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## Uncanny sounds and the politics of wonder in Christian Petzold's *Undine*

Mai Nguyen and Pauline Greenhill

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### Abstract

We examine uses of sound in German director Christian Petzold's *Undine* (2020), based on the story of a water sprite who marries a human and acquires a soul. We employ the concepts of 'acousmatic sound' and 'the acousmètre' to suggest that the film's uncanny soundscape invites a mode of listening that challenges and transforms habitual perception. While *Undine* largely adheres to cinematic realism, its sound design evokes intrusion by the preternatural and fantastical. By auditory allusions to the mysterious and uncanny, *Undine* asserts the significance of fairy tales and storytelling for perceiving and understanding reality and for imagining alternatives.

**Keywords:** Christian Petzold, *Undine*, acousmatic sound, acousmètre, politics of wonder

In the story of *Undine*, a water sprite leaves her aquatic origins to marry a human and acquires a soul in the process. The narrative ends tragically when her lover betrays her and she is obliged to kill him according to the laws of the elemental spirits. Related to figures such as the sirens of Greek mythology, the Lorelei of Clemens Brentano and Heinrich Heine, Melusine in French folklore, and selkie narratives of Celtic and Norse oral traditions, the first writings on this nymph can be traced back to Swiss physician and natural philosopher Paracelsus.[1] Popularised as a literary fairy tale in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany by the Prussian writer Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Undine*'s story has inspired numerous incarnations. For instance, it served as the source material for operas by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1812-1814) and

others, a play by Jean Giraudoux (1938), and most famously Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *Den lille havfrue* ('The Little Mermaid,' 1837). Films referencing 'Undine' date from the silent era and come from Austria, Canada, France, Ireland, and the US, as well as three from Germany: Rolf Thiele's *Undine 74* (1974), Eckhart Schmidt's *Undine* (1992), and Christian Petzold's *Undine* (2020) – our subject here. Movies based on or inspired by Andersen's tale are of course much more common.[2]

In discussions of *Undine*, Petzold and his interlocutors move between terming the story *Märchen* (fairy tale) and *Mythos* (myth).[3] Fairy tales include oral (told in different geographical locations and up to the present) and/or literary (written by known authors) forms. With their interest in the fantastic, the magical, and the wonderful, they are fictional. Myths, in contrast, are

both sacred and true ... core narratives in larger ideological systems. Concerned with ultimate realities, they are often set outside of historical time ... and frequently concern the actions of divine or semi-divine characters. [4]

Jack Zipes notes continuities:

Myths and fairy tales seem to know something that we do not know. They also appear to hold our attention, to keep us in their sway, to enchant our lives.[5]

Without presuming which form takes historical or literary precedence, Zipes asserts

The fairy tale is myth. That is, the classical fairy tale has undergone a process of mythicization. Any fairy tale in our society, if it seeks to become natural and eternal, must become myth.[6]

Nevertheless, in popular use calling something a myth renders it serious where terming it fairy tale means it is light, untrue, or even a lie – a characterisation disputed by many scholars.[7]

The mermaid has long been a fetishised figure of male fantasy.[8] Often associated with seductive and deathly attributes, she provokes a dialectic of attraction and fear. As the quintessential outsider, neither fully belonging to the elemental nor entirely to the human domain, she is conceived as Other to the male subject. The fascination and anxiety surrounding this figure relate to the notion that, at their core, narratives such as 'Undine' are concerned with the transgression of borders and boundaries, between water and land, human and non-human, preternatural and ordinary realms. As John Stephens explains, one

function of mythological narratives is to 'suggest ways of making sense of being and existence' and the enduring fascination that 'Undine' and similar stories incite attest to their continued relevance for reflecting on and working through contemporary cultural and socio-political issues.[9]

### ***Undine***

In German screenwriter and director Petzold's film, the tale moves (quite literally, by frequently depicted rail journeys) between the highly urbanised context of Berlin and a distant lake reservoir. The title character is equally at home on and in water and on land, but her strong connections to her original element are underscored visually and acoustically, as well as in her choice of an industrial diver as a lover. Water is the focal point and motivator for the preternatural events, marked by the film's creative use of sound, implicating what Cristina Bacchilega calls 'the politics of wonder', 'situated responses to the hegemony of a colonizing, Orientalizing, and commercialized poetics of magic'. [10] There is no Disneyfied journey to a happy ending; instead the complications of living in a multifaceted world of technology and nature offer an opportunity for the film to explore how real and supernatural characters alike can survive in or be overwhelmed by the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Eponymous protagonist Undine Wibeau [11] (played by Paula Beer) lives in modern-day Berlin and works as a freelance historian lecturing museum visitors on the city's urban development across the centuries. The film opens amidst a conversation between Undine and her boyfriend Johannes (played by Jacob Matschenz) who is breaking up with her. Referencing the curse of her namesake, Undine declares: 'If you leave me, I'll have to kill you.' The sober manner in which she utters these words leaves the spectator wondering whether her statement is a literal or more symbolic threat.

This uncertainty in distinguishing the factual from the figurative, and reality from imagination, runs through the film, as it does elsewhere in Petzold's oeuvre. Interweaving fairy-tale material with a present-day narrative, *Undine* dramatises the 'irruption of the sacred, and especially supernatural beings, into the world' which Stephens defines as the 'essential premiss' of traditional myths. [12] While the film largely adheres to principles of cinematic realism, its sound design in particular evokes intrusions and traces of the preternatural and fantastical. Listening closely to individual sound effects and music and tracking their development over time reveals that they invoke the spectre of the uncanny understood 'as the hesitation between what is (or might be) real and what is (or might be) imagined'. [13]

We draw on Michel Chion's theory of film sound, specifically his concepts of 'acousmatic sound' and 'the acousmètre' to suggest that the *Undine* soundscape invites a mode of listening that challenges and transforms habitual forms of perception,[14] affecting what Marco Abel describes as 'the rescaling of the familiar ... that is, our ability to sense, and make sense'.[15] The film's sound design encourages a heightened awareness of the spectator towards auditory phenomena which exceed their realistic representation. This modification of listening habits promotes the experience that Jane Bennett calls *enchantment*. Understood as a 'state of wonder' and a 'peculiar kind of mood, often induced by sound', enchantment alerts sensory perception and fosters an attitude of mindfulness towards everyday surroundings.[16] By cultivating this mood through soundscape allusions to the fantastical and uncanny, *Undine* asserts the significance of fairy tale and storytelling for perceiving and making sense of reality, particularly in relation to its overarching reflection on historical and current urban living.

### **Petzold, realism, and the fantastical**

Petzold's films are often linked with those of filmmakers such as Thomas Arslan and Angela Schanelec – labelled as the Berlin School. The term refers to a tendency first identified by French critics as a new wave in German-language cinema.[17] While the Berlin School has attracted considerable critical attention, regularly premiering at major international film festivals and extensively discussed by scholars such as Abel, Jaimey Fisher, and Olivia Landry, their films remain largely unknown to German mainstream audiences.[18] Of the directors affiliated with the movement, Petzold is the most commercially successful with films such as *Die innere Sicherheit (The State I am In, 2000)*, about a family of left-wing fugitives, which attracted over 100,000 viewers at the theatrical box office.[19]

The Berlin School's formal approach is often associated with an austere *mise-en-scène*, long takes, static or minimal camera movement, apathetic and reticent performances, and an emphasis on duration and stillness. This 'aesthetics of reduction' aligns the movement with a larger trend of realism in international filmmaking in opposition to the global hegemony of Hollywood.[20] For instance, Roger F. Cook, Lutz Koepnick, and Brad Prager in the *Berlin School Glossary* cite director Henner Winckler who 'sees the Berlin School as part of a larger European movement [which] rejects the "tyranny of fantasy" imposed by Hollywood'.[21] In this respect, Petzold's works present an exception since he regularly references classical Hollywood directors such as Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock as influences. Moreover, his films frequently draw on elements of genre, particularly melodrama and film noir.[22] His *Yella* (2007) shares with *Undine* themes of water and rivers, along with intrusions into a relatively conventional quotidian from the preternatural and uncanny. And in *Yella* as in

*Undine*, the closing explanation does not resolve questions about what has come before, although it does retroactively realign understanding. Petzold's *Undine*, a German-French co-production which screened at international film festivals in London, New York, and Toronto, and was released into German theatres in 2020, constitutes an overt treatment of the fantastical.

With *Undine*, Petzold continues his pairing of actors Beer and Franz Rogowski, also cast as the protagonists and central couple in his 2018 *Transit*. He explains *Undine* as a direct development from *Transit*, the conclusion of which implies that Beer's character dies in a shipwreck, conceived close to the end of filming the earlier work.

And I thought I would now make a story where we get you [addressed to Paula] out of the water back into life and where Franz would be underwater as a diver looking for you there. And then you would meet and you would have this love story that you were not allowed to have in *Transit*. [23]

Reviewers comment on *Undine's* play with the generic conventions of realism, melodrama, and fantasy. For instance, Jonathan Romney describes it 'as being situated between realism and fantasy, in a zone of narrative logic akin to dream', and Savina Petkova characterises the film's aesthetics as 'merging bold artificiality and hyperrealism'. [24] *Undine's* profession as a historian and chosen place of residence in Germany's capital city seem to firmly anchor her in reality. Set and shot in actual places such as the Märkisches Museum where *Undine* works as a guide, the film's grounding in reality is further reinforced by the fact that her lectures, which trace the transformation of Berlin's cityscape from the first settlements in the 13<sup>th</sup> century until the current era, were inspired by presentations held at the museum and written by a historian specialising in Berlin's urban development. [25]

Formally, these museum lecture sequences stand out from the rest of the film with a panning camera taking in the exhibition room's expanse in a long shot and capturing visitors congregating around miniature models and maps of Berlin. Unfolding over several minutes and preserving the continuity of *Undine's* speech, these sequences last unusually long in comparison to the depiction of *Undine* and *Christoph's* relationship, which seems to rapidly progress across various temporal and spatial ellipses. For example, the film bridges the 500 or so kilometres that the characters travel back and forth between Berlin and a lake reservoir in the Wuppertal region of southwest Germany within brief transitions.

The sequences taking place underwater establish the lake as a space with mythological significance. While *Christoph*, an industrial diver, carries out construction work on a dam

turbine, he catches sight of a giant catfish referred to in local folklore as Big Gunther and believed to be the incarnation of a medieval knight's soul. Later, during a dive with Undine, Christoph spots her name etched into a sunken arch on the lake's bottom, with a heart next to it, alluding to her supernatural origins and raising the question of whether it was left behind by a previous lover. The sighting of Big Gunther foreshadows and parallels an encounter between the protagonists in a scene unfolding two years after Christoph's accident in which Undine appears before him in the same lake reservoir. In both instances, Christoph attempts to verify these sightings by replaying his body camera's recording on a laptop screen. While the camera captures the catfish, Undine evades its display, leaving it open to the viewer to speculate over these events' real or imagined nature and the technology's reliability as well as the film's depiction – and of Christoph as an observer.

### **Acousmatic sound and the acousmètre**

Improbable, even impossible, occurrences hinting at the fantastical nature of the film's fairy-tale inspiration, are not only confined to the domain of the lake but also intervene in the sequences taking place on land, particularly in the city. These scenes render elements of the inexplicable noticeable through the presence of acousmatic sounds. Chion, drawing on the work of Pierre Schaeffer, defines as *acousmatic* 'sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause'.<sup>[26]</sup> They can either draw attention to themselves as 'active offscreen sound' inciting curiosity over their nature and source, or they remain unnoticed and a naturalised aspect of the film experience as 'passive offscreen sound'.<sup>[27]</sup> Since they are not attributed to visible onscreen sources, these sounds possess an elusive quality which makes them harder to classify.

Acousmatic sounds pervade the film. Crucially, they begin when Undine first meets her future lover in a café, and an aquarium shatters, drenching both characters but also establishing distinctive noises and effects. When Undine returns to the café after her work shift and hears a mysterious voice whispering her name, the source remains invisible and unknown. Its disembodied emergence establishes it as belonging to the special category of acousmatic sound that Chion coins the *acousmètre*: 'A kind of voice-character specific to cinema that in most instances of cinematic narratives derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen.'<sup>[28]</sup> Although the shot-reverse-shot sequence cutting back and forth between a frontal shot of Undine and the fish tank, framing the figurine of an industrial diver at its centre, could suggest that the voice emanates from this figurine, the *acousmètre* nonetheless remains elusive. Since it cannot be clearly localised within the diegesis, it fills the entirety of the diegetic space conforming to sound's general tendency to freely disperse across any spatial arrangement.<sup>[29]</sup>

Imbued with an aura of 'panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence' that Chion identifies with the acousmètre, the voice maintains its enigmatic quality throughout.[30] The appearance of an acousmètre is always accompanied by a diegetic uncertainty as it is 'neither inside nor outside the image' but seems to emanate from an undefined *elsewhere*. [31] The voice calling her name seems to function as a reminder of Undine's origin and curse, unsettling the stability of her everyday reality and perception, as it appears to be only audible to her. The ambiguity of the acousmètre is also evoked in a more subtle manner by the film's ambient sound. In conventional use, ambient sound remains unobtrusive. Operating in the background of a scene and the spectator's attention, it exemplifies passive offscreen sound. Primarily used for worldbuilding, it contributes to the diegetic space's degree of openness and depth.[32] Furthermore, ambient sound fulfils a unifying function by preserving the temporal continuity of a scene, for instance connecting disparate shots.[33] It imbues the diegetic world with a sense of concreteness and presence, expanding it beyond the visible frame and establishing a sense of sonic verisimilitude.

The ambient sound of the opening scene in *Undine*, set outside a café across from Undine's workplace, appears to conform to these realist principles. Effects such as rustling leaves, wind, distant traffic, and street noises seem suitable to the onscreen exterior space. While the implied diegetic sources (e.g. traffic or the footsteps of passers-by) remain largely offscreen, some are occasionally visualised such as swaying bushes in the background of the medium close-ups framing Undine and Johannes. The scene's focus is directed primarily at the couple's conversation, hence their voices have primacy on the soundtrack. However, their exchange is punctuated by moments of silence during which the volume and clarity of the sonic environment surrounding them seems unusually magnified, emitting a particular intensity that exceeds their realist function.

Sound takes on a subjective dimension, for example when the ambient noise grows quiet as Undine invokes her curse by threatening to kill Johannes. Here, the dynamics of the surroundings appear to be intertwined with the character's emotional state. The trembling rhythm of the rustling foliage especially enhances the tense atmosphere in Undine and Johannes' strained interaction. This more-than-ordinary soundscape facilitates the intensification of reality that Abel attributes to the Berlin School's 'arepresentational realism'. He argues that these films 'present their audiences with new, non-preexisting images of Germany ... by intensifying their look at reality rather than by avoiding it'. [34] The ambient sound of *Undine's* opening scene demonstrates that this intensification not only affects the audience on the level of visual senses but further involves auditory awareness. 'By making reality itself appear more intensely sensible', these films awaken senses 'to the



extraordinary qualities of otherwise rather ordinary lives'.[35] The transformative trajectory of the scene's ambient sound parallels what Bacchilega identifies as fairy tales' impact on 'people's sense of what is possible' in relation to their social reality and lived environment.[36] Alerting spectators to sound elements which appear to transcend their naturalistic representation, the film primes them from its beginning to draw on their auditory perception, thus fostering a renewed awareness for the inexplicable and extraordinary dimensions of everyday reality.

One effect that particularly stands out in this respect is the sound of passing trains heard from Undine's apartment. Initially presented as an element of a typical urban soundscape along with the general rumble of traffic and the occasional siren, the high-pitched hissing is synched to a passing S-Bahn visible through the window. This motif recurs frequently and at significant narrative moments, such as when Undine receives a phone call from Christoph at a time, as she later discovers, when he was in a coma. The initially motivated sound effect gradually loses the link to its implied diegetic source (the trains) and becomes acousmatised as it returns as offscreen sound. As Chion explains, the experience of sound in cinema always occurs in conjunction with the visual sense.[37] For instance, the distinction between onscreen and offscreen sound is based on their *relation* to the image rather than any intrinsic contrast between sounds themselves.

Therefore, realism in sound design is not determined by the degree of the reproduced sound's authenticity but by the phenomenon of synchresis which Chion defines as 'the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particularly auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time'.[38] This effect is fundamental to practices of synchronisation commonly associated with audiovisual realism. However, the impression of realism can be undermined when the connection of synchresis loosens, leading to the unravelling of the causal and motivated relationship between the heard and the seen. The sound first attributed to passing trains takes on qualities of the uncanny, echoing Sigmund Freud's description of the term's etymological origins: '[H]eimlich is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.'[39]

The development of the sound effect over time follows this trajectory of the familiar and recognisable (passing trains) which is increasingly rendered unfamiliar and turns ambiguous. Like the ambient sound of the film's opening, this effect gradually draws attention to itself through its repetitive occurrence, high frequency, and whistling tone which invest it with a ghostly aura. Its disembodied presence encourages 'reduced listening ... a listening mode that focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of

its meaning'.[40] By adjusting the spectator's habitual perception towards an *active* engagement with certain sound objects, it attunes their listening to sonic features such as tonal qualities, texture, duration, and rhythm.

The experience of reduced listening recalls the state that Philip Fisher refers to as 'pure presence' wherein perception of an object or phenomenon dwells in its own distinct qualities.[41] Bennett discusses this condition as part of her larger conception that 'to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday'.[42] Auditory perception plays a particularly important role in the experience of enchantment since it can arise out of 'hear[ing] extraordinary sounds'.[43] The repetitive occurrence of the sound effect further recalls Bennett's description of enchantment as working through structures of repetition and the 'presence of pattern'.[44] Crucially, the trajectory of enchanting repetitions involves mutations and alterations instead of identical replication. Hence, the sound effect first identified with the passing trains gradually loses its motivated relationship to the diegetic source with each repetition and develops into a more independent element of the scene's soundscape. While the effect does not operate in a contrapuntal manner to the image, i.e. facilitating an effect of spectatorial distantiating, it nonetheless suggests an intrusion of the surreal and unfamiliar into the film's reality.

*Undine's* acousmatic sounds foster a spectatorial state akin to the experience of wonder as conceptualised by Bacchilega. In her discussion of 'The Golden Key' tale, Bacchilega parallels the protagonist's encounter with experiences of wonder to that of the tale's listeners and readers who, similarly, 'are alerted ... to the power of the unexpected or amazing, the inexplicable, the "other" – whether it be our mortality or the miraculous – in our own experiences of the world and of stories'.[45] And as Bennett remarks, such a 'state of wonder' incites not only a 'pleasurable feeling of being charmed' but, moreover, 'a more unheimlich (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition'.[46] This ambivalent response is provoked by various uncanny instances in the film's narrative and sound design blurring the line between the imagined and real.

For example, uncertainty surrounds the phone call that Undine receives from Christoph after his visit to Berlin. The narrative's logic, the characteristically tinny sound quality, as well as the spectator's familiarity with Rogowski's distinctive voice identify it as belonging to Christoph and localise it as emitting from Undine's phone. However, following the revelation that Christoph had been in a coma at this time, the nature of the voice on the phone changes in retrospect. Akin to the acousmètre calling on Undine inside the café, the true origin of this voice remains ambiguous, further reinforced by the acousmatic situation. Radios, telephones, and other devices 'which transmit sounds without showing their emitter, are

acousmatic media by definition'.[47] Chion attributes a spectral quality to these technologies as they 'made it possible to isolate voices from bodies ... [which] naturally has reminded us of the voice of the dead'.[48] This uncanny inflection of acousmatic sounds, particularly of the acousmètre, recalls a kind of Freudian return of the repressed whereby the voice manifests itself through a pervasive and haunting presence.

## Water

The motif of water that continuously runs through the film, invested with symbolic and material significance, further underlines the impression that Undine is haunted by her curse. By virtue of her narrative origins associated with that element, she is particularly linked to the realm of the lake containing the remains of an arch inscribed with her name and a heart at its bottom and testifying to her century-spanning existence. The sequences shot underwater depict the lake as a quasi-fantastical space suffused with misty green colours, steeped in a murky play of lights and lush vegetation. The actors' slow movements and floating bodies are accompanied by a soundscape markedly distinct from that above water and particularly shaped by the rhythmic rumbling of the dam's turbines and gurgling water bubbles. Moreover, Undine returns to the origins of Berlin in her lectures, explaining the Slavic roots of its name that can be translated to 'dry place in the swamp'. Chronicling the city's emergence in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a trading hub, she highlights the commercial significance of its waters which made it possible for travelling merchants to pass through the city. This history is reflected in the museum's exhibition whose display of Berlin's changing urban landscape over the centuries depicts its topography as marked by surrounding woodland, lakes and rivers, most importantly the river Spree which runs through a map of its urban centre in a cerulean blue line.

Water's ubiquitous presence also permeates the film's sound design, for instance in the previously discussed scene in which the voice of the acousmètre calls out to Undine inside a café. This locale already alludes to several mythological motifs in its mise-en-scène: As the camera follows Undine across the courtyard, she passes by a statue perhaps depicting Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea. Furthermore, the painting hanging on a wall, briefly visible when Undine enters the café, depicts the nude back of a red-haired woman against a teal-colored background and recalls Undine's namesake.[49] This evocation of water and its mythological significance extends to the soundscape, for example in the noise of the running faucet which reverberates with an eerie clarity across the restroom in which Undine searches for Johannes.

Moreover, the repeated whispered acousmètre of Undine's name works akin to a chant. Bennett links this sonorous form to the experience of enchantment, remarking on the term's relation to the French verb *chanter* ('to sing') and describing the potential to 'cast[] a spell with sounds'.<sup>[50]</sup> The chant of the acousmètre seems to have this effect on Undine, who, frozen on the spot and wearing a dazed expression, seems affected by the 'temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' that Bennett notes.<sup>[51]</sup> The scene's sonic environment becomes dominated by water whose fluctuating and accelerating rhythm builds up tension and momentum until it reaches its climax with a high-pitched ringing sound and culminates in the fish tank breaking apart. The motion of the water and contents of the tank sweeping over Undine and Christoph are accompanied by a soundscape which recalls waves crashing on shore, leaving the two drenched on the floor of the café.

Abel's reading of Petzold's films, particularly of their aesthetic, can be discussed in conjunction with Bennett's definition of enchantment as a 'condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity' in which 'familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify'.<sup>[52]</sup> This sensory state is reinforced by the enveloping qualities of acousmatic sound which is by definition not linked to a visualised onscreen source and thus tends to spread out into the available space, even when it is rationally localised in the diegesis according to narrative actions, events, and settings. An effect of immersion is often attributed to the experience of sound in cinema, especially in the theatrical situation, as it expands the sense of dimensionality that the flat image projected on screen alone cannot achieve.<sup>[53]</sup> As Bennett points out, these features of sonic experience are particularly conducive to enchantment. They are encapsulated by Undine's 'transfixed, spellbound' state provoked by the acousmètre's incantation and the fish tank's bubbling water which engulf her perception.<sup>[54]</sup>

This heightened and alternative mode of attention is promoted by the ambient sound of the opening scene discussed above. Here, the sound's *intensified* presence is rendered noticeable for the spectator on a visceral level stimulating a reduced listening mode that attends to its material features. The scene alerts the spectator to the film's unusual soundscape and primes them to listen for hints of the extraordinary in its subsequent sequences. For instance, the spectator might notice the sound mix heard during Undine's train journey as she travels from the city to the lake reservoir. The droning ambient noise that accompanies a shot depicting the view through the train's window with landscape flying past recalls the underwater soundscape of the lake.

## Music

The place and meaning of music in film generally remains controversial. Ben Winters, among others, extensively critiques the strict distinction between non-diegetic and diegetic music (outside and within the film's story world, respectively), suggesting it creates an overly literal division between the spectator's reality and that of the film's characters. He argues that 'separating music as a matter of course from the events occurring in the fictional world, as the expression of a critical or narrating voice' is inappropriate to the specifics of film. Where 'fidelity to reality' is not presumed – in fictional movies, but especially those not embracing a strictly realist aesthetic, like *Undine* – the music's 'agency'[55] can be illuminated. In *Undine*, the use of acousmatic recurring piano music from J.S. Bach's transcription and arrangement BWV 974 for harpsichord of Alessandro Marcello's oboe concerto[56] offers food for thought in this area.

Tobias Pontara, following Winters' insights, raises the question, 'If the music is not part of the film's story world, then *where* should it be located?',[57] and the examples he draws upon include works from the fantastic/fairy-tale realm: Terry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm* (2005) and Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001).[58] A hint of what is taking place might be found in Winters' notion of characters 'radiating music' and interest in the idea that 'we are no longer required to imagine that the fantastical fictional film worlds and characters we enjoy in the cinema exist in some realistic world, separated from the music that defines them'.[59] The Bach piece is Undine's music – it appears only once when she is not in the sequence on screen. It engenders a sense of the character's state of mind in the viewer. But perhaps surprisingly the same passages can show different aspects of contemplation, from the sad to the optimistic to the resigned. Given Undine's already established preternatural powers, it remains open as to whether she radiates the music or if it simply reflects her extra-diegetically.[60]

Asked how he chose the music, Petzold notes that he had listened to the Vikingur Ólafsson (used in the film) and Glenn Gould renditions of the piece

and I thought OK, he's doing this initial chord and it's being then played again and again and then it's being turned into something like an Italian romance, and it has something to do with the story in the film. And Bettina Böhler and myself were at the editing table then started using that and it was really so fitting in the first scene and we knew this would be the score and nothing else.[61]

The  $\frac{3}{4}$  time D minor piece opens with a single tone, the tonic, in six quarter notes; then adding the supertonic, again in six quarter notes; and then with an A seventh (major) chord

in the same format, before the primary tune begins in the minor key. The effect is that the first bars are an introduction setting the alternatively contemplative and sad (especially when sounding in the minor key) and somewhat more hopeful (when moving to major) piece. Segments of the music appear eight times in the film. Most often they are associated with Undine's feelings, but they also visually link with her sometimes in close up or extreme close up. And they mark Undine and sometimes other characters walking or otherwise moving from place to place – first leaving the café and Johannes's betrayal to walk and then run to work.

The liminality of the moment between café and work continues as she changes into her work clothes, but the music and her contemplation of Johannes in the café abruptly end with a museum employee calling her name to remind her the audience is ready for her talk. During that museum presentation, the music begins again, after she has asked the audience to identify where they are now, opening on a shot of the model of Berlin and then moving to an extreme close-up of Undine's face. Undine is in the moment, by herself, as she walks back to the café. With the piano music and water sounds, the spectator sees the first view of the aquarium. As she searches for Johannes, viewers see and hear water dripping in the bathroom where she seeks him, directly prior to meeting Christoph. The music ends abruptly and with a cut to Undine walking into the frame and hearing the first acousmètre voice calling 'Undine'. The melancholy aspect continues when Undine is on the train returning to Berlin while Christoph stays at work at the lake. After a close up, he turns and walks down the train platform. She unwraps the industrial diver figure that becomes his avatar; after more train travel and museum presentation, the music ends on an abrupt cut to Undine sleeping with the figure beside her. In a crucial scene where Undine encounters her past, the music transitions from the lovers together on her balcony to the two walking with their heads together, reaching and crossing an urban bridge near the railway station. They pass Johannes walking in the other direction with his lover; the music again ends suddenly with a cut to Undine and Christoph inside the railway station.

After Undine learns that Christoph has been seriously injured in a diving accident, there is a flashback to the aquarium breaking and acousmètre voice 'Undine'. She visits him in the hospital, the piano sounding over the rhythmic respirator of the comatose Christoph. In the sole use of the music in which the introductory six bars are absent, the tune begins when Undine leaves the pool where she has drowned Johannes, and walks down a wooded path and into the river. The absence of the musical introduction marks this section as having a kind of finality; after peaceful shots of the water surface and bubbles, the music ends suddenly again, with Christoph screaming Undine's name as he awakes from his coma. He

had been diagnosed as brain dead after going without oxygen for twelve minutes and the implication is that Undine sacrifices herself and their love in exchange for his life.

The penultimate use, and the first one without Undine physically present, shows Christoph (walking with crutches after his injury) fruitlessly searching the café and elsewhere in the city for her. There is another flashback of the broken aquarium and fade to black, and a title card '2 years later'. The final use of the Bach begins after Christoph leaves his bed to go to the river and call for Undine. As his pregnant partner watches from the bridge, he wades into the water, completely submerging. Undine appears and the music begins as the two clasp hands. Christoph reappears on the bridge, holding the diver figure, and the new couple walk along the bridge, viewed from the water level, and disappear as the camera moves underwater, and everything becomes black. As the music continues, the credits appear. In this use only, the film finally presents the full piece, which ends in a major chord resolution (implicitly more upbeat and optimistic, unlike conventionally sad associations for minor chords).

The music underscores the stages of the developing love story between Undine and Christoph. Like that narrative, it becomes a background for potentially more serious considerations. The ethical and political stakes of the experience of intensified reality and enchantment come to the fore in the film's architectural discourse which thematises the historical development of Berlin's urban appearance and city policy. Urban spaces are not only areas of human habitation but also home to non-human species and natural environments which shape and interact with human-made infrastructures. This connection is particularly exemplified by the crucial role that water plays in urban planning. As Matthew Gandy explains, water 'lies at the intersection of landscape and infrastructure, crossing between visible and invisible domains of urban space'.<sup>[62]</sup> Berlin, which Petzold describes as a 'city built on water' embodies this principle with its surrounding lakes, rivers, and peatlands as well as its canals and water supply networks.<sup>[63]</sup> The film makes subtle references to this hydrological system, for instance when Undine mentions the 'Hobrechtsche Radialsystem' in a conversation with her colleague, referring to the canalisation network designed by the urban planner James Hobrecht for the city of Berlin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Along with this material significance, the film further asserts water's fantastical dimension through its association with the titular story of a water sprite and sound design which renders water as a force capable of arousing the experience of enchantment. The use of piano music, acoustically reminiscent of the sound of peaceful waters (though certainly not of rocky ocean coasts and storms) reminds the viewer that Undine, like the element she's

associated with, can be changeable. She's dangerous to those like Johannes who mistreat and exploit her (at their peril) but for the loving, accepting Christoph she gives in return, equalling or bettering what he brings to the relationship. Akin to the story of Undine which dramatises the transgression of seemingly disparate realms and states of being, the element of water is associated with a certain unruliness: it denotes a substance which permeates, seeps through, and loosens ossified structures. This transgressive effect is paralleled by the film's sound design and music which produce a sense of the extraordinary and inexplicable intruding into reality and affecting the spectator's senses. Both Abel and Bennett attribute to this re-rendering of the sensible a utopian dimension caused by, in Bennett's words, 'a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain and to move you from the actual world to its *virtual possibilities*'.<sup>[64]</sup>

## Fairy tale

In this respect, *Undine* belongs to the contemporary fairy-tale adaptations that are, in Bacchilega's words, 'looking to renew wonder in its complexity as both state and action, in response to the unfamiliar, the unexplained, the easily overlooked detail or way of being in our worlds, our stories, and within us, and calling for our own active – and, even more so, activist – responses to and participation in the process of storytelling and interpretation'.<sup>[65]</sup> Abel connects the utopian impulse of Petzold's films to the act of 'Heimat-Building' (home-building) driven by the characters' desire to establish 'a place of their own'.<sup>[66]</sup> As Petzold himself explains, the introduction of stories such as 'Undine' into the cultural imaginary of Berlin was enabled by the presence of water which functioned as a channel of passage and migration that attracted the first populations to the city.<sup>[67]</sup> In this sense, the importance of water for a city's wellbeing goes beyond its material role since it is further invested with symbolic meaning. As an element that is 'powerfully inscribed in the realm of imagination', water's association with history and storytelling links it to processes through which a sense of *Heimat* can emerge.<sup>[68]</sup>

Previous writings on Petzold's cinema have discussed his films as being principally concerned with the living conditions in post-unification Germany where 'the subjectively experienced desire for belongingness ... is itself subjected to the material conditions of life under neoliberalism'<sup>[69]</sup> With *Undine*, he raises the question of how to grasp a city as 'a place with its own sense of autonomy and meaning' at a time when processes of privatisation and commercialisation are making affordable living in Germany's capital city increasingly impossible.<sup>[70]</sup> Undine and her colleague draw a historical parallel to this situation when they discuss Berlin's rising property and rent prices caused by speculating investors and the lack of social housing during the Wilhelmine Period in their lectures.



Bacchilega locates the ‘transformative social potential’ of contemporary fairy-tale adaptations in their ‘politics of wonder’, understood as the ‘symbolic enactment of possibilities, “announcing what might be” – and taking us *ex-cursus*, off course, ... to explore alternatives we hope for’.[71] As such, Undine’s choice to avoid the imposed fate that she must kill a former lover, when she releases Christoph to his wife and child, allows for the hope of alternatives. But the attention to sound also invokes potentially less optimistic outcomes, from its holistic role in ecological pollution especially in urban areas (contrasted with the peaceful lake) and even its illumination of breathing as a politically charged act in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, as Linda Waack trenchantly discusses.[72] As with all fairy tales, the politics of wonder does not accrue exclusively in terms of the past and present – it also implicates the future.

We have argued that the moments of enchantment or *wondering* facilitated by the film’s acousmatic sounds allow for imagining alternative ways of living and making sense of reality.[73] Attesting to cinema’s unique ‘capacity to image a not-yet-actualized world, or a world in the process of becoming actual’,[74] *Undine*’s uncanny soundscape, which highlights the enchanting potential and historical significance of water to the city of Berlin, encourages a more ethical and sensible encounter with everyday surroundings and with one another, and demonstrates the relevance of fairy-tale narratives to foster this awareness.

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## Notes

- [1] Harries 2016, p. 1067. See also Seifert 2015.
- [2] The International Fairy-Tale Filmography ([ifft.uwinnipeg.ca](http://ftf.uwinnipeg.ca)) lists over 80 Andersen 'Little Mermaid' films.
- [3] Berlinale Press Conference.
- [4] Oring 1986, p. 124.
- [5] Zipes 1994, p. 3.
- [6] *Ibid*, p. 5.
- [7] A third category, legend, realistic stories invoking belief, can also involve water spirits who lure men to their deaths. See e.g. Bacchilega 2013; Greenhill 2020; and Warner 2014.
- [8] See Bacchilega & Brown 2019; Baackmann 1995.
- [9] Stephens 2015.
- [10] Bacchilega 2013, p. ix; see also pp. 189-202.
- [11] Petzold comments that Wibeau is a French (Huguenot) name found in Berlin which 'sounds like a stranger's name, but it also sounds like it's from Berlin'. The appropriateness of this choice for Undine's surname is underscored by the second syllable, 'eau': water in French.
- [12] Stephens 2015.

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- [13] Greenhill 2020, p. 25.
- [14] Chion 1994, p. 71; Chion 1999, p. 21.
- [15] Abel 2013, p. 1.
- [16] Bennett 2001, p. 5; 34.
- [17] Abel 2013, p. 9.
- [18] See Abel 2013; Fisher 2013; Landry 2018.
- [19] Abel 2013, p. 12.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- [21] Cook et al. 2013, p. 14.
- [22] Fisher 2013, p. 11.
- [23] Berlinale Press Conference.
- [24] Romney 2021; Petkova 2020.
- [25] Lattimer 2020, p. 30.
- [26] Chion 1994, p. 71.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- [29] Chion 1994, p. 79.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- [32] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- [33] White & Corrigan 2015, p. 185.
- [34] Abel 2013, p. 19.
- [35] *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
- [36] Bacchilega 2013, p. 7.
- [37] Chion 1994, p. 69.
- [38] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- [39] Freud 1919, p. 226.
- [40] Chion 1994, p. 29.
- [41] Quoted in Bennett 2001, p. 5.
- [42] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [43] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- [44] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

- [45] Bacchilega 2013, p. 191.
- [46] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- [47] Chion 1994, p. 71.
- [48] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- [49] Beer, the actor who plays Undine, has brown hair, but was made a redhead for this film. The association of cinematic mermaids with red hair is most notoriously present in Disney's various Little Mermaids, but also seen in, for example, Aquaman (2018).
- [50] Bennett 2001, p. 6.
- [51] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- [52] Abel 2013, p. 1; Bennett 2001, p. 5.
- [53] White & Corrigan 2015, p. 176.
- [54] Bennett 2001, p. 5.
- [55] Winters 2010, p. 243.
- [56] Cudworth 1969, p. 1231.
- [57] Pontara 2016, p. 42.
- [58] *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48 and pp. 48-49 respectively. For a discussion of classical music in fairy-tale media, see Greenhill & Esterhazy 2018.
- [59] 2010, p. 243
- [60] Also musically significant is the BeeGees 1977 song Stayin' Alive which links with breath and breathing as well as the relationship between Undine and Christoph.
- [61] Berlinale Press Conference.
- [62] Gandy 2014, p. 1.
- [63] Berlinale Press Conference.
- [64] Bennett 2001, p. 111.
- [65] Bacchilega 2013, p. 194.
- [66] Abel 2013, p. 69.
- [67] Berlinale Press Conference.
- [68] Gandy 2014, p. 2.
- [69] Abel 2013, p. 79.
- [70] Lattimer 2020, p. 30; Holm 2013, p. 172.
- [71] Bacchilega 2013, p. 5; 29.
- [72] Waack 2022.
- [73] Bacchilega 2013, p. 5.
- [74] Abel 2013, p. 107.