fleischer in describing a similar aesthetic procedure, referring to it as an “art of deposition” and explaining it as follows “because film is a place of absence, of fissure, of distance, it doesn’t appear in place of the event, it receives it.” (translation from the German). Lindeperg, Sylvie (2010): *Nacht und Nebel. Ein Film in der Geschichte*. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, p. 10.

18. This reference to modern film can, for example, be found in different manifestations in the following: Deleuze, Gilles (1989): *Cinema 2. The Time Image*, London: Continuum; Gregor, Ulrich/Patalas, Enno (1965): *Geschichte des modernen Films*, Gütersloh; Metz, Christian (1974): *Language and Cinema*, Berlin: De Gruyter.

The criterion for choosing these films is the appearance of gramophones, record players, and records. A focus is placed here on the moments of cinematic self-reflexivity that put the aesthetic interplay between sound, image, and text on display as a relationship of tension in keeping with modern film. What is meant here is how the recording instruments and media mentioned above are depicted in the films in question, which can either appear as a relationship between image, sound, and text—or purely as sound, purely as image, purely as text and/or in all possible combinations of the three. Furthermore, another relationship of tension is produced with respect to sound in that one can actually distinguish between film sound and the sound of a record within the film itself. In the following, such relationships between sound, image, and text as well as those between sound and sound are referred to as relationships of difference which are based on different acts of production, such as image acts, sound acts, speech acts, or writing acts.<sup>19</sup> The focus of these differences is not only on how sound, image, and text can appear in film with regard to form and aesthetics and how they respectively interact, but also on the broader institutional conditions of the media practice in question (in this case phonography, i.e., both the historical method of sound recording and the more general process of sound inscription, and film) —in particular via the moments of cinematic self-reflexivity that come to the fore as sonic icons and produce references to history. Sonic icons can be characterized on the one hand as aesthetic figurations that can take numerous different forms and on the other as theoretical figures which are assigned a specific function relating to cinematic self-reflexivity that extends beyond the boundaries of different genres and types of film.

Numerous studies on Robert Siodmak and Edgar Ulmer's *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* (D 1930) have grasped the film as a paradigmatic example of the relationship of difference between film and photography, not least because it contains a short sequence that shows the transition from a film image to photography as a photographic act.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the film also reveals the relationship of difference between phonography and film sound, not only by portraying the historical use of the gramophone, but also by recording the effects of the music it plays in the form of dancing bodies within the film itself, thus making its trace perceptible in the image. Yet this relationship of difference can only be gleaned indirectly (from the film image and the discourse on the film), as *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* is a silent film and lacks a set soundtrack specifically created for the images. This means neither the music on the record in question can be heard, nor can any originally documented film sound or film composition which accompanies the rhythmic montage of images be discerned. But as will be seen, the images, intertitles, and the various discourses on the film refer to entirely specific recordings on record from the time and musical motifs played during the premiere of the film.

Howard Hawks's *A SONG IS BORN* (USA 1948) has a different focus. The focus here is not on the use of the gramophone within the context of musical entertainment culture, as Hawks depicts instead the production of a phonographic music encyclopedia. In so doing, the comedy doesn't just give an account of an attempt to create a revised version of music history that incorporates the popular music styles of the time—including Afro-American

19. I make reference here in particular to Philippe Dubois 1983. *L'acte photographique*. Paris/Brussels. Dubois speaks of the photographic "image act" and thus describes a theoretical dispositif of photography by conceiving of the product and the act that generates it as one. I derive the term "sound act" from this idea as an analogous procedure.

20. Bellour, Raymond. 2010. *Zwei Minuten Ungewissheit in MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*. In *Viva Fotofilm - bewegt/unbewegt*, Eds. Thomas Tode, Gusztáv Hámos, Katja Pratschke, pp. 39–54. Marburg: Schüren; Prüm, Karl. 1999. *Stilbildende Aspekte der Kameraarbeit. Umriss einer fotografischen Filmanalyse*. In *Kamerastille im aktuellen Film*, Eds. idem., pp. 15–50, Marburg: Schüren.

gospel, blues, and jazz in particular—but also depicts the innovative practice of writing an encyclopedia by means of the phonograph and record recordings. At times, Hawks's comedy appears like a making-of for this phonographic undertaking. It presents sonic icons in the making, as it were, not least because Hawks places musical legends such as Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton and many others both before the microphone and camera.

The innovative quality of such a phonographic encyclopedia can be seen and heard all the more lucidly when one also takes *BALL OF FIRE* (USA 1941) into consideration, the comedy whose key theme is a classic encyclopedia in book form which Hawks shot several years previously. On the one hand, *A SONG IS BORN* is just a remake of this earlier film. Yet placing the two films alongside one another on the other makes the difference between phonography and the written word particularly clear, an example to demonstrate how a phonography of music history and thus ultimately an audio history of film can take concrete form.

In her essay film *SALUT LES CUBAINS* (F 1963), Agnès Varda plays with various relationships of difference between film, phonography, photography, and writing. This entails her, for example, contrasting a live performance by Cuban street musicians in Paris with a freeze-frame taken from film footage showing their musical rendition or animating the photographs of musician Benny Moré she took in Cuba directly at the editing table to form a photo film, with his record recordings as an accompaniment. This sequence was edited together at a time when Moré was already dead. Nearly half a century later, Varda equally re-stages acoustic fragments from her childhood in the autobiographical film *LES PLAGES D'AGNÈS* (F 2008). Here she superimposes a form of musique concrète—the sound of the furniture in her parents' house—onto the music her mother used to hear on the gramophone in the 1930s, thus forming a complex sound collage. Varda's sonic icons hinge upon phonographic traces and the processing of (acoustic) memories into a soundimagetext.

Finally, an attempt is then made to apply the conception of the sonic icon as a context spanning aesthetic production and history to a historical film. Historical films are frequently discussed in terms of how appropriately they represent historical facts or the consistency of their historical attributes and are just as frequently criticized as being anachronistic.<sup>21</sup> In such cases, the aesthetic of the film is entrusted with doing justice to the necessary demands with respect to representation and consistency. The approach being pursued here asks instead whether processes of historical inscription are still to be found in historical dramas and whether the genre of the historical drama can also produce sonic icons in the sense discussed above. The analytical procedures tried out in the previous sections are then applied to the British production *THE KING'S SPEECH* (UK/USA/AUS 2010) to this end.

The search for sonic icons proceeds in two directions in this final film example. On the one hand, the historical sound and film recordings used in *THE KING'S SPEECH* are explored in detail, with this archive material

21. For a critique of this sort of treatment of historical films, see Wendler, André. 2014. *Anachronismen: Historiografie und Kino*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink.

serving to attest to processes of historical inscription. On the other, the speech acts of the actors at the time of filming are examined as to whether these also bring historical references to this period (i.e., the start of the 21 century) to the fore. The idea here is that the historical narrative of *THE KING'S SPEECH* equally responds to a situation of the present. We live in a society of self-optimization and coaching and the film tells a story of precisely this kind, albeit in historical garb. With this dual interrogation in mind, the final section of this chapter also forges a connection to the chapters by Rasmus Greiner and Mattias Frey which follow this one, each of who bring their own methods to bear on the *THE KING'S SPEECH*.

## 2. Relationships of Difference Between Phonography, Photography and Writing: *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* (1930)

Even in the silent era, the soundtrack already formed a fundamental part of film aesthetics and screening practice via the respective musical accompaniment. But aside from the musical accompaniment in the cinema auditorium, the way in which sound and human language were conveyed via images, music, and intertitles actually laid the foundations for the modern use of film sound. This sets film apart from photography, which, due to its temporality as the snapshot of a given moment, only becomes connected to sound and timbre under certain conditions. One such condition is when photographs appear in film.<sup>22</sup> Films show, for example, how photographs are both produced and used, equally allowing them to be heard—even if sometimes only as the rustling sound of the aperture or the few moments of silence in a film when a photograph is looked at contemplatively. Such or similar references to photography in film are frequently explored via the concept of intermediality or remediation and then examined in terms of the relationship or difference between two media and their different respective aesthetic productions.<sup>23</sup> Instead of following this sort of approach, this chapter will attempt to grasp such relationships of difference as part of an aesthetic of modern film, whereby different relationships of difference are superimposed onto and interact with one another in often complex fashion. Part of the analysis of this aesthetic interplay always involves exploring the relationship to history, as will be developed in the following based on *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* as an example.

There are two main scenes in Robert Siodmak's silent film *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* where photography appears directly. The first of these is the scene showing a game involving star postcards on the Saturday evening that leads to the argument between Annie (Annie Schreyer) and Erwin (Erwin Splettstößer) before finally coming to head in a veritable storm of images. The second of these is the scene with the photographer at Wannsee, which shows moving portraits that do not actually belong to the fictional plot, with these portraits becoming still photographs for a moment before beginning to move once again.<sup>24</sup> Based on the example of *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*, it's possible to trace the relationship of difference between film and photography as distinct media in almost prototypical fashion: photography as a cross-section of time and space and film as a time-image viewed through a specific frame. *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* typifies an aesthetic that draws on a fixed sequence of camera shots, which has its roots in the photographic avant-garde of the 1920s.<sup>25</sup>

22. Pauleit, Winfried 2004. *Filmstandbilder. Passagen zwischen Kunst und Kino*. Frankfurt am Main.

23. For a critique of intermediality, see Nessel, Sabine / Pauleit, Winfried. 2011. *Jenseits von Intermedialität*. In: *Blickregime und Dispositive audiovisueller Medien*, Ed. N. Elia-Borer et.al., Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 209-221.

24. See here Bellour, loc. cit.

25. See here Prümm, loc. cit.



Figure 2. *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*, Robert Siodmak/Edgar G. Ulmer, D 1930

Yet phonography is equally inscribed into this relationship of difference between photography and the film image, with its significance in this case extending far beyond standard silent film musical accompaniment and additional sound effects. Its significance unfolds here instead as a second relationship of difference between the cultural practice of film sound production in cinema and other phonographic procedures, which becomes visible in the film via the use of the gramophone or are attested to by intertitles.<sup>26</sup> The 1930 premiere of *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* was still accompanied by a silent film orchestra and the film was produced without its own soundtrack. Yet the use of the gramophone and records is explicitly documented in and accentuated by the plot of the film. Two central scenes in which the film refers to its own tonal qualities depict the relationship of difference between film sound and phonography in specific fashion. The scenes are also grouped around the two explicit references to photography mentioned above (the scene with the star postcards and the scene with the photographer).

The argument scene involving the star postcards contains various visual “sound effects”. These include a dripping tap (shown in shots of varying field sizes) and a cupboard door opening by itself, both of which are indicated visually as being exceptional moments. In both these cases, the images serve to conjure up the corresponding sounds. This strategy is entirely standard in silent film and is based on automatic image and sound associations on the part of the spectator, which can be additionally accentuated during the film screening via music or intensifying sound effects,<sup>27</sup> as the images used in silent film were always actually geared towards being linked to sound. Today, sound effects appear on the different musical soundtracks which accompany the DVD of the film, thus

26. See Lange, Eric/Serge Bromberg, 2003. *Les premiers pas du cinéma. A la recherche du son.* (DVD), 52 min, Frankreich: lobsterfilms; Wedel, Michael, 2007. *Der deutsche Musikfilm. Archäologie eines Genres.* München: text + kritik.

27. Chion, Michel, 2009. *Film, A Sound Art.* New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 5-7.

allowing the squeaking of the cupboard door to emerge in onomatopoeic fashion. These effects create an additional presence within the film situation and open it up at the same time for the spectator, allowing the irritating sound to come to the fore and reverberate in the imagination. Yet the respective part of the music doesn't actually have to sound exactly like a cupboard door, as it's already sufficient to mark this visual "sound effect" by way of additional musical accentuation.<sup>28</sup> Initially purely visual in nature, this sound effect has the function here of opening up a complex semantic space within the film, which in this case indicates the threshold between love and hate before eventually reaching its peak in the destruction of the star postcards. The sound effect becomes a sonic icon in that it also refers to the gender relations of the time, calling these to mind by way of the conflicts that emerge when a couple live together in a one-room apartment.

This simple example serves as a particularly good illustration of how the relationships of difference between film and photography, film and phonography, and film and writing are linked together, creating an aesthetic interplay and producing sonic icons in the process, for this scene also edits together the dripping tap and the newspaper being read attentively during the evening meal. Intertitles also come into play here, such as that which states "An Eurer Stelle würde ich ruhig ein bißchen Krach machen!" (If I were you, I'd make some noise), which is attributed to the friend visiting them. Precisely because this silent film doesn't have a fixed soundtrack, it can still be interpreted via varying musical accompaniments to this day. Different accentuations are possible in every such interpretation, which produce in turn different sonic icon variants. These can, for example, more emphasize the hybrid nature of sound and image or the connections between them. According to the respective emphasis given, it's possible to speak of different tendencies here, which are also expressed differently in the various theories, with their respective theoretical conceptions for the connection of sound, image, and writing in film being written in a number of different ways. Michel Chion's concept of "audio-logo-vision", makes, for example, the inseparable connection within the film experience visible by way of hyphens, depicting the hybrid elements of film like a chain whose links are symbolized by the hyphens.<sup>29</sup> The compound term "soundimagetext" that follows in the footsteps of Tom Mitchell's work does away with any such connecting symbols, with its orthography generating a reading experience that remains unwieldy.<sup>30</sup> Much like the process of deconstruction, this stumbling stone in the flow of reading functions like a critique on categories of difference, implicitly setting itself against the idea that it's possible to cleanly distinguish between image, sound, and text.

The scene with the photographer in *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* depicts a portrait photographer's practice both as weekend entertainment and a form of aesthetic play that moves back and forth between moving and still images. Both before it and after it, the relationship of difference between film and phonography is explicitly displayed: a gramophone appears at the start of bathing trip to Wannsee beach and again as its close, thus also serving to frame the romantic meeting between the leading actors (Brigitte Borchert and Wolfgang von Waltershausen). The gramophone is first shown in close up being prepared for use (its various pieces are put together, the crank handle is

28. Chion, Michel. 2009. *Film, A Sound Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 7.

29. Chion, Michel. 2009. *Film, A Sound Art*, p. 468.

30. Nessel/Pauleit: *Jenseits von Intermedialität*, loc. cit.

attached), with this process being edited into various shots of swimmers getting ready to enter the lake (changing clothes, putting on bathing suits) in a parallel montage. Then the leading actress places the needle of the pick-up head on the record, with her tiny facial movements becoming connected to the record, pick-up head, and gramophone at this prominent moment of acoustic expectation. The pleasurable, almost physical immersion in the music is thus made visible, which both precedes the actual plunge into the lake and is brought into direct connection with it: the music and the water expand outwards in waves and envelop the human bodies, grasping them in their own respective dynamics. A series of moving portraits appears in frame which are connected with the cultural use of records, inscribing a soundtrack into the silent film in almost didactic fashion, a soundtrack that harks back to the favored (physical) amusements enjoyed by the Berlin city populace on Sundays in the 1930s, which included listening to the popular hits of the time on portable gramophones. A form of phonography becomes visible in the image that could be heard by the actors during production but remains inaccessible to the spectator. The rhythm can only be experienced as a trace left behind in the moving portraits, discernible in how the bodies of the non-professional actors dance to the sound of gramophone. The scene with the photographer functions to a certain extent as a counterpoint to this one, even if the five actors the film mentions by name do not appear in it. It also shows a series of moving portraits of people out on a Sunday outing, which congeal into photographic portraits during the interaction with the photographer. The difference between phonography and photography is depicted in the contrast between that the power of the record's sound (to set bodies in motion) and the act of photography, which captures a moment from moving life as a pose.

MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG injects a touch of the avant-garde into the story of the musical film by deliberately preventing the popular music soundtrack from being able to be experienced via illustration, displaying it instead as something inaccessible in documentary (didactic) fashion. The musical films of the era already stood out for their use of hit songs and operettas, a tendency which must also be read as an expression of the institutional intertwining of the sound film, radio, and record industries, which were thus able to provide reciprocal advertising for one another.<sup>31</sup> The “experimental” film MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG turns its hand to a form of reportage on the other hand,<sup>32</sup> inserting the song in question into the on-screen text which forms the film’s discursive prologue: “Brigitte Borchert hat im letzten Monat 150mal die Platte *In einer kleinen Konditorei* verkauft” (Over the last month, Brigitte Borchert has sold 150 copies of the record *In einer kleinen Konditorei*). The fictional plot of the first encounter between the couple at a café on the day before the outing to the lake is subsequently constructed as if it were actually illustrating the lyrics of this hit song (“In einer kleinen Konditorei, das saßen wir zwei bei Kuchen und Tee” –The two of us sat drinking tea and eating cake at a small patisserie). The record itself then finally enters proceedings as an actual visual object, first playing a fundamental role in the creation of the sonic icon as a prominent moment of expectation for a particular sound event to occur and leaving traces of itself behind in the moving bodies, before shattering at the end of the outing as a symbolic depiction of the impossibility of accessing past sound events.<sup>33</sup>

31. Wedel 2007, loc. cit., p. 244.

32. LichtBildBühne, No. 147, 21.6.1929.

33. This equally symbolizes the end of the romance between Brigitte and Wolfgang, but also generates a self-reflexive moment in relation to the film’s production history in the sense of the connection between the film aesthetic and history in general.

If, as Michael Wedel suggests in his chapter on the “Musikalisierung des frühen Tonfilms” (Musicalization of the Early Sound Film),<sup>34</sup> an archeological mission of sorts is conducted, the first finding one comes across is that a second film project existed and was directed by Robert Wohlmut, whose title (“In einer kleinen Konditorei”) is that of the same hit song and which also seeks to intermingle the sound film, radio, and records industries. The starting point for this project is the pop song or rather tango composition composed by Fred Raymond, with the respective lyrics being written by Ernst Neubach. A biography of Raymond claims that the Konditorei being sung about actually existed on Kurfürstendamm in Berlin and was indeed the subject of the song.<sup>35</sup> Following the success of the record, the composition also enjoyed a successful run as a musical theatre comedy, before it was subsequently filmed in Munich. Little is known about this project, which was produced by the Münchner Lichtspielkunst AG: it did, however, receive its premiere in Berlin on January 20, 1930 just two weeks before *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*, with the musical numbers being played live by the Sonora jazz band headed by Werner Schmidt-Boelcke, who was the chief conductor for the Emelka company in Munich and a silent film conductor at the Capitol cinema in Berlin.

In relationship to this production, *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG* can be regarded as an avant-garde undertaking whose strategy was to attempt to distinguish itself from other similar projects and which was quite possibly only produced as a silent film for financial reasons. For one of his following films (*DER MANN, DER SEINEN MÖRDER SUCHT* (D 1931), Robert Siodmak actually worked for UFA with the express purpose of generating reciprocal advertising and forging closer links between the various media industries, using music by Friedrich Hollaender and adapting a play by Ernst Neubach to this end. This film also takes the popular music of the time as its starting point, with the song “Am Montag, hab ich leider keine Zeit” (I’m not free on Monday unfortunately) extolling similar Sunday pleasures to those that formed the subject of *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*.

According to the recollections of leading actress Brigitte Borchert, the record of the song “In einer kleinen Konditorei” still played a significant role in the production of Siodmak and Ulmer’s silent film nonetheless. In the 2000 Arte documentary *WEEKEND AM WANNSEE* (D 2000) directed by Gerald Koll, Borchert relates that a gramophone and a record of the song were specially loaned out for the production and formed a constant accompaniment to the film shoot.<sup>36</sup> The documentary begins with precisely the same scene with the gramophone at Wannsee, which is initially silent apart from the sound of a projector. In a sort of re-enactment of the shoot (which originally took place in July/August 1929), the sound of the needle in the groove and the first bars of the hit song are briefly played once Borchert puts the pick-up arm on the record. This sort of retrospective processing aimed at reconstructing a historical soundtrack competes here to a certain extent with the interpretation given to the silent film by the musical accompaniment. It purports to be able to make the original sound of the shoot audible, but actually generates little more than a mildly nostalgic effect when actually heard. I’m emphasizing this here because Rick Altman’s criticism of naïve representational realism with respect to sound has exactly such examples in mind.<sup>37</sup> Examples such as these suggest that the original

34. Wedel 2007, loc. cit. pp. 244–251.

35. See <https://www.fredraymond.org/biographie/> last accessed on 29.3.2017.

36. Gerhard Koll. 2000. Arte-Dokumentation “Weekend am Wannsee”, an extra on the DVD edition of *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*, Präsenz Film und ZYX Music 2006.

37. Altman, loc. cit.

sounds of the film production can be reconstructed merely by bringing the historical image into sync with the historical sounds that apparently belong to them— a strategy which ultimately dispenses with any experience of difference. This is certainly not the path to take to eventually reach an audio history of film. Such a concept can only be developed instead based on describing the differences between film and photography, film and phonography, and film and writing. Even Koll's documentary seems aware of this, as it quickly transitions from the re-enactment into a contemporary interview.

### 3. Models for an Audio History of Film: A SONG IS BORN (1948)

The musical can be seen as the preferred subject for studies on early sound film, as it is one of the most significant film genres to become established with the introduction of sound. Unlike the western and like the comedy though, it is not necessarily regarded as a genre which seeks to grapple with history and is frequently counted as belonging to the realm of light entertainment instead, with a tendency to suppress any references to reality as such. In the following, my initial focus is on investigating several aspects of the historicization of the musical's production contexts in order to then discuss it as more of a media-aesthetic hybrid formation generated by the media industries than as a film genre. My example to this end is Howard Hawks's *A SONG IS BORN*, which I regard as a soundimagetext. Read in such a way, the film exhibits very clear references to modern aesthetics in the sense of cinematic self-reflexivity, while also revealing connections to history at the same time. These connections in particular are summoned up by sonic icons in this case too. The specific focus here is on the appearance of Louis Armstrong's singing voice, which forms a prominent moment within one of the musical numbers, as well as on the depiction of scat singing that follows it, which basically functions as a tribute to Armstrong. Both of these moments receive additional accentuation because they are depicted as specific sound recordings created via a phonograph within the film itself. The special nature and complex interweaving of these sonic icons, which emerge from the flow of the film in several different ways (as a musical number, a specific sound event, and as the material for a phonograph recording session), equally serves to further develop and create a better understanding of an audio history of film.

The film studios' investment in new sound technologies and their attempts to appropriate the record industry and the exploitation rights linked to it played a significant role in the ascendancy of the musical in Hollywood. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson sketch out the different production strategies of the various studios in this context.<sup>38</sup> While prestige studio MGM continued to throw its weight behind stars and production design, Warner Bros. invested in the development of the Vitaphone sound system at an early stage and only established itself as one of the big Hollywood players with the success of *THE JAZZ SINGER* (USA 1927). In this case, the initial production idea was to bring vaudeville plays and song numbers to the big screen as revue films, with the studio becoming specialized in the production of gangster films and musicals as a result. By contrast, the RKO studio developed the musical into more of a narrative genre over the course of the 1930s, after already having bought up the declining vaudeville theatres and converted them into cinemas. In his study *The Sound of*

38. David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson. 1993. *Film Art. An Introduction*. University of Wisconsin, New York. 1993, p. 472.

*Commerce. Marketing Popular Film Music*, Jeff Smith portrays how Hollywood was concerned with building up its own business models independently of the music industry at a very early stage. Motivated by the legal situation governing the use of music in film, Warner began in the 1930s already to buy up record companies in order to be able to record the music for their films themselves and market it as the respective rights holder. MGM followed this trend from the mid-1940s onwards.<sup>39</sup>

Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener emphasize both the popularity of the musical with audiences as well as the interest it generated among the theorists of the time. They also point out that the genre exhibits numerous examples of self-reflexivity at the start of the 1930s already, which reflect the interplay between relationships of image and sound.<sup>40</sup> This shows that this entertainment genre already contains the qualities of aesthetic play normally attributed to modern cinema. Kay Kirchmann also highlights this quality in his investigation of Hawks's comedies by emphasizing the autonomy of the speech acts of this genre (in reference to Gilles Deleuze) as a form of autonomous, aesthetic play at an auditory level.<sup>41</sup> The sort of modern and self-reflexive moments that appear in this entertainment genre are, however, also produced as part of an interplay with other media. The rapid pace of the speech acts in the screwball comedy and the design of the song numbers in the musical are also designed to compete with radio, to which the numerous references to radio shows of the time in these films allude.<sup>42</sup>

Rick Altman goes one step further and puts the entire historical identity of film and cinema in fundamental question during the silent film era already before the backdrop of the intertwining of the media industries. With regard to sound, he already confirms the multiple identities of the cinema of the silent film era, which he describes as a series of historically alternating forms: "Cinema as Photography [...] Cinema as Illustrated Music [...] Cinema as Vaudeville [...] Cinema as Opera [...] Cinema as Radio [...] Cinema as Phonography [...] Cinema as Telephony".<sup>43</sup> I regard this repeated focus on the qualities and contexts of the film musical of the time as evidence for the idea that these film productions should not be grasped first and foremost as a nascent film genre, but rather as a media aesthetic hybrid formations before the backdrop of their complex production, economic, and legal history, formations that are as indebted to stage, radio, records, and other entertainment industries as they are to cinema.

In the following, I take a closer look at Howard Hawks's *A SONG IS BORN* as an example of such a media aesthetic hybrid formation. The moments of cinematic self-reflexivity where the sound emerges from the flow of the film are discussed here as sonic icons. The film's composite form is particularly evident in how it makes use of its stars. The film's main draw, actor and singer Danny Kaye, doesn't actually get to sing in this musical—apart from the exaggeratedly caricaturing of a non-Western love song at the beginning of the film.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, large portions of the film are dedicated to musicians like Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, and Louis Armstrong, with the singing ultimately being left to the latter too. The film's stridently composite nature, which borders on inner turmoil, might be the reason why it's only received cursory attention from film critics and historians, particularly in comparison to other films by the same director, and is usually

39. Jeff Smith. 1998. *The Sound of Commerce. Marketing Popular Film Music*. Columbia University New York, p. 28.

40. Elsaesser, Thomas/Hagener, Malte. 2010. *Film Theory. An Introduction through the senses*. New York: Routledge, pp. 129–148.

41. Kirchmann, Kay. 2000. "Der Körper des Gelehrten. Leiblichkeit und Sprache in Howard Hawks' screwball comedies". In: Reingard M. Nischik (Ed.): *Uni literarisch. Lebenswelt Universität in literarischer Repräsentation*. Konstanz, pp. 255–284.

42. Wolfgang Hagen. 2005. *Das Radio*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag München.

43. Altman 1992, loc. cit., pp. 114–121.

44. Which precise countries are being referenced here remains unclear, Polynesia, Samoa and the West Indies are all mentioned.

discredited as an artistic work, being referred to, for example, by Peter John Dyer as superficial, inflated, not inventive, and not done with enough care, or by Robin Wood as an obviously weaker remake of Hawks' previous *BALL OF FIRE*.<sup>45</sup> Gerald Mast is one of the few to defend the film's qualities, film, albeit with a few caveats:

*Despite the rancid Mayo (and Kaye) of a SONG IS BORN, the film contains several spectacular musical sequences (a familiar Hawks strength) with Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Louis Armstrong, Tommy Dorsey, Charlie Barnet, Mel Powell, and the Golden Gate Quartet. Hawks delights in documenting the way that musicians make music—in the same way he documents the ways that people fly planes, catch tuna, drive cattle, chase game. No film with all those musicians can be all bad.*<sup>46</sup>

Mast attempts to explore the specific qualities of the film here, which are linked to the musical sequences staged by Hawks on the one hand and the specific performances of the musicians on the other—albeit without grasping the stand-out moments as sonic icons. Mast's biography of Hawks also emphasizes the unusual position that the director held, who tried to secure the greatest degree of independence possible from producers and usually also produced his films himself. For this reason, *A SONG IS BORN*'s composite nature may well have stemmed from the conflict of interest between Hawks as director and Sam Goldwyn as producer that was publicized in interviews with Hawks, which in turn only increased the film's stigmatization as a failed project.<sup>47</sup> In his own Hawks biography, Todd MacCarthy also gives an account of the various conflicts during the film's shoot and emphasizes that Hawks was primarily interested in the musician and not in the two actual stars Danny Kaye and Virginia Mayo, who had been allocated to him by producer Goldwyn. At the same time, it's also worth mentioning that the film was regarded as a success with audiences and a box office hit when it was released in theaters, topping the list of best-attended films for a whole week and staying within the top twelve for over two months.<sup>48</sup>

Yet *A SONG IS BORN* occupies a different position from the perspective of jazz music and its respective discourses. Krin Gabbard sketches out how the view of jazz music changed radically in the specialist press from the middle of the 1940s onwards,<sup>49</sup> with jazz now being treated as art. For a short phase in the late 1940s, Hollywood too reacted to this by accepting the legitimacy of this musical direction and ascribing it a specific aesthetic and history in two films in particular: *NEW ORLEANS* (USA 1947) and *A SONG IS BORN*. As Gabbard also emphasizes though, the music historiography in question is a revisionist one in which the history of the slave trade and racial segregation doesn't appear, jazz history greats such as Louis Armstrong are actually being exploited by the film industry as means of authenticating said sanitized version of history, and the origins of the blues are at most reduced to the expression of a sigh.<sup>50</sup>

*A SONG IS BORN* can almost be seen as providing a blueprint for how an audio history of film can be created—not least due to its composite nature and work with sonic icons and in spite of its story, which is not entirely satisfactorily narrated. The film is about an academic project to create a music encyclopedia,

45. Peter John Dyer. 1972. *Sling the Lamps low*, in: Joseph McBride (Ed.): *Focus on Howard Hawks*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, pp. 78 - 93, p. 90.; Robin Wood. 1968. *Howard Hawks*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 105.

46. Gerald Mast. 1982. *Howard Hawks, Storyteller*. New York NY: Oxford University Press, p. 353.

47. Hans C. Blumenberg. 1979. *Die Kamera in Augenhöhe: Begegnungen mit Howard Hawks*. Cologne: DuMont, p. 42.

48. Todd MacCarthy. 1997. *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood*. New York NY: Groove Press, pp. 433-444.

49. Krin Gabbard. 1996. *Jammin' at the Margins. Jazz and the American Cinema*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 222.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-120.

which has been worked on over a period of nine years by seven professors. The undertaking is being funded by a foundation—it's what would be referred to today as an "external project"—and headed by Professor Hobart Frisbee (Danny Kaye). What's special about the project is that a considerable part of the encyclopedia is being compiled in the form of phonographic recordings, which the academics—who are also musicians—record themselves. The musical comedy begins—similar to *BRINGING UP BABY* (USA 1938)—when the real world intrudes on isolated academic world in the form of night club singer Honey Swanson (Virginia Mayo). In *A SONG IS BORN*, this leads to at least one chapter in the history of music being revised via the incorporation of contemporary popular music styles such as jazz, bebop, and boogie-woogie. In this part of the film's plot, the two stars then play more of a subordinate role among the 'genuine' musicians invited to the research facility.<sup>51</sup>

The film also finds ways of depicting this innovative practice of writing an encyclopedia by way of record recordings. This begins already with the *mise-en-scène*. The research project library (just like the neighboring seminar room) is the central plot location and equipped with a state-of-the-art phonograph, which stands in clear contrast to the room's otherwise venerable, bibliophilic décor. As a technical device (and central figure), the phonograph stands in the middle of the room and also forms the focal point of numerous visual compositions. The color scheme (in Technicolor) also serves to accentuate the black, metallic tones of the phonograph and marks it as an element of media self-reflexivity. The phonograph also vies for attention within the frame with the leading actress (Mayo), who is wearing a red coat when she appears in the library for the first time. This configuration already reveals an initial difference to Hawks's previous *BALL OF FIRE*, which tells the story of a similar encyclopedia project (in black and white). There too, the world of academia is contrasted with the language of contemporary slang and equally shaken up by a night club singer (Barbara Stanwyck) arriving unexpected in the academic setting. In *A SONG IS BORN*, the figure of the phonograph appears as an additional foreign body alongside the female star, which binds together the desires of the (white) male academics. It shifts and directs their interest on to the ecstasy of jazz music and not least Afro-American music, which with the help of the phonograph in particular can be captured differently than via traditional notation—which the professors still repeatedly attempt to use in helpless fashion to try and get hold of the tunes and chords.

The presentation and use of the phonograph as a recording device receives explicit emphasis in two scenes. In the first of these (in the seminar room), a history of popular music is delineated on the blackboard with the help of numerous guests and star musicians. Afterwards, the findings are expressed in both words and music and recorded with the phonograph. The recording for the encyclopedia begins like a documentary radio feature on music history headed by Prof. Frisbee—who is also operating the phonograph—and compiled using various illustrative musical examples. The undertaking then swiftly becomes an audio-essay structured by music, within the night club singer taking over from the professor and continuing the historical account as a song. It's at this point that the performance finally becomes a musical number. Yet the lead is passed on one last time, to the jazz musicians themselves. Now the leading voice is that of Louis Armstrong, augmented by his physical performance and

51. Most of the jazz musicians appears as themselves under their own names. It's only Benny Goodman who plays the role of Professor Magenbruch, an expert in classical clarinet, who has allegedly never heard of jazz musician Goodman, but quickly develops a passion for jazz when playing with the jazz greats.

his trumpet playing—both of which stand out not just from the film, but also from the conventions of the musical. In my view, what’s relevant here is less that Louis Armstrong is narrating a specific history of jazz accompanied by his musical colleagues and more that the vocal number is revealed to be a model for another historical connection, which is folded into the academic, phonographic undertaking that makes up the film’s plot. Armstrong’s vocal performance is central here, which creates a prominent moment hard to put one’s finger on that is seemingly pervaded by Hollywood’s ambivalence towards the history of jazz. The scene presents a sonic icon in the making, as it were, as it is also encoded as a specific sound recording being carried out on the phonograph. The sonic icon created at this moment is thus particularly complex; having already been accentuated as the material for a phonograph recording and a musical number within a musical, it finally comes to the fore as a sonic icon once again as a specific sound event generated by Armstrong’s voice.

It’s thus only at a surface level that this scene is about the specific narration of a history of music led by an African-American musical icon, which—as Gabbard rightly comments—is “revisionist” and thus appeared sanitized.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, Gabbard comments that Armstrong was portrayed as a serious jazz musician in *A SONG IS BORN* in a manner previously unseen, a fact that isn’t just down to the film’s documentary qualities which are emphasized by Gerald Mast. Here too, the sonic icon emerges from the interplay of differences between sound, image, and text. As such, Benny Goodman appears with a book by music critic Winthrop Sargeant entitled *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* before the scene described above, which he—in the role of Professor Magenbruch, who knows nothing about jazz— used to learn about the musical genre.

What’s so special about this scene, however, is that this prominent moment with all its accompanying ambivalence is phonographically recorded for inclusion within a music encyclopedia within the fiction of the film—and has indeed been captured in sound and image for this film and thus preserved within film history. The aesthetic production of this song number is tied to history in the process. As one element of a media aesthetic hybrid, the titular song *A Song is Born* refers to how the film and recording industries are interconnected and displays this in model fashion as the context for a version of history that incorporates the Afro-American experience, regardless of how distorted. The academic seminar and the music recording studio become superimposed in the film as two locations of historical production.

In the second scene with phonograph (in the library), the group of other professors—all specialists in classical music—conduct a second recording a short time later. It is led by the night club singer with support from vaudeville duo Buck and Bubbles. The duo appears here under their own name, although their appearance is explained by their being unlikely window cleaners, who just so happen to be excellent musicians and jazz connoisseurs. They are introduced by the professors as good friends, who have already conveyed the different styles of jazz to them previously. The goal of the exercise now is to capture a jam session as it’s being performed. Unlike the first recording session, which takes the form of an audio essay whose ultimate aim is to create a well-ordered (revisionist) historical narrative

52. Gabbard. 1996, loc. cit., pp. 117–122. Gabbard also criticizes that Louis Armstrong’s presence seems to have been bought by the film industry as a commodity in order to pass on the necessary authentication to a new generation of white swing musicians.

according to a sanitized “it starts here and ends there” trajectory, the second recording frustrates this set-up via the introduction of narrative nonsense. This is initiated in particular by the fact that the song lyrics are being read from newspaper snippets torn out at random. This improvisational procedure, which is known as scat singing, deconstructs the meaning of language and transforms the words and syllables being sung into autonomous, poetic sounds. This performance once again pays tribute to Louis Armstrong as one of the early representatives of this art form (even if he himself is not actually present in this scene). It also depicts the jam session as playing with aesthetic difference and a utopian space of encounter where racial, class, and gender boundaries can be transcended—and which is transposed here from the nightclub (where such borders can traditionally be crossed) to a research facility library.

This second phonography scene contains another unique feature, however: although it is branded as excessive and “a prairie fire of orgiastic events” (by housekeeper Miss Bragg) before being immediately sanctioned and ended by Prof. Frisbee (as a responsible historian) within the film’s plot, it’s already been inscribed as a utopian trace in the phonograph recording, and with an excessive physical lust for aesthetic play no less. Within this context, the phonograph is thus not just a recording device to preserve the traces of this excess and allows it to be accessed later on,<sup>53</sup> but also changes what happens from the very beginning by the virtue of recording it. This is because historiography is now confronted with the non-narrative, tonal elements of language and thus also the body’s entire auditory sensuality and desire within the phonographic recording of the jam session and scat singing. And with the help of the microphone, phonography is able to capture these utterances in particularly clear fashion. This is where the challenge to classical historiography represented by the media of film and phonography comes into view, which Hollywood imagines in model, utopian fashion.

53. It’s only the recording of the sanctioned jam session that is actually played again from the record player as a gag.



Figure 3. *A SONG IS BORN*, Howard Hawks, USA 1948

It took 25 years for a similar fantasy to actually make its way into academic libraries: with the final sentence in Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes bases his “aesthetic of textual pleasure” on precisely the same tonal elements of language, such as the “grain of the voice”, the “patina of consonants” and the “voluptuousness of the vowels”. Surprisingly, he derives his model from sound film:

*it suffices that the cinema capture the sound of speech close up [...] and make us hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle [...], to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.*<sup>54</sup>

A *SONG IS BORN*'s unique nature now emerges when the two phonograph scenes in the two rooms opposite one another are placed into a configuration and related to one another like the two sides of record. While the jam session in the seminar room is tied to a didactic narration, the library scene makes the film's narrative context splinter into the different song numbers familiar from vaudeville or into fragmented sonic images. By setting off what happens in one room against what happens in the other, the film flaunts its own complex hybridity and reflects upon its own nature as part of an entertainment industry that produces stories and history based on two opposing techniques: as the sort of easily narratable, linear, and sanitized version of history that is subject to the specific interests of the industry and its consumers on the one hand, and as a performative expression of aesthetic play of a certain physicality that is interspersed with moments of ecstatic distraction on the other.<sup>55</sup>



Figure 4. *A SONG IS BORN*, Howard Hawks, USA 1948

The phonograph scenes ultimately also juxtapose two different configurations of knowledge. The recording scene in the seminar room stands for the production of a narrative work with a beginning and an end, which is previously symbolized within the film as a tree diagram on the blackboard. By creating an audio essay, the recording session for the record essentially implements this diagram, working in the same classically narrative mode as a history book. The nonsense arrangement that makes up the recording scene in the library is structured in opposing fashion, functioning either as an individual number that others may follow, or as a soundtrack, which, together with others, produces an ensemble, a music album. The jam session, scat singing, and the splitting off of particular quotes in the library scene makes reference to an ordering principle referred to by Roland Barthes as the “album” in *The Preparation of the Novel*, which involves quotes or fragments being collected in such a way which Barthes sees as being distinct from a book, which he sees as constituting a work. He does, however, refer to the relationship of mutuality between the work and the album, whereby the work tends towards the album and vice versa.<sup>56</sup> Hawks creates a similar connection between the two phonograph

54. Roland Barthes. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, pp. 66–67.

55. The linking of the two room is flaunted as a hybrid formation once again and inverted when the gangster plot overlaps with the musical. A shotgun wedding ceremony is conducted in the seminar room, whose speech acts are transformed into a series of slapstick moments and sonic images thanks to the hearing aid worn by the master of ceremonies, while in the library, the professors and musicians of all colors start jamming together, which is successfully able to ward off the threat of violence on the part of the gangster mob.

56. Roland Barthes. 2011. *The Preparation of the Novel*. Columbia University Press: New York, pp. 182–199.

scenes by presenting them as artwork and album respectively and displaying them as two interrelated orders of knowledge. These two orders of knowledge employed by Hawks and Barthes are now to be drawn on for use in this chapter on the audio history of film. On the one hand, the audio history of film takes its bearings from the central stations in the historical development of film and its treatment of sound. On the other, it is revealed to be a technique akin to archival work, proceeding from the various singular moments—sonic icons—which emerge from the soundimagetext (in this case, the voice of Louis Armstrong and the tribute to him in the scat singing scene).

If one now adds Hawks's comedy *BALL OF FIRE* to the mix, which he shot several years previously and revolves around the creation of a written encyclopedia, the difference between phonography and writing emerges in even clearer fashion when the two films are compared. The shift from book to record or rather written reference work to phonographic encyclopedia is of central importance and functions as a sort of oblique commentary on the possibilities of historiography. On the one hand, the first phonograph scene demonstrates how music history can be written with the help of phonography, namely as an audio essay. The second phonograph scene suggests something else on the other hand though, namely that the phonograph's recordings can be treated as an archive. Yet it's not just about a collection of historical musical recordings here from which music history, cultural history, and the history of the entertainment industries that is interwoven with them can be gleaned. The archive being referred to here is the archive in the Foucault sense, which records the body's auditory sensuality and desire in equal measure—that is, it also incorporates all those competing moments which cannot initially be broken down into a story and must first be deciphered via archival work (or in a process akin to psychoanalysis).<sup>57</sup> This interrelated model of audio essay and archive ultimately also provides a prototype for how an audio history of film can be written. The analysis of *A SONG IS BORN* suggested here is to be understood as exactly such an undertaking, both in terms of its demonstrative part (the production of an academic text akin to an essay) and the way it looks for sonic icons in the film or the archive.

#### 4. A Media Historiography Practice: *SALUT LES CUBAINS* (1963)/*LES PLAGES D'AGNÈS* (2008)

While Hollywood in the 1940s imagined a model for a media historiography in onomatopoeic fashion in the musical and the comedy, an innovative practice of media historiography was discovered in Europe at the same time which combined aesthetic and academic procedures into what emerged as the essay film. The significant role played by sound production in this hybrid form only became clear at the end of the 1950s, as the following description of the various stages in the development of the concept seeks to show.<sup>58</sup> In 1940, Hans Richter initially used the term “film essay” to describe this practice and emphasized that it doesn't simply document, but rather constructs a line of argumentation “whose goal it is to make problems, thoughts, even ideas themselves understandable”.<sup>59</sup> Richter thus moves beyond the standard boundary between the films of the artistic avant-garde, feature films, and documentaries and brings them together under the banner of the essay film. The true achievement of this hybrid media form, which Richter only identifies as a sound film essay in reference to the

57. On Foucault's archive discourse, see Knut Ebeling/ Stephan Günzel (Ed.): *Archivologie. Theorien des Archivs in Philosophie, Medien und Künsten*. Berlin 2009; and Petra Gehring: *Foucault. Die Philosophie im Archiv*. Frankfurt a.M., New York 2004.

58. See here also Winfried Pauleit. 2014. “Film als Theorie. Der Essayfilm als doing-image-text”, in *Nach dem Film* No13, <https://www.nachdemfilm.de/issues/text/film-als-theorie>, last accessed 12.11.2018 (English summary: Film as Theory, <http://www.thinkfilm.de/panel/film-theory-winfried-pauleit> last accessed 12.11.2018); the chapters by Dominique Blüher and Christa Blümlinger in: D. Blüher/P. Pilard (Ed.) 2009. *Le Court métrage documentaire français de 1945 à 1968*. Rennes.; and C. Blümlinger/C. Wulff (Ed.) 1992. *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen. Texte zum essayistischen Film*. Vienna.

59. Quote translated from the German. The avant-garde artist and theorist Hans Richter published his article under the heading “Der Filmessay. Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms” (The Film Essay. A New Form of Documentary) in the *Baseler Zeitung*, 25.4.1940, in: C. Blümlinger / C. Wulff (Ed.) 1992. *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen* loc. cit., pp. 195 – 198, here p. 197.

filmmaking of the time, lies in its ability to convey knowledge in an accessible fashion, unlike the work of the avant-garde.<sup>60</sup> Alexandre Astruc formulated his own conception of the essay film in 1948 in *The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo*, explicitly drawing on the relationship of difference between writing and film in so doing: “a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film.”<sup>61</sup> Astruc doesn’t just lay claim to the paradigm of authorship which the Nouvelle Vague would later pick up on but also asserts that this new film practice can just as easily be applied to philosophy as it can be to history. The essay film thus already carries the prospect of being a form of media historiography. Even if Astruc places the camera at the heart of this new practice—and mentions neither microphone nor phonograph—he still has an innovative sound film practice in mind here.<sup>62</sup> It’s only André Bazin’s 1958 comments on Chris Marker’s *LETTRE DE SIBÉRIE* (F 1958) which make significance of sound explicit for the essay film: “It might be said that the basic element is the beauty of what is said and heard [...] The montage has been forged from ear to eye”.<sup>63</sup>

What is equally significant here is the description of the relationship between sound, image, and text as an ensemble:

*With Marker [...] I would say that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence.*<sup>64</sup>

Bazin thus emphasizes the specific importance of speech acts in the essay film as being an aesthetic quality of sound. As such, Bazin characterizes the essay film as being of a hybrid nature and as an example of modern film based on a form of aesthetic play unfolding between sound, image, and text.

Together with Alain Resnais und Chris Marker, Agnès Varda belongs to what’s referred to as the *Rive Gauche* group, who espoused and put into practice an innovative, modern form of filmmaking from the 1950s onwards. Their work subverted the boundaries between the established categories of feature film and documentary and created an essayistic practice that grappled with relationships of difference between film, photography, writing, and text. All three of them are also among those who made their name with “photofilms”, that is, they produced films consisting of photos which are then reanimated in a second working step.<sup>65</sup> Alain Resnais started this method in his films about artists and artworks, beginning with *VAN GOGH* (F 1948), *GAUGUIN* (F 1950), and *GUERNICA* (F 1950), followed by Chris Marker with *LA JETÉE* (F 1962). Agnès Varda’s own photofilm *SALUT LES CUBAINS* was thus able to draw on their previous experiences. Resnais and Marker were even involved in Varda’s film directly, with both actually visible on screen, while the name “Chris Marker” also appears in the opening credits.<sup>66</sup> As an experienced photographer, Varda was particularly pre-destined to make a photofilm. She brought back over 3000 photos she had taken on her trip to Cuba in 1962/63<sup>67</sup> —and supposedly also a series of records.<sup>68</sup> For *SALUT LES CUBAINS*, the photos used for the film were filmed at an animation

60. See here also Winfried Pauleit. Pauleit 2014. *Film als Theorie*, loc. cit.

61. Astruc, Alexandre. 1968. “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo” In: Peter John Graham (Ed.): *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*. London, pp. 17–23, p. 19. With this formulation, Astruc reclaims the work of a philosopher who laid the foundations for a modern understanding of science. Descartes’ discourse, whose full English title is “A Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences”, is marked by a central focus on a subject rooted in healthy reason and is aimed against scholastic tradition. Aside from his metaphysical positing of the subject, doubt and the study of the world form the central epistemological methods.

62. The range of possible uses he mentions here extend from the exploration of the world with the camera all the way to conveying science in populist fashion, which according to Astruc could be organized via the bookseller on the corner (who also distributes films) or via television. Today, he would probably have suggested a computer-based communication network with an online database for films.

63. André Bazin 2003, ‘Bazin on Marker’, In: *Film Comment* 39(4). <https://chrismarker.org/andré-bazin-on-chris-marker-1958/>, last accessed 12.11.2018.

64. *Ibid.*

65. See Gustáv Hámos, Katja Pratschke, Thomas Tode: 2010. *Viva Fotofilm bewegt/unbewegt*. Marburg.

66. For the references to Marker, see in particular Sylvain Dreyer: 2009. “Salut les Cubains, une poétique du témoignage”, in: A. Fiant et al (Ed.) *Agnès Varda: le cinéma et au-delà*. Rennes, pp. 25–33.

67. The information on the precise date of Varda’s trip vary in sources between winter 1961/62 and 1962/63, see, for example, Astrid Ofner (Rf). 2006. *Demy/Varda. Eine Retrospektive der Viennale*. Wien, Marburg: Schüren, p. 152 and Dreyer 2009, loc. cit., p. 25. Varda herself indexes her trip in the voiceover in the film as “Cuba, January 1963”.

68. The titles do at least contain a reference to the use of records by the Vox label, which also publishes Cuban music.

table, with the duration in each case determined in advance by the music.<sup>69</sup> Alongside the animated photos, Varda also plays with different modulations of sound, image, and text in the film, showing photos, photo exhibitions, freeze-frames, musicians, and filmmakers, while different sounds, background noise, and examples of Cuban music can be heard in addition to the two voiceovers.

*SALUT LES CUBAINS* can also be seen as characteristic of an aesthetic avant-garde which doesn't conceal its political engagement and respective position—such as its support for diverse independence movements like the Cuban revolution—but rather makes these in the very subject of its filmmaking, albeit while retaining a subjective stance or building in an ironic distance.<sup>70</sup> One central element of this link between aesthetic and political engagement is collaboration with other filmmakers, together with an approach to filmmaking that grasps and shapes this collaboration as an encounter.<sup>71</sup> Varda explicitly addresses these ideas in the opening titles when she herself appears as part of what's going on and a whole series of colleagues of hers are shown working in the mode of 'cinéma vérité'. Alain Resnais and others mill around on the street with a camera in their hands to this end, interacting with the people they see and also intervening in what's happening with the camera, even if—unlike in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ* (F 1961)—no microphones or audiotape devices can be seen in these opening credits.<sup>72</sup>

Despite this, however, sound and words play a similarly central role in this film as they do in Marker's films and form part of a reflection on cinema itself. While Marker's works pretend variously to be a letter (*LETTRE DE SIBÉRIE*) or a photo novel (*LA JETÉE*), Varda's title (*SALUT LES CUBAINS*) is both an onomatopoeic greeting and an act of direct address. The title is translated into English in the subtitles as "Hi There, Cubanos", while Christa Blümlinger identifies it as a play on the title of a pop magazine of the time called *Salut les copains* (Hello friends)" which was dedicated to the then-contemporary music culture from which Varda was ironically distancing herself.<sup>73</sup> Beyond any such ironic considerations, the title also expresses the essay film's specific practice of writing history and simultaneously taking part in it by filming.<sup>74</sup> This dual reference to history is emphasized in the title, which on the one hand salutes "the Cubans" and also serves as a record of the meeting with Cuban musicians. On the other hand, however, Varda is also addressing the viewers of her film with this salute, almost as if calling them on the phone. A direct line to Cuba is generated by the film (and thus also from the location of the film screening). Metaphorically speaking, a 'telephone' connection to Cuba is set up, with what's happening at that moment in the country thus being transmitted phonographically and photographically in order to be experienced in the essay film—or, as Varda calls it, in a form of 'cinécriture'.<sup>75</sup> This process is characteristic of the essay film. It generates both a sensorial experience of directness and forms of cinematic self-reflexivity, the latter of which ultimately come to the fore in different parts of the film as sonic icons, emphasizing the ambivalent character of sound and image and marking them as traces of the past and the absent.

69. Ofner: Demy/Varda, 2006, loc. cit., p. 152.

70. Dreyer loc. cit.

71. For more on Varda's filmmaking as an encounter, see Delphine Bénézet. 2014. *The Cinema of Agnès Varda. Resistance and Eclecticism*. Columbia University Press New York.

72. Delphine Bénézet claims that alongside newly transportable cameras, a transportable Nagra cassette recording device was also used, Bénézet, 2014, loc. cit., 1.

73. Christa Blümlinger: "Die Ansichtskarten der Agnès Varda", in: Hámos, et.al. 2010, loc. cit., pp. 81–98, p. 93.

74. See Dreyer loc. cit. Dreyer describes this procedure as a "poétique du témoignage" and examines Varda's text work in the two voiceovers first and foremost, as well as the visual editing.

75. On the concept of cinécriture, see Agnès Varda. 1994. *Varda par Agnès*. Paris, p. 14.

This essayistic practice is depicted for the first time in the title sequence already. The title sequence is the only part of the film where events filmed in the conventional sense can be seen (rather than filmed photos). The first shot shows people visiting a photo exhibition, following how they move through the gallery, with the handheld camera panning slightly to the right to do so. The sound behaves like in a classical documentary: the background atmosphere and sounds can be heard, followed by voiceover giving a commentary (spoken by Michel Piccoli), which indicates the time and place: “Paris, Saint Germain des Prés, Juin 1963”. The second shot then shows an iconic 1959 press photo of the meeting between Fidel Castro and Ernest Hemingway following the victorious revolution; the handheld camera shoots it so it fills the entire frame, although it appears for hardly more than a second. The third shot shows a series of portraits of Cuban woman as the camera pans to the left, while a recording of a Cuban music improvisation is played, which is then given a face in the fourth shot in the form of a group of musicians. With the fourth shot, the position from which the camera is observing changes, with the camera now moving towards the musicians and looking for a gap where it can slip between the singer and the guitarist to show the conga player with his hands over and on the drum in close-up. Varda then freezes this shot in order to place her film’s title on the conga’s sheepskin membrane, while the sound recording of the musical performance can still be heard.

The short sequence of the first four shots once again reflects the essay film strategy of not just documenting and conveying historical events but participating in them at the same time. It’s not just about mixing with those before the camera (in this case, the musicians), but mixing and shaping a soundimagetext in post-production. This ensemble is put together at the editing table from Cuban music, the images from a French camera and sound work, the voiceover, the freezing of the image, and the writing of the film titles, before unfolding further in what follows as the sort of aesthetic play common to modern cinema. In other words, it’s not that sounds or images of an encounter are being produced here (in the simple sense of documentation), as is familiar from press photography, which Varda herself also inserts into her film in the form of the photo of Hemingway and Castro. The focus lies instead on producing an encounter between sound, image, and text, that is, shaping an ‘encounter as soundimagetext’, as a process that reveals relationships of difference, and explicitly incorporating the spectator into this process via addressing him or her directly.

The first freeze frame doesn’t just present the title of the film, but also reveals itself as an “image act”, which in this case is directed at the moving film strip and serves to carry out an operation upon it, namely to extract a single image from it.<sup>76</sup> The sound is decoupled from the image and displayed as a sound recording that initially seems to belong to the image, before then acting independently of it as an autonomous musical soundtrack and becoming tangible—for a moment—as an autonomous “sound act” alongside the respective image act. The music that appears at this juncture itself embodies a form of cultural difference. The music in question here is *guajira*, a Cuban rural music tradition<sup>77</sup> whose improvised quality almost gives it the function of social newspaper and comment upon everyday events.

76. Dubois 1990, loc. cit.

77. Helio Orovio. 2004. *Cuban Music from A to Z*. Duke University Press Durham, p. 101.

“Guantanamera” is its repeated refrain. The conga is the key instrument used in this type of music, which was developed by slaves of African origin in Cuba.<sup>78</sup> The sound recording is rendered more authentic in the scene that follows by the background noise and sound that are blended with the music. The sound seems as if it has indeed been recorded on location.<sup>79</sup> An approaching bus can thus be heard, which then also rolls into frame, before being held there in a second freeze-frame. The movement of the bus continues on the soundtrack however, with its acoustic movement through space becoming connected with the successive appearance of names on the side of the photographically frozen bus, which now, like the conga previously, functions as a base for writing and lists the further people involved in the production of the film.

The freeze-frames become identifiable as sonic icons in how they interweave the image act with the sound act. The encounter between two different practices comes to the fore here, which links aesthetics and politics: Cuban music and essayistic film practice. An essential hallmark of these image and sound acts is the respective dual gesture they each perform. The image act initially consists of the dynamic film footage shot with the small handheld camera, which forms part of what was happening in cultural-political terms out on the street at that time, and then in the freezing of the image during the post-production. This image act also includes the cut to the street that follows the freeze frame (i.e., the montage), where the musical performance and the events of the film continue, interrupted by further freeze-frames, which determine the design of the title sequence via the individual rhythm of the images. It’s the play of difference that shifts back and forth between the events on camera being in sync and the sound acting autonomously which can be grasped as a sound act. The sound can first be understood as an act of on-location recording (by being in sync with what’s happening on the street) and then as a post-production practice (in the sense of acoustic autonomy). These two consecutive sound acts are thus brought to the fore as a complex play of difference that can only be experienced in relation to the image. This way of using image and sound acts is a self-reflexive procedure, making both image and sound perceptible as traces of an essayistic practice.

The encounter between the committed filmmakers of the *Rive gauche* and the Cuban musicians and cultural revolutionaries thus only unfolds in the post-production phase, consisting of a form of complex aesthetic play in which the sheepskin membrane that produces the sound of the conga is photographically frozen and used as a tableau for the title of the film. This produces a triple vibration (consisting of photography, phonography, and typography) which comes to the fore as a sonic icon right at the beginning of the film. The sonic icon is therefore not simply there in the Cuban music or the beat of the drum being recorded, but is rather produced as an effect of how the post-production is carried out. During the film screening, this aesthetic play is then transferred onto the audience, producing a feeling of collective awakening and individual reflection. It’s an aesthetic strategy whose goal is to communicate and pass something on, a strategy that doesn’t just take the audience along it but rather calls upon them—or even entices them—to get involved in this aesthetic practice and thus write or continue to write history themselves and to participate in it at the same time.<sup>80</sup>

78. Ibid., p. 57.

79. Bénézet 2014, loc. cit., p. 2.

80. Bénézet uses the term “cinéaste passeur” to describe this context, Bénézet 2014, loc. cit., pp. 71–87, which emphasizes the role of the filmmaker as a communicator and mediator, which has also been described in relation to how Marker and Resnais collaborated with historians in producing the film *NUIT ET BROUILLARD*, Sylvie Lindeperg. 2014. *Night and Fog. A Film in History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The actual photo film begins by taking some first steps into Cuban music, culture, and history. It consists of recordings of different types of music, numerous photographs rhythmically edited together, and the remarks made by both voiceovers (Varda and Piccoli), which comment on men and women in Cuba as well as on Castro and his victorious revolution. The production process is relevant for this opening section. Both the selection of the edited-together photographs, the speech acts that provide a commentary on them, and their respective duration are determined by musical pieces set out in advance. Varda describes her working process as follows:

*I returned to Paris with around 3000 photos in my luggage and prepared them for filming by carefully calculating how long each of the selected music pieces would last. Then came the animation studio...*<sup>81</sup>

The rhetoric of the speech acts is also significant, which forms an essayistic practice that clearly differs from the sort of voiceovers used in documentaries.<sup>82</sup>

The opening begins in the mode of a classical commentary by making an objective localization—“Cuba, January 1963” (Varda)—before making some surprising thematic references, with the first of Cuba’s characteristics being related to the relationship between the sexes and inverted in ironic fashion: “Cuba was a cigar-shaped island for men. A crocodile-shaped island for ladies. And for the women, an island shaped like a crocodile. Since the Cuban revolution, all Cubans have beards...” (Piccoli).<sup>83</sup> To begin with, only the sound of water can be heard (waves hitting the beach). Only then is Cuban music played and Varda switches to the first person and takes on a subjective stance: “I was in Cuba. I brought back jumbled images. To order them, I made this homage, this film entitled *Salut les Cubains*”. Piccoli’s voice now continues to comment on the photos in an objective, explanatory mode (with a few ironic departures), which begins with sentences such as “Here is ...” and treats the photos as if they were the present. For her part, Varda remains subjective, reflecting upon her own actions. Her voiceover occasionally leaves direct commentary behind and treats the photos as a collection of past encounters during her trip. She varies and further specifies the title of the film to this end, expressing her appreciation (while looking at the photos) for specific groups of Cubans, particular individuals, animals, and finally also the different achievements of the revolution, much like Chris Marker’s film *CUBA SÍ* (F 1961).<sup>84</sup> This takes the form of a series of speech acts which acknowledge those absent who now appear in the photos, with each speech act beginning with “*Salut à ...*” (translated into English as “Here’s to ...”), with examples including “Here’s to the workers on an oil refinery in the bay of Santiago [...] Here’s to the eager student who holds her pen tightly in her hand...”.

The work with the two voiceovers forms an additional poetological feature of Varda’s essay film. This form of media historiography uses speech acts to encode images in different ways. In addition, the interplay between the voiceovers is connected to the Cuban music and thus emerges itself as a sound act. Their respective speech is not just structured rhythmically by the various pieces of music set out in advance, but also heavily overlaid by it, such that they and their respective vocals actually vie with the voiceovers and

81. Agnès Varda. 2010. “Filmfotomontage. Textfragmente, ausgewählt von Christa Blümlinger”, in: G. Hámos et.al. 2010 loc. cit., p. 75; Dreyer counts 11 different Afro-Cuban musical pieces in the just over 30-minute film, Dreyer loc. cit., p. 29.

82. On the textual rhetoric of the voiceover, see Dreyer loc. cit., p. 29 -31

83. I use the English translation from the subtitles of the film in the following.

84. Dreyer points out that Marker’s film was censored in France until 1963 and that Varda accentuated this appreciation even more in earlier versions of the film, Dreyer loc. cit., p. 32.

become woven together into a sort of recitative, with the voiceovers sometimes even falling silent to allow the musical vocals to come to the fore. The use of two voiceovers already introduces an element of polyphony, which represents a radical difference from the classical characteristic of an individual voiceover as being an omniscient narrator or “voice of god”. This strategy is taken even further in combination in that the voiceovers merge with the popular music and its vocals and thus take on the rhapsodic flavor of a recitative in dialogue form. Varda’s essay film is thus a composition which—in Bazin’s words— moves from ear to eye and in which Varda finds various voices: first and foremost, the musical voices of Cuba, but ultimately also her own voice as an essayistic, feminist filmmaker. *SALUT LES CUBAINS* is the first of Varda’s films in which her own voice appears, a voice that speaks in the first person as the director Agnès Varda, who travelled to Cuba to make a film—albeit a photo film whose aesthetic essentially stems from a specific blend of sound and speech acts, whereby speech acts can always appear as sounds at the same time, just as the music can also always function as a speech act.

Following this introduction to Cuban culture and the story of the revolution, the voiceover (Michel Piccoli) suddenly, and with a dose of irony, introduces “the King” of the Caribbean island, the “King of Rhythm”, with the photos now showing musician, singer, and dancer Benny Moré. Varda’s voiceover then announces that Moré is singing and dancing “for us” — a ‘son montuno’, a popular form of Cuban music that blends African and European (Spanish and French) traditions. The voiceovers remain silent during this song number, effectively giving the film’s stage to the king. It’s not just the lack of voiceover that allow the record recording of Moré’s singing to emerge as a sonic icon, but also another intervention on the part of Varda. She pastes speech bubbles (drawn speech acts) into several of the photos of Moré. This bricolage playfully translates a few lines from the love song into French, while also emphasizing Moré’s singing as a speech or song act. Moré’s dancing, which is achieved by animating photographs, is also put together in a special manner and makes use of dissolves at times. It’s this playful approach to differences (between sound, image, and text) that allow this performance to come to the fore as a sonic icon and once again identifies Varda’s essay film as a specific practice relating to a soundimagetext.

Following the song number, Varda’s voice reinters proceedings by saying “Salut à Benny Moré [...] Salut au roi qui est mort!” (Here’s to Benny Moré [...] Here’s to the dead King). Afterwards, Varda explains that he died in the time between the footage being shot and the film being completed. Her salute thus becomes a commemoration. Varda’s speech acts once again mark image and sound as a trace of the past and the absent and again emphasize the previously described essay film strategy of writing history and taking part in it at the same time. For here, in this deliberately accentuated scene, it’s not the music of the revolution that’s being played, but rather the music of the previously colonized. And it’s precisely this music that Varda’s aesthetic play of saluting and commemorating weaves into a soundimagetext to produce a sonic icon. In this case, this includes both an encounter with the musician while he was still alive and his being honored as a dead musical legend. Varda’s commemoration of Moré and the lively depiction of his music as the voice of the “King” almost

functions like a message in a bottle here. For the ‘son montuno’ tradition was regarded as the music of the old following the revolution, losing its former popularity and only returning to vogue much later to attain a new global fame—via another film, namely Wim Wenders’s *BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB* (D/USA/UK/CUB 1999).

The last part of the film shows what Cubans do on a Sunday.<sup>85</sup> Similar to *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG, SALUT LES CUBAINS* shows photographic images of a brief interlude of freedom within the working economy—and then turns its attention to Monday, looking at those employed in the various museums: the art museum, the Hemingway museum, the cinematheque. The end of the film then puts the spotlight on the women once again. Varda again uses her photos to arrange a dance to Cuban music (the cha-cha-cha), with someone different at the center this time: young director and cinematheque staff member Sara Gomez, one of the few filmmakers of color in Cuba. Gomez was shooting her first films for the Cuban cinematheque at the time and also worked on Varda’s *SALUT LES CUBAINS*. The broad range of different photos used to create the portrait of the just 18-year-old Gomez unfolds as an open ending to the photographic, musical dance in which additional photographs of Castro, Moré, and also Cuban children are linked together to form a utopian portrait of a society, which represents in turn a product of post-production and is compiled from photographs and records recordings. This sonic icon also displays a trace, albeit one that doesn’t merely index Gomez dancing to a specific record as one moment within a chronologically-determined story and allow it to come to the fore in the film.

Varda is also aiming at something else here. By dancing the cha-cha-cha, the still unknown director Gomez is actually placed at the heart of Varda’s essayistic historiography as the new queen. In other words, Varda herself is leaving a trace behind and shaping it as a form of aesthetic play consisting of sound, image, and text. This trace is very much multilayered. First of it, it relates to a coronation: as the dancing queen of contemporary rhythm, Gomez is inheriting the estate of the deceased Benny Moré, who was king of traditional forms of dance music. The cha-cha-cha developed out of the ‘danzón’ under the influence of the ‘son montuno’ at the end of 1940s, became one of the new popular forms of dance music in Cuba in the 1950s, and spread worldwide from the 1960s onwards.<sup>86</sup> This hopeful trace constructed by Varda connects revolution and tradition. It holds out the prospect here that the Cuban revolution (as an anti-colonialist movement) will spread throughout the world together with the cha-cha-cha. It primarily recalls, however, that the story of the colonized in Cuba is to be found in music. Secondly, this trace can be seen as a sort of grafting process, which attaches new Cuban filmmaking, portrayed by its new young hope Gomez, to the popular culture of dance and music—and thus opens up a new field of expression in which the musical traditions of resistance of the colonial era are connected to the essayistic and popular forms of cinema to create an interventional film practice and a specific form of an audio history of film. Thirdly, Varda’s film lays a biographical trace that connects the two filmmakers (Varda and Gomez). Both Varda and Gomez are examples of the few female filmmakers in their respective countries. What stands out here is a salute from one female filmmaker to another, which enters film

85. Dreyer points here to yet another reference to Chris Marker and his film *DIMANCHE À PEKING*, Dreyer loc. cit., p. 32.

86. Orovio 2004, loc. cit., p. 50.

history as a ‘cinécriture’ of a history of female and feminist filmmaking that continues to be written. Varda inscribes Gomez into her film as an image, as music (and a dancing queen of the cha-cha-cha) and as a name (of a director) from Cuban film history. And she also inscribes herself into her film, as a voice that can be heard, as an image, and as the name of the director Agnès Varda, who finds her voice in this film by encountering the Cubans.

Nearly half a century later, Varda created a sonic icon once again in the opening titles of her autobiographical film *LES PLAGES D’AGNÈS*. This one also establishes a trace constructed by Varda herself, with the strategy used to this end being very similar to that employed in *SALUT LES CUBAINS*. Yet this later film has the autobiographical in its sights and could equally carry the title “Salut Agnès”.<sup>87</sup> Varda actually gives a sort of salute to herself by staging a complex encounter with her person, her work, and “the others” in a similar intermeshing of sound acts, image acts, and speech acts.<sup>88</sup> Varda actually writes her own history as soundimagetext to this end, staging it as a salute and a commemoration, which address both the young filmmaker Varda as well as the filmmaking icon she’s become in the meantime. To this end, she connects the strategies she applied to Sara Gomez and Benny Moré in *SALUT LES CUBAINS*. Essayistic practice is also at the heart of *LES PLAGES D’AGNÈS*, which operates as a play of difference between film, photography, writing, and text and once again aims at the dual practice of writing history and taking part in it. The focus of the following is to describe the beginning of the film as an intermeshing of sound, image, and speech acts. The individual acts contained within the first two shots will initially be extracted and analyzed to this end in order to subsequently characterize Varda’s essayistic practice of interweaving these acts and how they are produced and shaped as a sonic icon.

Focusing on the speech act to begin with, the start of *LES PLAGES D’AGNÈS* takes the form of an autobiographical account. The first two shots are set up as an oral history, which begins as follows: “I play the role of a small old woman [...] who tells the story of her life [...]” Shifting onto the image act now, it can be described as follows: the camera pans to pick out Agnès Varda on the beach, following how she walks backwards, moving to the left (as if walking backwards in time and against the standard direction of reading), turning her body to keep walking further to the left, before she changes direction and walks towards the camera and starts speaking, addressing the camera directly. Shortly afterwards, Varda mentions that the idea behind her film is to create a filmed self-portrait. Concentrating finally on the sound act, a phonographic composition can be discerned here. This already emerges in the first seconds of the film, as the sound of water can be heard while the “ciné-tamaris films” logo appears on the black screen before the beach is even visible. When the beach comes into view, a modern violin composition starts up alongside the sound of water. Only several seconds later does Varda’s voice join the sound and music on the soundtrack. In the first shot, her lips move in sync with what she’s saying, while in the second she can be heard in voiceover.

Already in the first shots of *LES PLAGES D’AGNÈS*, sound and image are marked as belonging to the present and past at the same time. The specific

87. Alain Bergala picks up on this strategy in his film *DE COQ À L’ANE* which is both about and features Varda and greets Agnès Varda by saying “Salut Agnès”, although the mise-en-scène makes reference to the opening scene of *CLÉO DE 5 À 7*.

88. Right at the beginning of the film, Varda talks of her interest in “the other” who have influenced, called, and ultimately formed her.

encoding of a cinematographic trace is carried out from the image and sound recordings at the editing table—that is, in post-production. This refers to the idea that what can be heard and seen is simultaneously marked as the past and thus can be perceived as shuttling back and forth between present and past. In addition, the direct address to camera and microphone also depicts the dialogue as an encounter with the self which simultaneously addresses the present of a future audience. The way this connects *mise-en-scène*, *mise-en-son*, and postproduction throws the strategies of the essay film into clear relief once again.<sup>89</sup> The procedure shifts between sound, image, and speech acts. The complex network (the *soundimagetext*) develops as an aesthetic play involving traces of the past and those yet to come being addressed, which is at the same transferred onto the audience. In this sense, the way Varda describes her position as being a “documenteur” and her filmmaking as “cinécriture” both provide meaningful pointers which equally describe this essay film strategy.<sup>90</sup>

While the first two shots show various planned, self-reflexive initial considerations for Varda’s undertaking (speech act: autobiographical narration/image act: filmed self-portrait/sound act: phonographic composition), the following ones show her film team preparing for a shoot. They provide a clear contrast to the idea of such planning and are emphasized as such. They are helping to prepare Varda’s production of a sonic icon. The shots in question show mirrors being installed on a beach by the sea, a process presided over by Varda, who is explaining the idea of the scene to her staff. The scene is marked as an authentic working process via the handheld camera, the sound recording, which is hampered by heavy wind, and the lack of any clear order to the visual construction. At the same time however, this shoot is not entirely unplanned. Varda and her camera people remain open to coincidence as they accompany the working process, as if they want to capture some sort of event or reality effect at the very least.<sup>91</sup> Varda plays first with the wind and then with her scarf, before looking at a wooden mirror frame and suddenly and abruptly narrating an authentic memory from her childhood: “That reminds me of the furniture in my parents’ bedroom in Brussels”. In the shot that follows, Varda points to the frame and finally touches it with her hand: “The bed was like this one here and mum’s cupboard was like that one over there.” The shot that follows shows another mirror, where a third person can be seen in turn. Varda is no longer in frame, but continues to speak of her memories in voiceover in similar fashion: “But it doesn’t make the squeaking noise I used to like so much when she opened the cupboard.” Varda now directly follows this sentence with the squeaking sound of a cupboard door. The sound is a deliberately placed sound effect and appears all the more surprising given the “authentic” work being carried out in the background, almost like a gimmick that has wandered into Varda’s essay from a horror film. Michel Chion calls such sounds “sensory phantoms”, which create acousmatic entities.<sup>92</sup> Here it’s Varda’s mother that this noise is summoning up as a phantom, at exactly the moment when Varda is no longer in frame and can no longer be heard. Varda thus begins the account of her childhood firstly with haptic, material memory traces and then with acoustic ones. The form of aesthetic play generated doesn’t just mark the current sound, image, and speech acts as simultaneously belonging to the past

89. We can equally talk of *mise-en-son* here, in analogy to the practice of *mise-en-scène*. What is meant here is complex work with sound, which encompasses both the recording of events external to the film and their recording with microphones, as well as the arrangement of different recordings during postproduction.

90. For more on the term *cinécriture*, see Varda, *Varda par Agnès*, loc. cit., p. 14.

91. On the concept of the reality effect, see Roland Barthes. 1989. *The Reality Effect*. In: Barthes 1989: *The Rustle of Language*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 141–8.

92. Chion 2009, loc. cit., p. 465, p. 490.

as previously described, but also operates the other way around, by calling up missing sounds (the remembered squeaking of a cupboard) and thus also a deceased person into the present for a few moments as a phantom.

Afterwards, Varda's voice can be heard in voiceover. Varda now comments on the acoustic memories from her childhood from a different position, as if she were sitting in an editing suite during post-production. This positioning of the voiceover is a specific sound act carried out by the essay film, which moves it away from the classic voice of god and into the position of a filmmaker speaking and reflecting, which is also an authentication strategy, a reality effect. Varda talks about her parents' manually operated gramophone and says that her father used to like playing songs by Tino Rossi and Rina Ketty on Sundays, while her mother sometimes used to listen to Schubert's Unfinished Symphony during the week. Finally, the Schubert symphony strikes up, once again with a squeaking sound layered on top of it. Varda again produces a sound effect here, this time as a sound montage (consisting of music and a particular sound). The opening bars of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony have a squeaking sound added to them that has already become associated with her parents' cupboard due to the previous story, creating a montage of classical music and 'musique concrète', which again calls up her mother as an acousmatic apparition. Yet the squeaking sound is then unexpectedly linked back to the beach scene and can actually be localized onscreen, seemingly from the hinge of a mirror in several parts that Varda has had brought to the beach.

Chion terms this effect a "de-acousmatization", which refers to the way in which a sound loses its magic or an illusion is broken, which in Varda's film had managed to conjure up the presence of her mother for a few moments.<sup>93</sup> Yet the strategies of the essay film take these film sound effects further. By encoding sound, image, and text in dual fashion in such a way that each influences the other, these effects also refer to the different locations that relate to the film (the shooting location and the location of post-production) and thus forge connections to reality and history outside of the film itself. The clear distinction between an acousmatic, omnipotent entity and its de-acousmatization and localization within the film is undermined as such. Varda's method thus initially produces a sonic icon, a trace which links the location of shooting with the location where the post-production was carried out. And it is at this latter place that Varda plays the music that she was lacking on location. In other words, the de-acousmatization may destroy the illusion of her mother being alive, but not the memory of her and the cultural practice of listening to music within the Varda family, which probably also represents a characteristic 1930s practice beyond the family itself—as is also depicted in *MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG*, for example. The link between the sonic icon and the biographical traces of memory generated by the sound effect being revealed is actually all the stronger as a result and thus becomes transformed into a reality effect. Without needing to include much information or give many hints, Varda identifies the use of the gramophone in her parents' house as forming the material, semiotic hub of her childhood, which she continues to process as a (female) filiation in what follows, drawing on the methods of the essay film to this end.

93. Chion 2009, loc. cit., p. 473–474.

The specific sound design of the ‘musique concrète’ and the way in which the mother is conjured up actually just form a prelude to the actual title sequence. This sequence now starts to transform the traces of acoustic childhood memory into an installation and performance on a Belgian beach, with the title and credits of the film initially placed as writing in the image. Varda displays another aspect of how the soundimage-text is woven together, with this shift once again emphasizing how a trace is being constructed. For the title sequence actually shows a transitional situation between the film and the world which is explicitly staged as such, namely as the making-of her very own film.

The title sequence basically only consists of one fixed camera shot and shows a metal bedstead mounted like a viewfinder which structures the view of the sea in such a way that the sky and beach are outside of the frame. This once again conjures up Varda’s mother, this time as a synesthetic image generated by phonetic sounds, and emphasizes a reference point in Varda’s biography (*La mer/la mère*, the sea/the mother). This sonic icon created by connecting noise, music, framing, and a background for writing. The bedroom of Varda’s parents and their bed (previously called up acoustically) are now de-familiarized in the form of a viewfinder, which now marks the actual starting point of a biography as a trace and an empty view of the sea. This complex aesthetic procedure fantasizes about Varda’s very origins in the form of a primal scene that is transposed to the Belgian beach. The act of procreation and the act of birth are covered or even replaced by sound and image acts: Varda films the sea (the mother) through a viewfinder (the parental bed). A group of surfers carrying their surfboards move through this frame to begin with, like a distorted view of sperm under a microscope (a trace of the father) – an image that also has the white writing of the film title superimposed top of it. After the credits and as soon as the viewfinder once again provides an unobstructed view of the sea, Varda appears and enters the viewfinder frame. She positions herself within this film image as a sort of countershot with her photo camera in her hand and thus produces a dual, interconnected image act. This form of play is flanked by a contemporary free jazz vocal number called *Loulou Zoulou* (2008). Bernard Lubat’s singing replaces the trace of the previous commentary here via a vocal performance that operates beyond linguistic meaning while still expressing the “pleasure of the text” and song—the pleasure of Varda’s fantastical soundimage-text in this case. By referring back to scat singing in this way, Varda makes reference to the time before language that precedes every biography, the time in the life of a child that begins in the mother’s stomach when language is only perceived as a vocal performance consisting of different sounds.

This set of procedures can, however, also be interpreted within the context of her artistic biography. The creation of this dual, interconnected image act recalls the same practice used by Varda in her 1963 photo film *SALUT LES CUBAINS*, in which she found her own voice with the rhapsodic flavor of a recitative. That earlier film operates in very similar fashion with respect to the construction of traces and sonic icons. Like the title sequence of *LES PLAGES D’AGNÈS*, it begins with the sound of water, that of waves hitting the shore, and is also marked by the voices that appear within a piece of music. Later on, in *LES PLAGES D’AGNÈS*, Varda’s commentary explains

that she doesn't want her work and her life to be regarded as separate from one another. The way in which she constructs a sonic icon already makes clear that Varda's life and work are each composed of sound, image, and speech acts and are repeatedly condensed into a fabric which creates a prototypical version of an audio history of film in which biography, film history, and history are all inextricably linked.

### 5. Reality Effects: THE KING'S SPEECH (2010)

From a pragmatic point of view, historical films can be grasped as an independent film genre that creates references to historical events.<sup>94</sup> One particular characteristic of these films is that the historical era being depicted and the time of the film's production are entirely distinct from one another. This means that historical films are unable to directly address their subjects with the help of cameras or microphones. Instead, they depict historical events with the help of comprehensive work in the area of set design, architecture, and costumes. This work usually takes its bearings in turn from historical depictions in other arts and media. These traditionally include literature, theatre, and art, but also photography, phonography, and documentary film in particular. Historical depictions in other arts and media serve to a certain extent as a model for the production design of historical films. It's these models that give historical films an "authentic" look and occasionally sound too.<sup>95</sup> Finally, the design of the respective film sets is frequently realized via the use of historical objects or reproductions of them. These specific production conditions have played a key role in inspiring the numerous debates surrounding the historical film, which revolve around the legitimacy of this genre in terms of whether it can actually offer a reliable representation of history.<sup>96</sup>

Historical films can also clearly deviate from authenticated historical representations. André Wendler's study *Anachronismen: Historiografie und Kino* is dedicated to such deviations, which he grasps as temporal differences expressed by the term anachronism. He makes the initially surprising assertion here that a historical film containing such anachronisms can indeed be regarded as successful historiography, because 'every' such historiography is held together by an anachronism.<sup>97</sup> Wendler's book teases out the similarities between historical films and historiography, arguing that the latter is equally characterized by anachronisms.<sup>98</sup> To a certain extent, the focus of his analysis thus lies in investigating historical films and traditional forms of historiography in parallel. What he neglects here, however, are other differences of other kinds, namely those between the historical film and the other arts and media to which this genre necessarily makes reference. While Wendler does repeatedly return to the specific mediality of photography, phonography, and film, he basically regards them as a media composite which he refers to as moving image, film, cinema.<sup>99</sup> Whenever he talks of individual differences, such as when he examines phonography in the film *SHUTTER ISLAND* (USA 2010), he only analyzes and evaluates these as temporal anachronisms without taking into consideration the historical inscription to which the musical recording attests.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, however, Wendler's study is indeed pioneering with regards to how such differences can be analyzed in historical films in that it points out that historical inscriptions generated by the

94. Burgoyne, Robert. 2008. *The Hollywood Historical Film*; Liptay, Fabienne/Bauer, Matthias (Ed.). 2013. *Filmgenres. Historien- und Kostümfilm*. Reclam, Stuttgart.

95. On authenticity in film, see in particular Mattias Frey's contribution in this journal entitled "[The Authenticity Feeling](#)".

96. See here, for example, Robert Rosenstone's response to Robert Toplin's "Reel History: In Defence of Hollywood" (2003), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/198619> (last accessed 21.6.2017).

97. Wendler, *Anachronismen*, op.cit., p. 41.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 42–80.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

100. Wendler only attempts to describe such differences based on the image itself in relation to Georges Didi-Huberman's "images above all", *ibid.*, p. 39.

media of photography, phonography, and film can only appear indirectly in historical films—as differences or anachronisms.

Tom Hooper's *THE KING'S SPEECH* (UK/USA/AUS 2010) looks back at the history of the broadcast of the voice via radio and sound film, as well as the public use of these media by the British royal family during the 1920s and 1930s. It's a historical film which draws on historical documents, media, and arts in highly detailed fashion. The central reference point here is the historical sound recording of the speech given by King George VI when the United Kingdom entered the Second World War in 1939, which spoke to the unity of the nation in the sense of nation building. The film's key closing scene presents a re-enactment of this speech. It's this reference to the historical sound recording reproduced in *THE KING'S SPEECH* which forms the historical film's most delicate moment. The re-enactment of the speech replaces the historical recording of the king's speech with the contemporary sound recording of the voice of an actor accordingly and thus emphasizes a phonographic difference. The DVD of the film includes the sound recording of the original speech as bonus material, which enables the two versions to be compared while also serving to authenticate just how close the film is to the original.<sup>101</sup>

Yet the 2010 film equally responds to developments within society during the media age in which it was made. The prince must subject himself to different methods of self-optimization, therapy, and coaching, which are likely to be familiar to every contemporary viewer as part of the painful process of overcoming one's deficits. Like every historical film however, this film thus also conveys various aspects of the time of its production in the sense of providing the history of a particular psychology. Or, to put it another way: the success of a historical film like *THE KING'S SPEECH* with audiences suggests the existence of certain dispositions in today's societies which can be explored and described as forming their historical characteristics.<sup>102</sup> The historical nation building of the 1930s of which *THE KING'S SPEECH* gives an account can therefore indeed be interpreted as a symptom of a current shift in the category of the nation, as can be seen in the push and pull between globalization and re-nationalization in both the United Kingdom and beyond.

In the case of *THE KING'S SPEECH*, there is a particular relationship between the era of historical media shifts in the 1930s depicted in the film (which shows the effects of the radio and sound film era) and the time at which the film was produced (which was itself experiencing the effects of digital media). While the historical media shifts of the 1930s only really affected professional groups at the focus of public attention, such as actors and politicians, the contemporary media shifts affect every member of Western society in fundamental fashion. At the level of its historical plot, the film tells the story of the personal challenge posed by the media age to a prince and future king. Yet this also gives contemporary viewers the opportunity to connect their own experiences of media shifts in the digital world to this period of historical media upheaval.

101. The DVD released by Anchor Bay Entertainment 2011.

102. Siegfried Kracauer's study touches on such a diagnosis. Kracauer, Siegfried. 2004. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Finally, *THE KING'S SPEECH* also establishes a relationship to other depictions of history in film – even if the film doesn't explicitly intend to do this. This takes place above all via the discourses that surround the film, including its reception and contextualization within film historiography. Within the framework of genre classification, this relationship is primarily marked by the other historical films that take the British royal family as their theme or other biographical films (biopics) that tell the story of historically authenticated people. Within the context of research on the audio history of film, this relationship also includes films whose specific work with sound places the same or a closely related historical period at the heart of their depictions even if they were made in entirely different historical contexts, such as Humphrey Jennings's *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* (UK 1942) or Charles Chaplin's *THE GREAT DICTATOR* (USA 1940).

The focus of the following is to take *THE KING'S SPEECH* as an example as a way of taking a closer look at the complex network of different historical and media connections and references that stem from a specific historical film. Sonic icons once again form the starting point here as moments of cinematic self-reflexivity that come to the fore and serve to structure this network. With this as the focus, perspectives aimed at the sort of ideological criticism that would take the history and present of the United Kingdom as their theme will only be explored in marginal fashion here. A critical engagement with *THE KING'S SPEECH* based on such ideas would certainly make sense and would build on the method used by Siegfried Kracauer in his analysis of the history of a particular psychology, which involved examining the representation of the historical royal figures of the Weimar era at an early stage already.<sup>103</sup> I will instead be picking up on Wendler's suggestion and making the historical film the starting point for an investigation of relationships of difference. The analysis will not, however, focus on the relationship between the historical film and traditional forms of historiography first and foremost (as is the case with Wendler), but rather concentrate instead on the relationship between a historical film and its own moments of cinematic self-reflexivity while also bringing its links to other media (in particular to phonography) to the fore. What's to be shown here initially is that sonic icons also appear in historical films – at precisely the same moments when anachronisms in the film's historiography can be experienced. The way in which the creation of sonic icons confers reality effects onto the historical film will also be explored. Finally, a focus is also placed on the relationship between *THE KING'S SPEECH* and the previously mentioned films by Jennings and Chaplin, which is ultimately determined by way of analyzing sonic icons in the historical film.

*THE KING'S SPEECH* tells the story of how Prince Albert (later King George VI) learns to overcome his stammer with considerable effort in order to give radio speeches to the British people. The starting point and prologue of the film is formed by the first speech given by the prince to be broadcast on radio on the occasion of the closing of the British Empire Exhibition on October 31, 1925. The prince's speech forms a direct counterpart to the historical opening speech given by King George V (Prince Albert's father) on April 23, 1924, which was the first time that a speech by a British monarch was broadcast on the radio.<sup>104</sup> Before the backdrop of the monarchy's new

103. See Kracauer, Siegfried. 22.12.1930. Der bejubelte Fridericus Rex. Frankfurter Zeitung, as well as Kracauer, Siegfried, 2004, *From Caligari to Hitler*.

104. Philip Grant (2012), accessed 24.5.17, <https://www.brent.gov.uk/media/387533/The%20British%20Empire%20Exhibition.pdf>

media presence and the resultant demands on the voice of the king, *THE KING'S SPEECH* depicts the prince's speech disorder in suitably dramatic fashion in: as a significant blemish on the next in line to the throne, who is unable to speak properly in the new radio age.

With this in mind, the film then places the relationship between Prince Albert (Colin Firth) and his speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) at the heart of the plot. Their relationship takes the form of a mixture of speech therapy, psychotherapy, and coaching procedures, as well as various longer-term strategies. The goal of the treatment and the training strategies is to make the prince fit for public appearances and radio programs. The film's dramatic highpoint is then formed by the radio speech he gives on the occasion of the declaration of war on Germany on September 3, 1939, which is celebrated as proof of King George VI's successful media presence thanks to his many years of vocal training and is constructed as the film's happy end. The film's postscript points out that the speech therapist accompanied the king on all the speeches he gave during the war, that their radio broadcast became a symbol of national resistance, and that the two of them remained lifelong friends.

The film was criticized from an ideological perspective and accused as such of falsifying history, particularly in relation to the British government and the royal family's political positions in the lead-up to events of the Second World War.<sup>105</sup> One can also accuse this biographical account of having various other ideological implications, such as when the speech disorder of a British prince and his alienation within the royal family is brought into connection with the trauma and loss of speech suffered by First World War soldiers, or when Hitler's media-boosted oratory skills and their ability to incite the masses to war seemingly demand that the voice of the king appear on the radio as a counter position to call for unity across the British nation in defending the fatherland.

The film's focus on the relationship between the prince and a speech therapist isn't just a way of depicting a male friendship that transcends class boundaries and helps form a voice of national resistance. It's actually the speech acts and their mediatization instead which become the central subject of the film. In this way, *THE KING'S SPEECH* (aside from its ideological implications) contains a series of self-reflexive moments that emphasize the acting within the film as well as the sound of and performance linked to speaking before the microphone. This takes place at different levels. On the one hand, there are the speech and vocal exercises performed by the stuttering prince, whose use of repetition make reference to the production and staging of speech acts for the film. On the other, there are the appearances by the speech therapist, who is shown auditioning for an amateur theatre group in his free time or playing a guessing game with his children, which consists of reciting Shakespeare plays and taking on the corresponding roles.

Finally, the dialogue between Prince Albert and his father King George V (Michael Gambon) on the occasion of the radio broadcast of the latter's Christmas speech in 1934 addresses the relationship between the royal family and acting and performance directly. King George V describes it as follows:

105. Christopher Hitchens: Churchill Didn't Say That: The King's Speech is riddled with gross falsification of history, Slate 24.01.2011, (last accessed 25.5.2017) [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2011/01/churchill\\_didnt\\_say\\_that.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2011/01/churchill_didnt_say_that.html)

“In the past, all a king had to do was look respectable in uniform and not fall off his horse. Now, we must invade people’s homes and ingratiate ourselves with them. This family’s been reduced to those lowest, basest of all creatures. We’ve become actors.” – Prince Albert replies: “We’re not a family, we’re a firm.” On the one hand, contempt for acting as well as the changing media public is mentioned here – both of which carry dramatic consequences for the royal family. On the other, these sentences make *THE KING’S SPEECH*’s costume drama logic splinter for a while as a sort of distancing strategy and allow its anachronistic qualities to be experienced. For a short moment, Michael Gambon and Colin Firth become visible and audible as actors, namely at the very point when the social roles they are embodying (king and prince) becomes decisively marked as a form of acting. Michael Gambon/King George V almost seems to flaunt this effect in how he performs his lines, whose emphasis reaches its peak with the word “actors”. By stating that they are not a family, but rather a company characterized by its business relations, Prince Albert/Colin Firth equally underlines the rupture in the fiction (and also in time). While he puts the prince’s suffering and alienation within the royal family into words in front of his father here, which is repeatedly brought into connection with his speech problems in the film, this sentence is delivered by Colin Firth fluidly and without even a hint of a stutter – as if it didn’t actually belong to the role of the prince (ultimately, the sentence can just as easily apply to the relationship between the two actors Michael Gambon and Colin Firth, who are in a business relationship with one another during the production of the film).

This dialogue doesn’t just allow the actors to step out of their roles for a while. The modulation of the speech acts also creates a reality effect,<sup>106</sup> which emerges from the flow of the film as a sonic icon: the grain of the actors’ voices can suddenly be heard. What initiates this sonic icon is the leap from the historical context of the royal family (the 1930s) into the present of the film production and back again. This effect addresses the audience and calls to mind their contemporary experience of a society of control and the media in which working on performing one’s persona is of central significance for economic and social success. The film thus links together the present and its historical account (via this anachronism) and thus brings the historical experience of a media society being formed up to date. This can already be seen in the prince’s suffering and his fear of failure, which must be met with various endeavors of self-optimization and coaching. The lack of closeness and affection in the royal family is made up for in the coaching and therapy relationships.

Seen in this way, *THE KING’S SPEECH* becomes the diagnosis of a time that gains meaning as a tragedy in the present in the sense that it doesn’t just tell the story of the historically authenticated Prince Albert and his speech disorder, but also addresses the current media shift which today structures every individual’s realm of experience. The film thus reveals itself to be a new version of Shakespeare’s royal drama *Hamlet*, which democratizes the play and transposes it into the media age. The film’s historical garb in connection with the contemporary references to the demands of a media society in particular generate a broad sense of relatability and empathy on the part of the audience and at the same time reduce the shame they feel for their own deficits, which are transferred onto the figure of the king.

106. Barthes: *The Reality Effect*, op. cit.

This new version of the royal drama shifts the prince's central conflict onto the historical media changes and the introduction of radio. Alongside the radio broadcast of the king's voice (which seems to determine the prince's future), the film also addresses the recording and broadcast of voices by way of phonograph and sound film. As such, the conversation between father and son on the occasion of the radio speech (Christmas 1934) is framed by the prince's first visit to Logue, the speech therapist. During this first session, Logue has the prince deliver the famous passage from Hamlet ("To be, or not to be ...") and creates a phonographic recording of it. What's special about the recording set-up is that the prince is given headphones so that he can listen to classical music being played from a gramophone – meaning that the prince can't hear his own voice and is able to deliver the Hamlet monologue into the microphone without stuttering. As far as the plot is concerned, the recording offers proof that the speech disorder can indeed be cured. As the prince breaks off the exercise, its meaning is only revealed later, however.

From a media historical point of view, the therapist's set-up represents an intervention in the standard setting of therapeutic treatments, as the use of the phonograph for recording speech enables the vocal performance in question to be checked or verified. This enables public speaking to be practiced in targeted fashion, with the recordings able to be used to analyze and work on the intonation and dramatic emphasis of the voice— a method used in coaching and supervision that nowadays takes the form of video analysis. The use of phonography also carries the prospect of a change in the medium of radio at the same time: from simple "live" broadcast to radio plays produced in advance. From very early on, the sort of innovative radio productions that worked with such recording techniques actually took their bearings from the recording techniques used in film, that had since the introduction of sound film also separated the production of sound from the direct screening situation, which was instead recorded, processed, and edited at a studio in advance.<sup>107</sup> The speech therapist's treatment room thus turns into the key location, becoming a production studio, as it were, which produces the king's voice in advance—even if no actual record recordings of the prince speaking are broadcast on the radio. It's more that the therapeutic relationship itself becomes mediatized. The therapist and the phonograph almost become one and mirror the process of a voice being produced in acoustic terms. The film depicts this blurring of boundaries between the two in impressive fashion, as Logue carries out the phonographic recording with a hand microphone (although there are various other microphones on stands in the room), creating the impression that the voice recording is being directed through the body of the therapist.

At the same time, the film's self-reflexive moments and their focus on speech acts are also linked to the aesthetics of modern film. This occurs due to the specific composition of image and sounds acts in this scene. While the camera observes the prince from outside during the exercise (like Logue), the sound is heard from the prince's internal perspective, who is listening to classical music on the headphones. As such, the speech act can be seen, but not heard, as it's only the therapist Logue who is able to hear the speech act being recorded by the phonograph. The montage makes reference to the

107. See here the first part of this essay. Wolfgang Hagen has pointed out that the production of radio plays was already taking pointers from film during the silent era, with Hans Flesch's first radio play "Zauberei auf dem Sender", broadcast on October 24th, 1924, see Hagen, 2005, *Das Radio* op.cit., here p. 103.

108. This material has seemingly been taken from numerous sources, stemming on the one hand from a Reichsparteitag in Nuremberg and from an excerpt from Hitler's speech at the Sportpalast in Berlin after he took over power on February 10, 1933.

constructed quality of the scene by splitting off the voice recording as a separate sound act and allowing it to be accessed in the form of a record, which is later played in the prince's apartment – directly after the dialogue between father and son. The recording and playing of the prince's voice thus frame the moment described above that initiates the sonic icon, whereby the film jumps out of its historical context and into the present of the time of its production. They thus establish a second level of perception alongside the historical narration, which directs the spectator's eyes and ears to the mediality of the speech acts in the film and how they are produced. In other words: in this scene, one can witness how the specific work with sound imbues the speech acts performed by the actors with a temporary presence, which gives the historical figures additional authenticity via a reality effect.

The scene in which the royal family attends a private screening of the newsreel of George VI's recent coronation (May 12, 1937) has a similar self-reflexive function. During the preparations for the coronation ceremony at Westminster Abbey, Logue, the speech therapist, is depicted like the director of the coronation protocol. At the private film screening though, it's ultimately the archbishop (Derek Jacobi), who claims the praise for the successful ceremony for himself as the host of Westminster Abbey and the one to actually carry out the act of coronation. The contrast between the language coach and the archbishop emphasizes the transformation of traditional ceremonies in the media age: this public ceremony morphs from being a ritual carried out by a church dignitary into a secularized media production, that is, a performance staged for camera and microphone.



Figure 5. *THE KING'S SPEECH*, Tom Hooper, UK/USA/AUS 2010

A newsreel clip from Germany can also be seen at the end of the same roll of film, which shows an excerpt of a speech given by Hitler at the Sportpalast.<sup>108</sup> While they watch, the daughter asks her father (King George VI): “Papa, what’s he saying”, who answers: “I don’t know. But he seems to be saying it rather well”. This family dialogue thus focuses on a speech act once again, in this case on the convincing nature of Hitler’s performance and functions like an update of the previous dialogue between father and son about the demands of a royal media presence. The historical film material of the coronation and Hitler’s speech represent the only explicitly marked

historical sound source to be used in the film. Its presentation via shot-countershot emphasizes both the tonal and visual differences between the historical archive material of the 1930s (in black and white) and the color film production shot on 35mm with digital sound from 2010. The film depicts the royal family as actors watching something from another time, who behave with the same degree of distance towards what's they seeing as television viewers of today do towards historical film material—and are placed in (hardly regal) garden loungers in this scene. Or, to put it another way: the actors' speech acts seem to be making them jump out of their roles and into the present to furnish the historical figures they're playing with authenticity via a second sonic icon.

Summarizing now the previous analysis of *THE KING'S SPEECH*, the sonic icons play a central role as self-reflexive moments which structure the film at different levels. The biographically documented friendship between the prince and his speech therapist is rewritten into a royal drama for the media age. The film grasps history as media history and retools it into a new discovery on the part of the royal family for today's media society, a discovery that carries conflict in its wake. The concept for the success of this new discovery is based on the professionalization of speech acts and how they are shaped and disseminated by the media. In this way, the film links together royal performance and film acting. It's this linkage that provides the film with its reality effects, with the dialogue between father and son (as well as that between father and daughter) thus allowing the voices of the actors to come to the fore as sonic icons. This goes hand in hand with a shift from history to media history, which also serves to democratize the figure of the king for a moment, turning him into a historical pioneer who anticipates and reflects upon the pressure to adapt and rediscover oneself across numerous parts of the contemporary media society.

*THE KING'S SPEECH* thus repeatedly references its constructed nature in discreet fashion and accentuates its self-reflexive qualities. Its use of historical archive material places the film in relationship to other cinematic representations of history, most explicitly, for example, to Leni Riefenstahl's staging of the Reichsparteitag, whose focus on Hitler's speeches and speech acts is alluded to the deliberate contrast created in relation to the film excerpts in the news reel footage. What's less obvious and likely unintended is the film's relationship to other productions, such as Humphrey Jennings's *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*; *THE KING'S SPEECH*'s focus on the king's speech acts almost appears to be responding to the imperative contained in its title (*Listen to Britain!*). The relationship between *THE GREAT DICTATOR*, Charles Chaplin's first film to contain dialogue, and Hooper's drama can probably also only be made out before the backdrop of the use of sonic icons in historical films. For Chaplin's film actually generates a reality effect in very similar fashion, in that a speech act within the fiction of the film shifts into marking the presence of an actor—Chaplin himself in this case—who suddenly starts addressing the audience.

When film is explored via its audio history, Jennings's fundamentally different brand of filmmaking can still be compared with a historical film like *THE KING'S SPEECH*, as both films attempt to make a voice of Britain audible.

In *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*, Jennings's artistic, avant-garde strategy is to construct this voice from sounds and music (and images) composed of a cross section of articulations on the part of the country. The microphone is used like a camera to this end to create a differentiated compilation of sounds and noises, as the *London Times* already noted in 1942.<sup>109</sup> A multi-faceted soundscape emerges in the process that carries out a different form of nation building, namely one conducted from a multitude of different perspectives, which alongside the everyday sounds of agricultural and industrial production also shows two musical appearances that form a key element of cultural resistance against the Nazis. These are an excerpt of a concert by duo Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen (singing their famous song *Underneath the Arches*), which reflects on the war era from the point of view of the simple people by way of comedy and song, and a lunchtime concert by Myra Hess at the National Gallery (playing Mozart's piano concerto G-Dur, KV 453, 1784), who is a central representative of cultural resistance.

Jim Leach's study explores the complex relationship between poetry and propaganda in *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*.<sup>110</sup> He traces both how the film was classified as a poetic city symphony and the critical reception of Jennings' oeuvre, including the mythologizing of the people's war and the propagation of national unity that are both attributed to him. The main focus of the study's last section is an analysis of the design of the music in the film. He highlights the ambiguous nature of how the two concert excerpts are combined in particular here, with their connection emphasizing national unity on the one hand, while also pointing to some irresolvable differences on the other. Specifically, the montage attests to an openness of meaning construction that goes beyond the propaganda of national unity, even as Leach admits that the final piece of music to be played (*Rule, Britannia!*) does indeed link to the national myth of Britannia.<sup>111</sup>

Jennings's real coup in *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* consists of his remarkable decision to do without a voiceover at a time (1942) when they were standard and to rely on an avant-garde, poetic soundscape instead to articulate the voice of British resistance to Hitler. film thus consists of sound and image recordings that do indeed capture sounds and images at different locations, as well as concerts. The leading figures of this particular acoustically formed resistance are located in the realm of music and thus in the field of the arts—rather than politics. While the musicians represent different classes with different musical cultures (with the comical song performance by Flanagan and Allen belonging to popular culture and Myra Hess's piano concerts belonging to the highbrow culture of the middle class), Myra Hess and Bud Flanagan's respective Jewish immigrant backgrounds mark them more as transnational stakeholders than national ones.<sup>112</sup> This equally applies to their music. The verses of Flanagan and Allen's popular song *Underneath the Arches* describe the experience of the homeless from their own perspective, who dream of something better beneath the railway bridge—even of a trip to Latin America with all the revolutionary complications that entails in the film of the same name. For its part, the Mozart piano concert performed by Myra Hess can be seen as an example of the sort of European classical music characterized by beauty, humanitarian content, and expression that is not tied to a particular purpose.<sup>113</sup>

109. Review of the Ministry of Information films, *London Times*, February 24th, 1942, quoted by Hunter, Jefferson. 2010. *English Film/English Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 79, fn 97.

110. Leach, Jim. 1998. *The Poetics of Propaganda*. Humphrey Jennings and Listen to Britain, in: Barry Keith Grant, Jeannette Sloniowski (Ed.): *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 154–170, reprinted in: Jonathan Kahana (Ed.): *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism*. Oxford University Press 2016, pp. 352–365.

111. *Rule, Britannia!* is a patriotic song written in 1740 by poet James Thomson and composer Thomas Arne, which is regarded as the United Kingdom's unofficial national anthem. See Scholes, Percy Alfred. 1970. *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Oxford University Press, p. 897.

112. See, for example, Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. 1986. *Humphrey Jennings: Surrealist Observer*, in: Charles Barr (Ed.): *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, pp. 321–333, p. 331.

113. Michels, Ulrich. 2001, dtv-Atlas Musik, Munich, see the section on "Klassik" pp. 332–399, in particular 332 & 397.

Jennings thus pursues a form of a nation building which encompasses both the (musical) culture of the (lumpen)proletariat as well as that of the bourgeoisie. The former is able to build on the popularity of a string of comedy films from the 1930s and 1940s in which Flanagan and Allen appear as comedians and singers.<sup>114</sup> The latter is linked to a central historical location, the National Gallery as a state museum, via the lunch time concerts held there. This is equally captured by Jennings's work with images, such as those of surrounding area and the historically significant Trafalgar Square, which was laid out to commemorate the British victory over the Spanish and the French in 1805.<sup>115</sup> It is not a government representative that is at the center of the arrangements of the lunch time concerts, but rather Myra Hess's playing—and Jennings' sound work on the soundscape. In this context, the king and the queen are placed on the side of the concert attendees within the frame—as listeners, not speakers—and thus appear on an equal footing with the other visitors as a result.

The complex work dedicated to the design of the sound and image acts suggests that *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* is not merely to be located somewhere between poetry and propaganda, as Leach and others suggest, but that Jennings is actually already operating in the mode of an essay film, as Hans Richter explicitly claimed in 1940 for the British School surrounding John Grierson.<sup>116</sup> Jefferson Hunter also underlines the same interpretation when he traces the development of the production process for *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*. A treatment from April 28, 1941 attests to the fact that at this point the film's conception was still aimed purely at Myra Hess and the lunchtime concerts. In another treatment from May 23, 1941, the theme of the film was to be the music of the war in all its many facets. During the production itself, Jennings then turned his attention to complex sound and images that both incorporated particular noises and did away with the voiceover.<sup>117</sup> Hunter also emphasizes the various parallels between the structuring principle of *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* and the city symphonies of Ruttmann, Cavalcanti, and Vertov.<sup>118</sup> And finally, he also points out that Jennings was interested in a different form of historiography, which condenses history from a multitude of different voices over the course of a single day in similar fashion to the city symphonies. This compositional principle is in turn indebted to the anthropological method of participatory observation, as was developed at Mass Observation, a research institute co-founded by Jennings in 1937 as a field research unit aimed at collecting a range of voices to grasp complex historical events.<sup>119</sup> One of its first book publications "May 12th 1937" (and the only one to be co-edited by Jennings) was explicitly against the creation of official historical images on the occasion of the King George VI's coronation. The idea instead was to collect more than 200 observations and witness testimonies from the day of the coronation and arrange these in book form to retain a multitude of perspectives and thus democratize the representation of history.<sup>120</sup> Jennings also made use of the same method in his film *SPARETIME* (USA 1939), thus developing his own unique directorial principle that set his work apart from the documentaries of the time in both form and content.<sup>121</sup>

114. Sutton, David. 2000. *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-1939*. University of Exeter Press.

115. See British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol20/pt3/pp15-18>, last accessed 3.7.2017.

116. See here also the fourth section of this essay entitled "A Media Historiography Practice" as well as Hans Richter, *Der Essayfilm*, op. cit.

117. Hunter, Jefferson. 2010. *English Film / English Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 75.

118. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

119. See here Richards, Jeffrey/ Sheridan, Dorothy (Eds.). 1987. *Mass-Observation at the Movies*. London: Routledge, "Introduction", pp. 1–18.

120. Jennings, Humphrey/Madge, Charles (Ed.). 1937. *May the Twelfth, Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937*, by over two hundred observers, London: Faber & Faber.

121. Richards, / Sheridan. 1987. *Mass-Observation* op. cit. p. 6 claims that *SPARE TIME* is actually a publication of the Mass Observation research organization. See also Anthony, Scott. *SPARE TIME* (1939), screenonline, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/443890/> (last accessed 8.6.2017).

Taking these ideas into consideration, *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* appears on the one hand to have been obliged by the state body (the Ministry of Information) that commissioned it to call for national unity and resistance against Hitler. On the other, the film appears like an independently designed, avant-garde pamphlet that takes a critical position towards the propaganda-motivated thoughts of unity and is actually more in line with the ideals of the Mass Observation research institute as well as the international surrealist movement that Jennings was close to.<sup>122</sup> Similar to the work of Agnès Varda later on, Jennings's film work already contains an approach for a different form of historiography that takes music and work on film sound as its starting point (just like Jennings, Varda was also later accused of propaganda for her historical engagement in *SALUT LES CUBAINS*). During the Second World War already, Jennings attempted to grasp a specific situation of historical upheaval in the United Kingdom as a soundscape composed of fragments of reality with an eye to music and those involved in making it. With *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*, he establishes a way of working with sound and image that retains multiple perspectives and points towards a modern aesthetic, while simultaneously intervening in the play of mediatized political representation in order to write history by way of an interventional film practice. What links *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* to *THE KING'S SPEECH* is a media-based form of historiography which grasps history as media history and depicts it as audio history.

Within the context of an audio history of film, the lines of connection between *THE GREAT DICTATOR* and both *THE KING'S SPEECH* and *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* become even more evident. For as a satire on Hitler, Chaplin's film explicitly intervenes in the acoustic representation of historical figures and equally tries to formulate a voice of resistance against Hitler from a position of artistic creation. Chaplin's film already became a political issue in the pre-production phase (in October 1938) after it was publicly announced that the film was to be about Hitler. As a result, the censorship boards in both the United Kingdom and the USA attempted to stop the film from being produced.<sup>123</sup> The film's initial aim is to make fun of Hynkel's/Hitler's manner of speech by having Chaplin distort it into a comical vocal performance.<sup>124</sup> The film's key dramatic moment is based on the motif of the doppelgänger: a Jewish barber is mistaken for the dictator Hynkel. With this idea, Chaplin picks up on the public controversy surrounding his person after Hitler came to power in 1933, whereby the appearances of Chaplin and Hitler and their respective beards were repeatedly compared.<sup>125</sup> This case of mistaken identity means that it is ultimately the barber rather than the dictator who gives a speech to the people at the end of the film, which is broadcast on the radio here too. Chaplin then breaks character (the character of the Jewish barber/Hynkel respectively) in this speech, which culminates in Chaplin speaking to the viewers of the film as an actor and private individual. During this performance, Chaplin develops a particular trick that allows him to step out of his role as an actor and his voice to come to the fore as a sonic icon, which serves to further accentuate his speech to the film's audience. It's actually the same aesthetic strategy that is used here that was employed 70 years later to allow the voices of actors Colin Firth and Michael Gambon to come to the fore for a short while—in order to bestow a reality effect onto the historical figures.

122. Jennings was the co-organizer of the first surrealism exhibition in London, see Hunter. 2010. Op.cit., p. 70.

123. Aping, Norbert. 2011. *LIBERTY SHTUNK! Die Freiheit wird abgeschafft. Charlie Chaplin und die Nationalsozialisten*. Marburg: Schüren, in particular p. 317.

124. Chaplin already intoned a political speech in ironic fashion in 1931's *CITY LIGHTS*.

125. Ibid., p. 245.

While director Tom Hooper used this effect in 2010 to bring a royal drama into the media age, Chaplin's strategy is based on repeated shifts in role and a vocal performance of suitable complexity. This 1940 film is actually Chaplin's first ever one to include dialogue.<sup>126</sup> In addition, Chaplin himself plays the antagonistic characters of the Jewish barber and the fascist dictator, who look almost identical to one another in the film. In so doing, the director picks up on the public discourse surrounding the comparisons between Hitler and Chaplin, but contrasts them and distinguishes between them via opposing ways of speaking and vocal performances. Chaplin ultimately makes use of the possibilities of sound film to declare himself in favor of democracy and humanity and against fascism and nationalism as both an artist and a citizen of the world—but then once again shifts this method from a historical perspective to a media historical one.

The speech begins with an apology and a confession ("I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an emperor, that's not my business ..."). The tonal, gesticular, and thematic rhetoric of its opening stages marks a difference in the speech act itself. This marking of the difference in speaking becomes audible as a sonic icon and allows Chaplin the actor to step out of his role and address the audience directly. The trick he uses here is on the one hand an aesthetic play typical of modern film, which plays with the fact that a voice normally belonging to one body actually switches between three bodies in this case (the dictator, the barber, and Chaplin himself). André Bazin described this trick as such.<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, this aesthetic play extends beyond the film itself, as Chaplin doesn't just include a commentary on history and a plea for humanity in his film, but also formulates a commentary on media history. By making the latter of these commentaries, Chaplin intervenes as both a private person and an artist into the increasingly mediatized power play to achieve dominance within world political events, doing so by flaunting and criticizing the practice of national representation as a misguided performance for microphone and camera only guided by particular interests—and contrasting this performance with his own imago and his own vocal performance.

The Mass Observation research institute documented and evaluated the reception of Chaplin's *THE GREAT DICTATOR* in England in 1940/41 in comprehensive fashion based on press analysis, questionnaires, and direct observation of audience in theaters.<sup>128</sup> The highly mixed reactions on the part of the 400 people surveyed established that the final speech was regarded as the best part of the film (scoring much higher than all the slapstick sequences).<sup>129</sup> The observations of audience reactions in theaters also suggest that the audience members of the time perceived the effects of the sonic icon (the difference within the speech act, Chaplin stepping out of his role, and the way in which they themselves were being addressed) in very clear fashion.<sup>130</sup> In addition, the study also emphasized that the audience felt as if they were being directly addressed by the content of the speech. Although Mass Observation operated as an independent research institution and positioned itself critically towards state images of history, the Ministry of Information became an important commissioning body for cinema evaluations of this kind during the Second World War. Their primary interest here was finding out how their in-house propaganda films were being received, which also included the films of the Crown Unit, for which Jennings was working at the time.<sup>131</sup>

126. Aping. 2011. op. cit., p. 317.

127. Bazin, André. [1948]. *Le mythe de M. Verdoux*, in: Idem. 1971. *What is Cinema?* Volume II. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 110.

128. This study is documented in Richards/Sheridan. 1987. *Mass-Observation op. cit.*, p. 9, pp. 350–363.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

130. *Ibid.*, p. 360, as such, there was applause in 50% of theaters during the speech and at the end. In several theaters, applause lasting up to eight seconds was noted during the speech, the longest sustained period of clapping in all of the audience studies ever carried out by Mass Observation.

131. Richards/Sheridan. 1987. *Mass-Observation op. cit.*, p. 10.

Even if Jennings was no longer working for Mass Observation during the war, it can be assumed that he was entirely familiar with the investigations on film reception being carried out by the research institute (which remained largely unpublished at the time) and that he also analyzed and evaluated them in view of his own film production *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*.<sup>132</sup> Before this backdrop too, the parallel aesthetic strategies employed in the films by Jennings and Chaplin seem less surprising. Jennings's strategy is related to that of Chaplin in the sense that *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* also brings the musical "voice" of an artist (pianist Myra Hess and her lunchtime concert initiative) into position, a voice which Jennings depicts as the central voice of resistance against Hitler within the film. Jennings's claim that this pianist is representative is created entirely differently however. She becomes the central element of a soundscape that is not only put together from different types of music, but also from recorded sounds and fragments of reality that are revealed to be acoustic articulations of everyday occurrences. In this way, an entirely different voice can be made out within Jennings's soundscape, namely that of a form of media art, whose procedures for recording sound and image collect a polyphony of different tonal and gestural articulations and forms them into a city symphony or rather an avant-garde or essay film. Jennings thus links this modern aesthetic procedure back to the mediatized political power play for national representation. In other words, *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* contrasts the official speeches made by politicians or kings with a soundscape that may receive a face in the form of the pianist Myra Hess, but is at the same time characterized by a multitude of voices—an acoustic (and visual) representation of the many composed of the sort of fragments of reality which Jennings had in mind when working at the Mass Observation research institute.

Compared to the work of Chaplin and Jennings, *THE KING'S SPEECH* initially appears like little more than the subsequent restoration of an official image of history in which the voice of the king can finally be heard again. Yet this film also works with a shift in focus from history to media history. Its focus here is on connecting a period of a historical media upheaval with the experiences of a spectatorship from the present. The figure of the king is democratized in the process and reconfigured into a historical pioneer of the "right" way to act within the contemporary media society and is furnished with a reality effect in the process. What's significant about this process is less that the king himself becomes more human and finds success via coaching and therapy and more that the many (viewers) feel represented by him or an emotional connection towards him. Already in 2011, *THE KING'S SPEECH* was being referred to as the most successful British independent film of all time.<sup>133</sup> While the success of the film with audiences may have stemmed from the specific way it depicts history, which is itself in turn stylized as being successful, it is at the same time explicitly linked to two sonic icons, with its mediality and constructed nature being thus emphasized acoustically. The sonic icons are based on the vocal performances by British actors, who step out of their roles for a moment and become recognizable as actors—and, suffice to say, on the film sound and acting work under director Tom Hooper, which produces these sonic icons in the first place. Yet these sonic icons cannot be reduced to be

132. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

133. The Guardian, 11.02.2011. Xan Brooks/Adam Dawtrey: Never mind the Baftas ... who will get *THE KING'S SPEECH* riches?, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/feb/11/baftas-the-kings-speech-riches> (last accessed 9.6.2017).

being one single element of the production process, but rather generate an activity of their own in the film screening situation and in the reception of the film. In this sense, it remains open whose voice **THE KING'S SPEECH** ultimately makes audible, whether that of a historical king, that of contemporary actors, that of a mass market audience of the present (or its respective mood), or that of acoustic media art—of sound design in the digital age.

### **List of Figures**

Fig. 1. **THE KING'S SPEECH**, Bedlam Productions © original copyright holders.

Fig. 2. **MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG**, DVD Präsenz Film/ ZYX Music © original copyright holders.

Fig. 3–4. **A SONG IS BORN**, The Samuel Goldwyn Company © original copyright holders.

Fig. 5. **THE KING'S SPEECH**, Bedlam Productions © original copyright holders.