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## Synced

2022

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18823>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Binotto, Johannes: Synced. In: *NECSUS\_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Rumors, Jg. 11 (2022), Nr. 1, S. 304–308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18823>.

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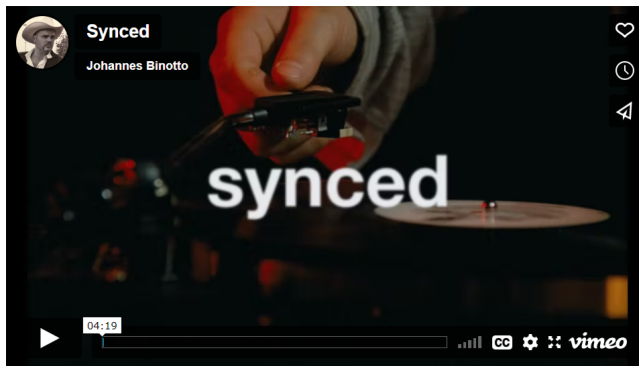
## Synced

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NECSUS 11 (1), Spring 2022: 304-308

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/synced/>

**Keywords:** audiovisual essay, film, sound



The coupling of optics and acoustics in cinema is never a natural given, but always a construction dependent on technological intervention. As we all know, moving image and sound recording, although both already invented, failed for a long time to come together because they lacked synchronicity. Attempts to run a gramophone record with the respective soundtrack simultaneously alongside a movie projection remained unsatisfactory. Sound had to become visual itself so it could run as optical soundtrack on the filmstrip in complete sync with the images. But as a complex construction the synchronicity of sound and image remains fragile and always dependent on technical equipment, therefore also open for experimentation. [1]

Synchronisation thus turns out to be nothing less than one of those basic conditions of cinema that Gustav Deutsch in his series of experimental films explored under the open ended title *Film Is...* (and whose footage I use in the first part of my video essay). However, the fundamental instability and paradox of synchronisation could also lead to a more general philosophical questioning of the dubious relation between the acoustical and the optical. In relation to the topic of the human voice, theorists like Jacques Lacan (1962/2004) and Mladen Dolar (2006) have argued about body and voice being fundamentally de-synchronised resulting in what is known as the split subject of psychoanalysis; while Mary Ann Doane (1980) and Michel Chion (1982/1999) have investigated these questions more directly in relation to film and film history. However, (and like the above mentioned films of Gustav Deutsch exemplify) it is not just film theory and philosophy but most strikingly the films themselves that seem to argue about these implications of synchronisation.

A particularly interesting case in point is Claude Pinoteau's French blockbuster *La Boum* (1980). At one of the titular parties, thirteen-year-old Vic is standing at the buffet to drink a glass of orange juice when her future boyfriend Mathieu approaches her from behind and puts the headphones of his Walkman over her ears. Suddenly, as if jumping on a record, the wild rock music to which all the teenagers dance is replaced by Richard Sanderson's love song 'Reality', which only Vic hears – and the audience with her. It is as if Mathieu had put his device on us, the spectators, at that very same moment also.

Thus, the Walkman music is strangely oscillating between diegesis and extra-diegesis, as although it is emanating from a device visible within the diegetic space it is heard as extra-diegetic film music. Similarly, the young couple, entranced in this music, seem both present and absent at the same time. The lyrics of the song even seem to comment on this uncertain status of both the music and its listeners, which oscillates between rapture and presence:

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'Dreams are my reality / the only kind of real fantasy / Illusions are a common thing / I try to live in dreams.' According to the lyrics, reality and fantasy are not mutually exclusive.

The fact that the 'real fantasy' experienced here is indeed a common phenomenon, a 'common thing', proves all the more apt, of course, as the device that plays the actual leading role in this scene was to become a universally sought-after consumer product, not least thanks to this film. As I try to show in my video essay, Pinoteau's film analyses the many implications of this device (and also its more recent descendants like the iPod and iPhone) in an astonishingly profound way.

It is also no wonder La Boum occupies a central place in Shuhei Hosokawa's 1984 essay 'The Walkman Effect' (although the musicologist mistakenly locates the scene in the follow-up film *La Boum 2*). As Hosokawa argues, *La Boum* proves wrong those pessimists who saw the Walkman primarily as a device of isolation: 'Walkman users are not necessarily detached ("alienated" to use a value-laden term) from the environment, closing their ears, but are unified in the autonomous and singular moment – neither as persons nor as individuals – with the real.' [2] The Walkman, precisely by tearing Vic out of her environment, in return connects her to that ominous realm which transcends familiar reality. The device synchronises the subject with the real.

However, Hosokawa's interpretation that Vic and Mathieu are sinking into their shared music at this moment is not entirely accurate. Did he overlook the fact that Mathieu had to take off his headphones in order to put them on Vic? Consequently, he cannot hear the music she is listening to. At most, he can imagine it by remembering it. And consequently, the synchronisation between the young lovers is only an apparent one. Promptly, at the end of the film, when she dances again with Mathieu, Vic is already looking over Mathieu's shoulder at another boy with whom she will fall in love next.

And yet the pathos of this scene is not false at all. What we see in the scene with the Walkman is indeed a successful synchronisation, but one which works somewhat differently than Hosokawa may have noticed. The seemingly naïve film is even more radical in terms of media theory than the theorist: while we watch Vic dancing closely embraced with Mathieu and with the music of 'Reality' in her ear, she suddenly opens her eyes and looks, for an imperceptible moment, directly into the camera and thus at us. This moment that is visible on one single frame only and thus virtually invisible for the cinema audience was undoubtedly unintended – a mere mistake by the still inexperienced actress Sophie Marceau in her first film role. Yet, at the same time it is absolutely perfect: it is not Mathieu, it is us, with whom Vic is synchronised – we, who are the only ones listening in on the same music

as she does. It is a moment of synchronisation that is at the same time radically disruptive because it breaks through the fourth wall separating diegesis and extra-diegesis, audience and film. But perhaps, precisely in this radical impossibility, this moment is also the absolute example of what synchronisation is: a process that splits what we thought was unified and welds the incommensurable.

It is therefore also this moment that triggers a shift of dispositif in my video essay, moving from the mere screening of the film scene to also showing my computer desktop on which I am watching and also working with and analysing this material. And it is a moment to also make clear how technical devices, far from being simple tools, always engender this very dialectic of splitting and connecting – devices like the Walkman – as well as the many machines of cinema. Similarly, when now going back to the beginning of the video essay, we will finally be fully aware that the onscreen text combined with the film excerpt by Gustav Deutsch was of course something completely different than what the voice on the original soundtrack actually said. Yet another example of audiovisual synchronisation as a distortion, but a distortion for recognition.

## Author

Dr. Johannes Binotto is senior researcher in cultural and media studies, video essayist, and experimental filmmaker. He teaches film and media studies at the Lucerne School of Art and Design (HSLU) as well as literature and cultural studies at the University of Zurich. In his research and in his video work he has a specific focus on the intersections between film theory, philosophy of technology, and psychoanalysis. He is currently leading VideoEssay. Futures of Audiovisual Research and Teaching ([videoessayresearch.org](http://videoessayresearch.org)), a research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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## Notes

[1] Thompson 1995.

[2] Hosokawa 1984, p. 170.