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The Gravity of the acousmètre: Listening via the radio and through paratext in film

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In 2013, two films were released that speak to each other via a radio conversation, Alfonso Cuarón's feature length space adventure *Gravity*, and Jonás Cuarón's short film *Aningaaq*. Both father and son, Alfonso and Jonás Cuarón, wrote the screenplay for *Gravity*, and while in the process of the film's production Jonás made the accompanying short film. It was anticipated that the short film would be used as part of the promotional material for the feature length film, but *Aningaaq* was also shown in theatres and put forward by Warner Bros for consideration in the Best Live Action Short Film category for the Oscars. [1] *Aningaaq* was completed during the post-production of *Gravity* and the sound from the short film was integrated into the post-production sound design for the feature film.

The audiovisual essay I present here is centred on these two films and comprises a shared radio conversation, showing one side of the conversation and then the other. [2] The action is as follows: Dr Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) attempts to make contact with Houston Mission Control while on the Soyuz spacecraft, but her radio transmission is instead received by an Inuit fisherman, *Aningaaq* (Orto Ignatiussen). They do not speak each other's languages – at first Stone misinterprets *Aningaaq* to be Chinese, and *Aningaaq* misunderstands Stone's name to be May Day. They often speak over each other, until they finally settle on the topic of death. During this conversation, Stone decides and attempts to end her life, while *Aningaaq* discusses his reticence about putting down his dog, Naanak. A white light is seen moving from the top right of the frame down towards the centre of the screen. This light is Stone's spacecraft hurtling towards earth. *Aningaaq* fades out to the title credit accompanied by the sound of a rifle being fired. *Gravity* and *Aningaaq* offer a glimpse into the lives of two protagonists in distinct situations and spaces, allowing us to listen to the pain and suffering that they share, while they find solace in each other's company.

In this audiovisual essay, I incorporate text on acousmatic sound and the acousmètre from Michel Chion's book *The Voice in Cinema*. [3] Chion discusses the use of an archaic word – acousmatic – brought back into use by Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s. Acousmatic sound refers to sound 'that is heard without its cause or source being seen'. [4] Chion adopts and extends the use of the term from media, such as telephones and radio, central to Schaeffer's interest in *musique concrète*, to incorporate acousmatic sound into his theories of film sound and music. Chion outlines how early synch sound film made use of acousmatic sound to imply offscreen space. He draws from the original attribution of the term, which was associated with a Pythagorean sect, 'whose followers would listen to their Master speak behind a curtain [...] so the sight of the speaker wouldn't distract from the message'. [5] Special powers are associated with acousmatic sound and the acousmètre (the term used specifically for an acousmatic voice). [6] These powers are due to the hidden nature of this sonic presence. Chion illustrates this point by referring to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming,

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1939). The Wizard (Frank Morgan) is the acousmètre whose visible presence is hidden from Dorothy (Judy Garland) and her friends. He is finally de-acousmatised when Toto (Terry) pulls back the curtain, thus exposing the Wizard as a mere mortal without any magical powers or abilities. [7] Throughout the history of synch sound film, acousmatic sound and the acousmètre have been used to further narrative information beyond the frame. I turn to Chion's words for this audiovisual essay to offer an illustration of this acousmatic potential within *Gravity* and *Aningaaq*.

Chion discusses the differences between how the acousmètre is presented in radio to that of film, [8] illustrating the ways in which the acousmètre can operate across various media technologies. However, Chion does not discuss the use of radio within cinema, and it is worth pausing on this use of acousmatic sound to consider how the two media can expand the potential for the acousmètre to be summoned within a narrative. In *Gravity* and *Aningaaq*, the cut of sound cannot be delineated. Stone is bathed in the sounds emanating from the radio, while *Aningaaq* attends to the radio while also dealing with his dogs and parental duties. In the surround sound mix, Stone's and *Aningaaq*'s voices can be heard moving through different speakers that represent the sonic space of the Soyuz capsule. Stone's difficulty in understanding what is being said to her is exacerbated and presented through the movement of voices in the surround speakers. The Dolby Atmos [9] mix aligns with the inability to perceive a 'cut' in radio as it 'has no frame'. [10] The use of digitally enhanced long takes combines with this sonic approach in *Gravity*. [11] It is as if the digital sound technologies harnessed and developed for cinema, with multiple channels and speakers, is in fact getting the soundtrack close to what can be achieved with radio, that is sound, without a visible 'cut' detected. [12] These voices and sounds, like the image, float in space.

Lisa Purse identifies how an all-seeing perspective which is aligned with Kowalski's (George Clooney) vision does not extend to Stone. Once Kowalski untethers himself to save Stone, 'the remainder of the film will insist, again and again, on the impossibility of an all-seeing perspective'. [13] Purse draws attention to the fact that 'the film is much more interested in disorientation, and the impossibility of a controlled or overarching perspective'. [14] Just as with these visual choices that Purse identifies, the soundtracks of *Gravity* and *Aningaaq* also refuse an all-hearing perspective. The sounds coming from the radio are not always clear, and the languages are not shared. The protagonists on one level do not comprehend each other's words, but they do share a form of empathetic sonic communication. Through the inclusion of an 'integrated soundtrack' shared across both films, Stone and *Aningaaq* grieve in partial understanding of each other, although it is us the audience, through paratextual audioviewing, who understand how much they do grasp each other's pain. [15]

Gravity and Aningaaq exist in a paratextual relationship, but they are also ‘works’ in their own right. Jonathan Gray defines a paratext as,

both ‘distinct from’ and alike – or, I will argue, intrinsically part of – the text. [...] Paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them. [16]

Gray adopts Roland Barthes’ idea of ‘text’ as being separate from the ‘work’; the text is constructed by the reader or, for our purposes, the audience. [17] Aningaaq is in medias res with the radio conversation in Gravity; the entire short film is the other side of this radio conversation. So, how should we read Gravity and Aningaaq as paratexts? Gray suggests we should ‘move away from questions of textual ontology – what is the text? – to questions of textual phenomenology – how does the text happen?’ [18] Asking how Aningaaq happens is not to focus on how this short film was audioviewed before, after, or even adjacently to Gravity, but rather to consider how both films happen – and by this I specifically mean what is at stake when Gravity borrows the soundtrack of Aningaaq, expands its universe, and as a result, the voices are de-acousmatised? How do we consider their component parts, and how do we read the films within the temporal flow of each audioviewing? Aningaaq works intertextually with Gravity, as it can ‘talk back’ to the blockbuster film. [19]

What is interesting and significant within this paratext is that the de-acousmatisation process happens through this relationship, but not within the individual ‘works’. In Gravity and Aningaaq the sound is never de-acousmatised; we never see the other side of the conversation, and the acousmètre is never reduced to a place or body. However, across the two films a fascinating de-acousmatisation happens, where it is impossible to revisit either film without conjuring the other side of the conversation in one’s mind. The conversation, although not linguistically comprehensible, seems to transcend language, as both protagonists discuss dogs, parenthood, death, and grief, prompted by the sounds they hear. Both Stone and Aningaaq, while dealing with grief and death, are comforted by each other over the radio. In this paratextual relationship, and the unique de-acousmatisation process that happens as a result of it, it is the non-human animal, Nanaak, whose death is heard acousmatically through the firing of a rifle.

The impact of integrating two soundtracks stretches the paratextual relationship within the films. The use of acousmatic sound allows for this conversation to be forged separately, and also work across the context of both films. Gravity received significant critical attention in film sound studies due to its pioneering use of Dolby Atmos technology and the implication

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this has on concepts of presence, immersion, embodiment, and the sensorial. [20] Miguel Mera argues,

The aim of immersive technologies is to generate a sense that one has left the real world and is 'present' in the virtual environment. If immersion is the technologically driven, objective aspect, presence is the perceptual outcome of that immersion. [21]

To further this sense of presence, the inclusion of a discussion of the acousmêtre, a hidden sonic presence in cinema, expands the two concepts within these films. The acousmatic presence in the narrative has a role in absorbing us within the presence created using immersive technologies.

Author

Liz Greene is a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Reading. She is an editor of *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* (Liverpool University Press) and the co-edited book *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media: Integrated Soundtracks* (2016). She publishes research in written and videographic forms. Greene is currently completing a feature length social documentary film that stemmed from the research project *Brews and Brows: Shaping Stories from Eyebrows to Scousebrows* and is embarking on a new research project on The Wizard of Oz universe.

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Notes

[1] Abramovitch 2013, np.

[2] I initially envisaged that I would bring these two films into my editing software and place them side by side to reveal how the conversation unfolds. However, I discovered that the timing within these scenes do not allow for such an approach, although the overall length of each suggested they may work together. The audiovisual essay is presented in the epigraphic mode of videographic criticism, for more on this form see Keathley & Mittell 2019, np. I chose to produce a stereo mix of the soundtrack to provide consistency across the two films as both films were released in different surround formats and presented differently on the blu-ray disc. This required the mixing down of all the stems from the surround sound mixes to ensure that all could be heard in a stereo mix. Some of the panning between speakers will be more clearly heard when listening with headphones but listening with headphones is not essential.

[3] Chion 1999, pp. 17-29.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[9] <https://www.dolby.com/technologies/dolby-atmos/>

[10] Chion 1999, p. 22.

[11] Purse 2017, pp. 221-238.

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[12] Idrovo & Pauletto argue that this movement of voice is akin to how voices move in theatre (2019, p. 43).

[13] Purse 2017, p. 231.

[14] Ibid., p. 234.

[15] 'Integrated Soundtracks' is the subtitle of *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media*, an edited collection that brings a 'boundary-breaking ethos' with a conscious effort to 'combine sound design and music into the overall concept and design of screen media' (Greene & Kulezic-Wilson 2016, pp. 1-13). What is important to note in relation to *Gravity* and *Aningaak* is that this approach of an 'integrated soundtrack' is the starting point for both films.

[16] Gray 2010, p. 6.

[17] Barthes 1977, pp. 155-164.

[18] Gray 2010, p. 41.

[19] Ibid., p. 44 (emphasis in the original).

[20] See for example Mera 2016, pp. 91-111; Gabriel & Sonnenschein 2016, pp. 113-121; Idrovo & Pauletto 2019, pp. 31-58; and Walker 2020, pp. 119-139.

[21] Mera 2016, p. 93.