

Auditory Steering in Haptic Cinema

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Abstract

The expressive force of sound culture plays a vital role in cinematic narrative and representation, and haptic cinema with unique aesthetic features has particular superiority in terms of sound expression. Currently, an increasing number of art films showcase innovative explorations of haptic auditory, bringing about fantastic voyages of perception. The major purpose of this essay is to elaborate on the audio practice and aural turn in haptic cinema, in order to comprehend the significance of sound culture. The sub-objective of the case study is to compare the different audio-visiogenic effects and manifold audio-visual concomitance based on the textual analysis of *Drive My Car*, *Memoria*, and blind theme films. I intend to apply the soundscape and audio-vision theories and investigate the haptic cinema pathway. At this stage in this research, the aesthetic qualities and cultural connotations of haptic auditory will be examined through three dimensions: perception, narrative, and metaphor. According to the certain functions of sound, the framework is divided into the following main parts. First, I will start with the subjectivity and materiality of sound to illustrate how films achieve haptic auditory expression; Next, I will demonstrate the way sounds are exerted as narrative motives in these cases, focusing on the issue of the sound source; Finally, I will analyse sound in the metaphorical sense, showing the two sample movies' similar routes from rupture to recovery.

Keywords

Film Sound, Haptic Film, Soundscape, *Drive My Car*, *Memoria*

1. Introduction

Since its inception in the 1990s, haptic cinema theory has been deeply relevant to sound. The original representative Vivian Sobchack proposes the term “Embodied spectatorship”, establishing the multiple dimension of perception (Sobchack, 1992). Then, “haptic visuality” by Marks and Polan (2000) and “tactile

experience” by Jennifer Barker (2009) initially liberate film from the constraints of ocular-centrism. Subsequently, this theory has been continuously expanded, in which the discussion of sound is always a vital research category. For instance, Martine Beugnet provides an assessment of contemporary French film’s engagement with intense senses and affections. She gives the name “cinema of sensation” to interpret the breakthrough of its audio-visual correlation and underlines the textured facticity and fluid movements of sounds (Beugnet, 2007). In Jiang Yuhui’s recent thesis, he articulates the decisive function of the sound creation in his, which can touch the audience’s senses as anon-visual element with immediacy (Jiang, 2019).

In addition, with the ushering of this research orientation, the creation of cinema art has also shown an aural-oriented tendency. In such a comprehensive cinema art that integrates audio and vision, sound has been regarded as subservient to image for a long time. This element tends to be neglected in most cases, relegated to monotonous background music or confined to repetitive and rigid sound effects.

With the continuous improvement of disciplines in the field of sound, such as acoustic ecology and sound design, as well as the rapid advancement of voice technology in recent years, numerous films present novel characteristics and trends in the visual-audio correlation, including the multidimensional performance of image-sound, sound subjectivity and narrative. Some movies like *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), *Roma* (2018), and *Dunkirk* (2017) portray the immersive representation of ambient sound to the extreme. The other kind of movies, such as *Song of the Phoenix* (2013), *Whiplash* (2014), and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (2017), provides paradigms for taking sounds as narrative dynamics with the rendering of the atmosphere and psychology. These works reconfigure the sound space in multiple dimensions, many of which in particular highlight this swerve from audio-vision to vision-audio and show the haptic auditory features, reflecting a profound integration with haptic cinema.

2. Haptic Auditory: Materiality of Sound and Perceptual Centrality

2.1. Auditory Centrality in Blind Theme Films

Haptic cinema refers to a type of tangible film in which sound is reshaped as a significant vehicle for achieving this sensate quality. Thus the audio forms that possess this aesthetic paradigm can be seen as haptic auditory. Films that offer a narrative about blindness are unique in their haptic-auditory representation, which abandon the omniscient viewpoint in favour of a blind one, in order to portray the plight of the visually impaired. For instance, the Finnish film *A Blind Man Who Did Not Want to See Titanic* (2021) employs a shallow-focus lens to present an extremely restricted perspective, creating a world of blindness. This subject has an inherently close connection to auditory and provides an opportunity to fully engage the narrative potential of the senses. When the vision is

stripped away, other non-visual perceptual system gains priority and acuity in the film. This transformation allows the portrayal of sensorial experience to be extended to another dimension—the haptic sound as the auditory form.

One such “blind vision” film driven by haptic auditory is *Blind Massage* (2014), which is directed by Lou Ye and called a “sound-supreme” film by him. The film follows the lives of blind masseurs as a marginalised group, by imitating the visual experience of the blind with the out-of-focus shots and leading the viewer into the character’s inner world by obfuscating the surroundings; At the same time, Lou Ye employs elaborate sound design to produce a singular aural narrative. He embedded extensive sound elements in the character’s daily life, which reproduce a variety of realistic sounds. In addition, based on synchronised audio-visual relationships, it further creates a subjective simulation of the auditory environment of the blind, in an effort to get close to their real feelings.

According to the soundscape theory established by Raymond Murray Schafer, *Blind Massage* constructs a tridimensional soundscape system—initially, the film uses a mass of low-fidelity ambient sounds as a consistently haunting keynote sound, sketching out the outline of a vague and miscellaneous soundscape; Additionally, audio props such as wind chimes and flutes appear repeatedly, acting as a type of sound marks which lead to trigger the moods. As the plot progresses, the director represents the distinct contrast of sound phases to convey the transition of feelings in certain pivotal moments. When the protagonist’s sight is restored, for instance, the abruptly veiled surrounding sounds generate a sense of dislocated strangeness, which also alludes to their long-time psychological state, such as the obstacles and alienation they have suffered.

2.2. Material Sound in Cinematic Body

In addition to the blind narrative films mentioned above, the two films *Drive My Car* and *Memoria* released in the same year as 2021, make vision take a back seat in a way that deliberately obscures the image, which fully expands the space for aural expression. *Drive My Car* tells the story of the dramatist Kafuku, who camouflages his grief with a placid façade after his wife’s unexpected death. Later, during the rehearsal of the play *Uncle Vanya* in Hiroshima, he got along with the matching chauffeur Watari, finally opening their hearts and pouring out their melancholia. In *Memoria*, the protagonist Jessica is a European who sojourns in Colombia. A mysterious loud sound haunting her ears keeps her on the edge of collapse, driving her to find the source of the auditory hallucinations. Having experienced a series of supernatural riddles, and finally entering the archaeological scene, she reencountered the missing hero Hernan in the countryside and share memories with him, gradually arousing the truth.

The utility of haptic-aural is exerted to the utmost in *Drive My Car*, in which the protagonist’s wife is named “Oto” which means voice and she appears in the form of voice as her name suggests. The first frame in the movie is the blurred contour of Oto in the dimmed twilight, who tells the story in a tone without undulation, while the vertical and swaying silhouette of her body moves in the

same way as a swinging Lampetra. Director Ryusuke Hamaguchi foregrounds the non-visual (auditory and tactile) elements that are more closely attached to intimacy and lust to reach the audio-viewer's senses directly. With the resembled opening, *Memoria* also applies low-illumination cinematography to conceal its heroine Jessica and a series of sounds as a prelude: a mysterious bang, a string of strident vehicle alarms outside the window, and then a shrill alarm clock ringing. The director Apichatpong immediately grabs the audience's ears with one after another signal sounds in quick succession, emphasising the undeniable priority of the auditory.

The conception of the "cinematic body" involved in the haptic cinema theory is interpreted as the aural form of the sound's materiality, which coincides with the notion of auditory embodiment. The close-ups of sound textures in both films carry out an interaction of haptic auditory. With the coarse noises rubbing against the ears, audio-viewer is allowed to physically touch the musculature of the film's soundtrack by listening, which highlights the corporeality of the film. A variety of media including radio, tape and recorder make multiple appearances in the film, and this self-exposure as vocal organs is definitely a manifestation of the presence of the film body. Oto remains continually alive in the form of the voice on a tape recorder after passing away, generating a ubiquitous sensory phantom of acousmetre in the inner-car space. While her ethereal voice turns into a ghostly incarnation of the film's vocal cords, the recorder becomes a corporal sensory extension of the deceased conversely.

Furthermore, the two films coincide in their utilities of fluid imagery that performs water as an intermediary entity, which is deeply linked to sound as a medium and endows it with a corporeal form. The fountains and shores of the bustling city in *Drive My Car*, the rain and rivers of the vast tropical rainforest in *Memoria*... all these unfold like the film's skin surface, generating a moist sound texture that creates a unique aural environment and inner physical space. In this vein, *Drive My Car and Memoria* illustrate Jennifer Barker's theory regarding the layers of the haptic experience from the surface to the interior, embodying the waters as the skin of the image and the sounds as the musculature (Barker, 2009). In the contemporary situation where the virtual senses are constantly evolving and sound is becoming increasingly mediated, the exerting of haptic auditory offers a nontraditional approach to the embodiment of the senses.

3. Sound as Narrative Motive: Sound Source and Memory Carriers

Rick Altman reveals the mechanism of the interchange between film and audience, keeping with the symbiotic relationship between image and sound. Classical narrative cinema takes advantage of the model of human unity in order to bridge the image-sound gap, which permits the cinema to constitute its own unity. Simultaneously, the spectators accept it to affirm their own identity, and thus accede to the symbolic realm of language (Altman, 1980). This collusion indi-

cates the consequences of the separation of sound from its source. The human illusion of integrated self-perception is achieved in the harmony of sound and image, while the sourceless sound would trigger a disconcerted sense and cognitive fragmentation that stems from something unidentified. Correspondingly, Žižek contends that the panic of adding a soundtrack to a silent cinema is derived from the “oddity and horror of automatic sound” (Žižek, 1996). Therefore, it is a human instinct to seek out the source of sound subconsciously.

In the dimension of counterpoint between sound and image, *Drive My Car* and *Memoria* narrates from the two extremes of dullness and high sensitivity to contrapuntal sound respectively. In the former film, the protagonist Kafuku has been in a state of habitual reticence and is reluctant to listen; However, Jessica, the protagonist of *Memoria*, is a talented listener with the capacity of “Clairaudience”, which enables her to hear acoustic space that is imperceptible to others.

The two films split the audiovisual illusion by the artifice of discordance involving muted shots and acousmatic sound. *Drive My Car* renders the hollowness of the character’s heart with broad blank-leavings for sounds in a trans-sensory way. When Oto says: “Hear an amplified silence”, the music abruptly ceased whereby the audience is wrapped in the deep sea of stillness, experiencing an empathetic void and solitude; In contrast to the vococentrism¹, *Memoria* begins with a mystery about an unidentifiable abstract sound that solely in protagonist’s brain, whereby the null extension² generates sensational suspense. Then the pursuit of the phantom sound constitutes the main plot and strings the subsequent dramatic conflicts. Jessica’s fear of the undetermined sound drives her to relentlessly seek and imagine its source. She attempts to put the heavy sound into words, describing it as a piece of “gigantic metal ball falling to the bottom of a well”. Consequently, as the process protagonist persistently probes the audio puzzle, the audience develops interactivity with her and gradually gets sucked into the labyrinth of sound. Throughout the entire movie, the “automatic-sounding horror” accompanies both the protagonist and the audience.

What is even more distinctive is *Memoria*’s attempt to use sound to illustrate the motif of memory. At the finale of the movie, Jessica eventually recalled the lost memory through sound and reconciled with it. Similar to the ASMR conception of “trigger sound”, this loud sound functions as both an apparatus that evokes fear and a switch that awakes memory. Trace back to the opening, the director Apichatpong has implanted the sound into the dream world, establishing a portal between reality and consciousness, actuality, and recollection, whence Jessica is constantly wandering through the memories of herself and others.

In accordance with Pierre Schaeffer’s taxonomy of three listening ways, “reduced listening”³ is proposed as a perceptual pattern that solely focuses on the

¹“vococentrism” refers to the centrality of human voice.

²Present sounds that the audience would otherwise not hear.

³The word “reduced” stems from the philosophic term “reduction” in Husserl’s phenomenology theory.

independent sound itself and its inherent properties, with the source and other meanings removed (Chion, 2014). In this vein, some researchers point out the effect that the ASMR subculture arouses the audience to listen to the trigger sound. Rather than being a hindrance, the causal listening of the definite source would eliminate the potential doubts and threats from acousmaton's⁴ narrative blurring, ensuring a listening process with more safety and relief. When the origin of the bang is identified at the end of *Memoria*, it is transformed into a tangible vehicle of memory as the answer is revealed: this transcendental sound is the trigger sound of prehistoric human collective memory, a kind of sound signal that emanates from the earth's core.

As far as the mediating property of sound, it is represented in its capacity to convey information and carry memories. Both two films arrange such episodes in which the characters act as incarnate voice media. In *Drive My Car*, Kafuku undertakes the function of capturing and retelling Oto's screenplay, performing his presence equivalent to a corporeal recorder. The analogous scenario in *Memoria* refers to Jessica receiving other's memories through physical contact, endowing her with an antenna-like quality through which the connection is established between planets. In terms of narrative, sound in *Memoria* is not only the musculature of the film but also a symbol of the prehistoric civilisation of the planet which emerges with the archaeological excavations. The director Apichatpong uses sound as a medium to visualise memory, constructing a metaphorical chain in the movie—tape serves as a medium for recording sound, while sound serves as a medium for storing memory. Therefore, the sound, as an imprint that could confirm the objectivity of memory, possessing with the substance of the evidence. It is the inmost collective memory inscribed in the individual subconscious.

4. Sound as Metaphor: Soundscape Splitting and Sensory Recovery

Based on the detachment of sound and sight, the haptic film delves into the symbolic dimension of non-realistic sound, further indicating the split of modernity. If *Memoria* achieves a visual description of subconscious activities such as memories, dreams and fantasies by the metaphor of phantom hearing. It can be recognised that *Drive My Car* uses noise as a kind of mental externalisation for its characters as well as a metaphor for the sensory fragmentation in modern society. Both of them employ sound as a thread to weave the polyphonic structure together with intricate sounds and scattered consciousness, presenting a trace from the split to the connection.

Murray Schafer argues that the high-fidelity natural soundscape with audible sources has been obscured by pervasive cacophonies of machinery in industrialised cities and replaced by a low-fidelity one, resulting in a sonic "schizophrenic". He criticised modern industrial noise and the mass media for destroying the

⁴"Acousmaton" refers to the sound image without source.

auditory environment, arguing that noise signifies the authoritarian repression and deprivation of civil life (Schafer, 1994). In this context, the noise was gradually endowed with a metaphorical signification in social and cultural realms. A group of modernist films represented by *Red Desert* and *Eraserhead* employed monotonous factory noise as an aural language to denounce the modern dilemma of numbness and alienation.

The tactful utilities of noise are resonating with each other throughout the movie *Drive My Car*. With some specific distortions of sound elements, this artifice portrays the characters' unarticulated grief and torment while bringing the audience as close as possible to their subjective auditory experience. The sound effects resemble rubbing discs presented frequently. Kafuku first hears this monotonous machine noise in his garage following discovering Oto's affair. Then in the subsequent scenes including the drizzle of the funeral and the pouring fountain, it constantly evokes damp memories and melancholy emotions, signifying that the projection of inner discord is clogging up his hearing channel.

The schizophrenic soundscape caused by the spatial barrier particularly stands out in the film. After Oto's unexpected decease, Kafuku practices his lines and dialogues with her voice while being shuttled in the intimate space of his beloved red Saab day after day. The window serves as a definite boundary. Kafuku is immersed in the dramatic space created by the recording tapes and merely casts indifferent glances at the scenery outside. Whereas with the plot developing, Kafuku's boundary is gradually disintegrated by the intrusive chauffeur Watari and he begins to listen to the outside world and other's voices. They traverse the ocean via bridges and tunnels, crossover the border alongside winding bays, consistently repeating the lines of connection. When they arrive at the destination-snowy field in Hokkaido, a prolonged period of silence envelops them like snow blindness and culminates the story with intense emotion. At this moment Kafuku eventually hears the whistling in the bottom of his heart and confesses his camouflaged pain. At the finale of *Memoria*, Jessica also looks out of the window. The perplexed sound echoing in her brain achieves consonance with the outside sounds, while the auditory sense integrated with vision whereby her long-time haunted mind was finally pacified.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, sound implements haptic aesthetics in multiple dimensions in film. The aural narratives in blind vision movies accentuate the materiality and perception of sound through sensory experience, and present embodied auditory through comprehensive layers of soundscape; as I analysed above, the two films *Memoria* and *Drive My Car* are narratives of seeking the sound source and storing memories through the audio-visual counterpoint, elaborating the mediating nature of sound. As for the connotation regarding the social and cultural field, phantom hearing and noise gain further metaphorical effects, leading to the signification of modernity. It presents a route from schizophrenic and isola-

tion to coherence, meanwhile, the deprived senses are ushered into recovery and unity. These experimental creations appear that haptic cinemas are probing into the absent sound as a pivotal component, investigating and expanding its formulations. On the one hand, these sound practices have delved into the key characteristic of cinema as an authentically integrated visual-audio art. On the other hand, they have effectively exerted film's unique advantages in terms of sound expression, enriching the connotation of sound culture to a large extent as well.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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