

# Traces of Sound

## Reflections of Sounds Unheard

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**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE  
SOUND ENVIRONMENT CENTRE  
AT LUND UNIVERSITY REPORT NO. 20

This publication can be ordered through Lund University at:  
<https://www.ht.lu.se/serie/ljud>. Email: [skriftserier@ht.lu.se](mailto:skriftserier@ht.lu.se)



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individual chapters, the contributors, 2023

Cover photo by Jacob Kirkegaard from a field recording  
for his work *Crossfire* (2022).

Publications from the Sound Environment Centre  
at Lund University No. 20


ISBN 978-91-89874-19-0 (tryck)

978-91-89874-20-6 (digital)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.37852/oblu.255>

ISSN 1653-9354

Typesetting by Gunilla Albertén, Media-Tryck, Lund University  
Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University, Lund 2024

 Nordic Swan Ecolabel 3041 0903

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# Beyond Sound Objects

*Sandra Pauletto*

It was Pierre Schaeffer who introduced the term *objet sonore* in his now famous *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966) and *Solfège de l'objet sonore* (1967), since then the English term object has been used in relation to sound in many contexts (Rocchesso et al. 2003; Godøy 2018). In this essay, I argue that while conceptualizing sound as an object has many benefits for the development of audio technology and production methods, it also obscures and undermines some fundamental and unique characteristics of sound. To exemplify how and when conceptualizing sound as an object seems to be unhelpful, I look at media production and specifically the creative practice of foley, and the use of sound in documentaries with examples from works by the documentary film-maker Erik Gandini and others. A better understanding of what sound is can be found in its unique, often contradictory, characteristics—its ability to help us trace what is relevant and truthful in what is in front of us—rather than what it might have in common with other creative materials such as images.

## The puzzling nature of sound

Many find sound a mysterious topic. Those studying media production, for example, often find it a complex subject and its material difficult to control, being more at ease with the visual aspects. Despite the similarities between some of the processes used to manipulate images and sounds—we can filter both images and sounds, we can create

analogous delay effects, and so on—sound and image are also fundamentally different.

We tend to assume, for example, that we all see the same things and in the same way, while we are less confident that what we hear is the same as others hear. Partially this is due to the temporal nature of sound. If I were to hear something that someone else does not hear, it is unlikely that an exact replica of that sound will repeat just for someone else to be able to hear it too. Sounds, therefore, might be easily and forever missed. The things we see are often static. If my friend does not see something I see, they might have to move their head or redirect their eyes to see it. While sound is always transient, the things we see are usually, though not always, more stable in time.

Yet sound behaves even more strangely than that. It stretches our body, our sensory possibilities. Hearing allows us to perceive from all directions, even things that are far away from us. We can also hear sounds that come from inside our bodies, something that makes the delimitation between what is inside us and outside us porous. As Voegelin (2018, 120) puts it, ‘sound is skinless’. Vision reaches far too, but it is directional and easily blocked; other senses, such as touch and taste, require vicinity. Sound is quite indifferent to physical barriers and passes through most things, almost unscathed. It is perhaps the only everyday aspect of our lives that behaves like a ghost. We hear the present as sound, but reverb means we can hear traces of the past, and because sounds are often made of cycles or patterns, when hearing a sound we will have expectations about the future too. Will the pattern continue, stop, or fade? Like a symphony, the sounds around us provide us with moments of suspension, unexpected turns, or reassuring resolutions.

Sound is ambiguous. It gives us information about some aspects of its source, but often not enough to be able to be certain about what produced it. We can easily be fooled into believing that frying bacon is instead the sound of rain. Sound allows us to imagine things we cannot see or even that do not exist; to formulate a range of reasonably plausible perspectives about what we are experiencing. Yet sound can also be extremely clear. From infancy we learn to understand and produce complex patterns of sound—speech and music—as well as rec-

ognize the sounds of our closest relations. This process of identification and production is soon embedded in us—something we can do effortlessly. In short, sound is many things simultaneously, and at times seems to create contradictory experiences.

## Fact and fiction, evidence and doubt

Given the contradictory nature of sound, it is not surprising that it became the focus of Francis Ford Coppola's thriller *The Conversation* (1974). In the film, a professional wiretapper, Harry Caul, is tasked by a company director to record his young wife while she is walking in a public square accompanied by a young man, who is suspected to be her lover. While preparing the recordings, Harry discovers an ambiguous line: depending on where the accent lies in the sentence it could mean two completely different things. The evidence—what Harry recorded—is suddenly cast into doubt, the sound being both evidence and doubt, factual truth and traces with multiple interpretations. In *The Conversation* some of the contradictions inherent in sound—the way we conceptualize it, the way we listen to it—are Coppola's principal creative focus. In an interview at the time he said,

Sound works on such a sneaky level. You can do things with sound that the audience doesn't know you're doing. With a picture in front of them, they're very aware of it. I just think that sound is very effective. (Rosen 1974)

For Coppola, the subject of *The Conversation* is eavesdropping, privacy, and surveillance. It is about audio technology, the signal on a tape, supposedly being a stable, objective fact and the eavesdropper's relationship with it (Turner 1985). And it is about listening. As Coppola said,

as the film goes along, the audience goes with it because you are constantly giving them the same lines they have already heard, yet as they learn a bit more about the situation, they will interpret things differently. (De Palma 1974).

The film is thus also a comment on the way audio technology has developed and the way we think about it.

Recording allows for sound to be boxed into something graspable—an object that can be categorized and selected, and even used as evidence. It contributes to taming the contradictions of sound. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun ‘object’ in several ways. The first does not easily apply to sound as we experience it: ‘A material thing that can be seen and touched’. Its definition as ‘A thing to which a specified action, thought or feeling is directed’ seems to fit better, because we can direct actions and feelings towards sound as we experience it. We can listen to sound, we can like it or dislike it, we can make it by, say, banging two things together or playing an instrument, but if we want to do more—repeat the same exact instance of sound, for example—we need to make it into something else, into something ‘that can be seen and touched’ as per the first definition of ‘object’.

Speech and music were first turned into objects a long time ago as written text and scores. The transformation of these sounds into objects has been so successful that for some speech is its text or a piece of music is its score, and not its sound. While this has allowed speech and music to be communicated and evolve to an enormous degree, it has also obscured their sonic, contingent nature. Is a musical masterpiece still a masterpiece if the player is unable to produce its sound? Is a speech still truly inspirational if uttered by a toddler or an inexpressive synthesizer?

Transforming other kinds of sounds, everyday sounds and atmospheres for example, into objects has proven more difficult. The development of recording technology has been the primary factor in making these sounds into objects, and it is no coincidence that Schaeffer coined the concept of the sound object when recording and reproduction technology became established in the late 1940s. We were finally able to capture sounds and separate them from their sources, making them into something that could be seen and touched, first as tapes and later as discs and digital files. We built computer interfaces designed so we could virtually touch and see sound. Film sound, for example, works with these kinds of sound objects: a soundtrack is constructed



by manipulating them. Sound files are categorized as voice, music, and sound effects in the editing window. Sound effects are selected from digital sound libraries and inserted where appropriate, sliced, grabbed and moved around like pieces on a chessboard.

Technology allows us to listen to any sound, even mundane sounds, differently. We can more easily attend to sound's acoustic characteristics—we can listen 'acousmatically'—rather than concentrating on its production mechanisms. It also allowed us to create new classifications and taxonomies, elevating any sound to the status of potential creative material, and changing the way we appreciate sound overall. Yet while this has provided a revolutionary freedom, with sound finally disconnected from the contingent, transient nature of its production, it has also obscured some of its unique characteristics. Examples from media production can help us see where it is unhelpful to make sound an object.

## How it feels rather than what it is

In the documentary *Roadrunner: A film about Anthony Bourdain* (2021), the director Morgan Neville used artificial intelligence to recreate Anthony Bourdain's voice for three lines of text Bourdain himself had written but had never recorded. Many were outraged by this use of technology and called it a 'deepfake' (Rosner 2017). One of the fears was of 'a growing slippery slope surrounding what is real and what is fake' (Yang 2021). Karen Hao, an *MIT Technology Review* editor, in summing up the response, revealed a number of assumptions about documentary making.

There's this visceral reaction of, Hey, whoa, you potentially manipulated our understanding of Anthony Bourdain—what he would have said, how he would have portrayed himself—without his consent and without our knowing. (Rosner 2017)

The idea that a documentary would do anything but manipulate our understanding of its subject implies there is one 'true' understanding of a subject, which the documentary should present. Plainly, any sub-

ject can be understood in a variety of ways, and a documentary is one possible representation of the director's understanding of the subject. Furthermore, the idea that the people represented in the documentary should consent to how they are portrayed is to misunderstand whose viewpoint the documentary expresses. A documentary is the expression of the director's point of view which does not need to coincide, require permission from, or be sympathetic to their subject. It is arguably unethical to seek that kind of consent. Should the director of a documentary about a brutal dictator obtain their consent for the way they wish to portray them? Even *cinéma-vérité*, a documentary style that seeks to capture reality 'as objectively as possible', often by favouring lightweight equipment, small crews, and location sound, ultimately expresses the perspective of the director, who chooses where to point the camera and how to edit the footage.

Perhaps the real issue with the technique Neville used was that the words Bourdain wrote were presented in the form of sound, rather than text. Neville defended himself by saying, 'I wasn't putting words into his mouth. I was just trying to make them come alive' (Yang 2021). As Bourdain was their author, why such outrage at the form in which they were presented? What if the director had made the words into a graphic? What if a different voice, not Bourdain's, had read out the words? What about intonation and prosody? And what if a recording of Bourdain saying the lines had existed? Surely their use in a different context is already manipulation? This is the same conundrum faced by Harry Caul in *The Conversation*: these are the words, but what did Bourdain mean by them? We seem to think that somewhere within sound, its emphasis and accentuations, we could track back to the truth. Or is the answer for us, the audience, to take greater responsibility by acknowledging the truth resides in how we interpret what is in front of us?

Sound provides an incomplete picture and brings signifiers into doubt: it is not 'this' or 'that', as things defined against each other, a matter of differences and similarities; and it does not offer us a certain form, but is the moment of production of what the thing and the listener are. (Voegelin 2018, 120)

As ‘the truth’ does not simply reside in the materials recorded and their production, sound, with all its contradictions, is ideal material to express what Werner Herzog (1999) calls ‘the deeper strata of truth in cinema’—a poetic, ecstatic truth—for as he continues, this deeper truth is ‘mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization’. So speech is not just its text, its graspable object, but it is also its contingent, ungraspable instantiation: its sound, be it an original recording or a voice-over fabrication. Through sound we ‘feel’ speech more directly and we arrive at our interpretation of what those words mean, of their truth.

Hao seemed to think that by recreating Bourdain’s voice Neville had crossed a boundary that previously did not exist (Rosner 2017). I would suggest that this is not really new ground at all. We do not need AI to be able to create plausible new sounds, indistinguishable from sounds recorded in real life. Even speech, one of the most difficult sounds of all, can be edited together and altered by processing at the phoneme level, making someone sound more assertive or doubtful, younger or older (Pauletto 2012). It is sound’s malleability that makes it possible.

Both factual and fictional media have made great use of sound’s adaptability. In fiction and factual media alike, the sound of the characters’ bodies and how they express their behaviour is treated in exactly the same way as Neville treated Bourdain’s voice. The urgency with which someone bangs on a door, the love expressed by the sound of a kiss, the hesitation in the sound of a spoon stirring a cup of tea: they are likely to be faked, portrayed by a performer in a recording studio, not the person we see on screen (Pauletto 2019).

## The agitation of the between-of-things

In the early twentieth century, technology developed to the point where films could be accompanied by a synchronized, recorded soundtrack. A technique was developed to perform and record sound effects corresponding to the film, which had its roots in theatrical sound effects and takes its name, foley, from the person who pioneered the practice. Though cinematic technology has since been transformed,

foley remains the way a vast part of the sound is created for film, TV, radio, and so on. Foley artists generally produce the sounds of the characters on screen: footsteps, the sound of clothes when the character is moving, and the sound of interactions with objects. These are the sounds we hear in our daily life that we often pay little attention to, but constantly use to judge what is happening around us.

Why, then, can we not use a general library of sounds to create these ‘noises’? Why do they need to be performed by foley artists uniquely for each film? After all, they are mundane sounds and hardly the focus of the production. I would argue that foley artists are still here because rather than a representation of ‘sound objects’ (footsteps, knocking), foley sounds are a representation of acting—an expression of how something or someone *feels* rather than what something *is*. As James Naremore writes, ‘only the most vulgar empiricism regards the objects around us as inanimate. Once those objects have entered into social relations and narrative actions, they are imbued with the same “spirit” as the humans who touch them’ (1988, 87): actors turn objects into ‘signifiers of feeling. Sometimes the player’s dexterity is foregrounded, but more often it is hardly noticeable, lending emotional resonance to the simplest behaviour’. That resonance can be provided by sound.

The enduring tradition of foley foregrounds the contingent as a fundamental quality of sound, contesting the idea that sound is a collection of discrete objects and categories.

In sound we exist transiently and contingently not as signifier or definition, but as the agitation of the between-of-things. (Voegelin 2018, 121)

Foley is one of the most concrete examples of sound as ‘the agitation of the between-of-things’.

## Reaching deeper strata of truth

If sound is primarily a signifier of feeling, rather than an object, the distinction between what is real and what is fake is not just uninteresting, but almost impossible. The way any one sound was created

becomes irrelevant, as long as the sounds we create make the audience feel the way we intended. And if the feeling is to be real and ‘truthful’, in Herzog’s sense (1999), sound will be one of the most interesting ways to reach ‘deeper strata of truth in cinema’, rather than what Herzog calls the ‘truth of accountants’.

Hao’s assumptions about documentary making (Rosner 2017) have their roots in the traditional view that documentary films are representations of reality based on directness, transparency, and simultaneity (Nichols 1991). It implies a clear distinction between the observer and what is observed; an objectification of reality in all its aspects, visual and aural. From this standpoint, if we see something on screen, we want to trust it really existed and was in front of the camera when filmed, and if we hear a sound, we want to assume it was produced and recorded at the same time. Yet the history of documentary film-making presents us with many examples of creative tools firmly detached from reality, whether animation, staging, reconstructions, interventions, or various forms of participation on the part of the director.<sup>1</sup>

From this emerged an alternative idea of documentary: the ‘creative documentary’. Italian-Swedish documentary film-maker Erik Gandini (2021) describes it as a hybrid film genre, which attempts to represent ‘the real’ in a creative, critical art form. The tension in the interaction with reality is central to creative documentary making and instead of sidestepping it, a creative documentary makes it a key element in the process. The film-maker no longer attempts to be a dispassionate observer of a reality evolving in front of them, and their voice is no longer

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<sup>1</sup> Documentaries have used re-enactments and animation from the start. Winsor McCay’s short propaganda film, *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), used only re-enacted or recreated footage. Peter Watkins’s *The War Game* (1966) depicted a nuclear war and its aftermath, Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) was deemed ineligible for an Oscar because it used re-enactments. Ari Folman’s Oscar-nominated animated memoir *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) is told by an unreliable narrator and includes fictional characters. Other examples of untraditional documentaries are *Danish Into Eternity* (2010, Michael Madsen), *We Tell* (2012, Sarah Polley), *The Act of Killing* (2012, Joshua Oppenheimer), *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015, Kyle Patrick Alvarez), *Kate Plays Christine* (2016, Robert Greene), *Lucky One* (2019, Mia Engberg), and *Reconstructing Utoya* (2018, Carl Javér).

excluded, instead being the very thing on which the narrative relies—and at their disposal they have sound, one of the most flexible tools with which to shape reality.

Gandini's aesthetic deliberately encourages audiences to doubt the representation, and sound's resistance to being objective evidence is a great help. Gandini's two main collaborators, the film editor Johan Söderberg and sound designer Hans Møller, are key to his approach to sound. Throughout the production process, they discuss not so much the sounds present during filming, but how Gandini felt on location, the aim being to recreate that feeling rather than attempting to reconstruct the sounds of the reality. In that sense, Møller's notion—taken from fiction—of 'total freedom' is extremely valuable, 'as he really wants to create a universe, which is exactly what I like to do with these films' (Gandini 2021). The long-lasting collaboration with Johan Söderberg, a film editor with a background as a percussionist and vast experience of editing music videos and adverts, shapes not only the way the picture is edited, but also the rhythm of the edit—the interplay of audio and visual elements—and, at times, the musical choices.

Gandini (2021) describes the creative possibilities opened up by sound design as a 'revelation' and concludes that sound is a fantastic tool to 'show reality for how it feels, rather than how it is'. For his documentary with Tarik Saleh about Guantanamo Bay prison, *Gitmo* (2005), there were lengthy discussions about how the American soldiers were trying to present the place as if it were a tourist attraction, describing the wildlife, the golf course, and so on. Gandini (2021) said:

I remember talking about the feeling that there was a lot of construction going on. And there were these dogs that were used for interrogation, I mean, simple things. ... They had almost built like a platform for media where you could put up the cameras and shoot 'Gitmo by night'; it's bizarre, you know. ... The situation was that suddenly, with this microphone, we could pick up the talking, the screaming from inside the camp. And this Lieutenant Mos was doing his best to sort of convince us that they were just talking to each other. And I am sure that Hans Møller added some voices there; it was definitely true that people were shouting and screaming and so on, but he enhanced it somehow. (Gandini 2021)

Similarly, the dogs barking and construction sounds were added later where the directors and sound designer felt they would provide the same unsettling, contradictory feeling they had discussed. But why cannot recorded location sound provide the right feeling? Gandini (2021) says it is often uninteresting. The recording equipment does not capture the feeling which the sound provoked in listeners when they were there and heard it the first time. Once again, sound cannot be reduced to its object—the signal in a file. A completely new synthesized, sonic atmosphere can be more ‘authentic’, evoking the original feeling. As Gandini (2021) puts it, ‘to turn (the recorded material) into a scene you need more stuff’.

In more recent films, Gandini presents his themes almost as riddles—something he calls a ‘Alice in wonderland approach’ (2021). He looks at the present from unusual perspectives, be it Italian society in the Berlusconi years in *Videocracy* (2009) or Swedish society in *The Swedish Theory of Love* (2015), making the viewer look at the mundane as if for the first time, ‘creating something that is recognizable, but feels somehow new. Almost making the banal exceptional’ (Gandini 2021). Manohla Dargis’s description (2010) of this feeling in her review of *Videocracy* is particularly fitting: ‘it feels as if you were watching a transmission from another planet’.



Self-insemination scene from the film *The Swedish Theory of Love* (2015). With permission from Erik Gandini.

*The Swedish Theory of Love* is a film about the Swedish emphasis on individuality and independence. A single woman's ability to have a child by anonymous sperm donation is portrayed in the film as an example of such independence. Early in the film, there is a sperm bank scene, which shows robotic medical machinery and sperm moving around in a petri dish—an artificial construct in both images and sounds. The sound of the machines is reminiscent of sci-fi sound design, with each little movement or LED light accompanied by a small buzzing or beeping effect. The scene ends with the clearly unrealistic sound of sperm 'bubbling' under the microscope. The sound design gives a sense of an efficient, modern, aseptic system designed to produce something organic, moving, and pulsating—something alive. Another completely fictional insemination scene follows, in which a female narrator, accompanied by a choir of 'angelic' voices, reads out the instructions for the procedure in a tone that is both reassuring and unsettling. The scene ends abruptly with a woman pushing a pram and an implosion into almost silence, perhaps hinting that having a baby might not be as idyllic as the previous sounds seemed to imply. While many of the elements (the interview with the sperm bank owner, the sperm donors' descriptions) are factual, the images and sounds are intended to produce a feeling that in Gandini's case is often a feeling of doubt or suspension. The result is that the audience wonders, 'Is it really so simple? Is it really so good to be fully independent?'

Sound is again used to evoke feelings at the end of the film, which concludes with extracts from an interview with the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman talks about independence and interdependence, and the paradox that happiness is the result of struggle—the taming of troubles, not the absence of trouble. The syncopated music used for the scene seems a metaphor for this contradictory process. Bauman adds that society can solve some of its most pressing issues such as hunger and health, but it cannot resolve the human need for company. The buzz of a lone motorbike, the rattling sound of a man cycling, create the feeling of individuals going about as single entities in search of something. Independence erodes our socializing skills, Bauman continues, which are difficult and time consuming. Gandini



here sequences a number of images of living rooms against a soundtrack of a ticking clock, inspired by visits to his relatives in Sweden, in contrast to his experience of Italian households (Gandini 2021). The sound of his personal memory, which hints at loneliness and a lack of socialization, becomes in this case the channel for authentic feelings experienced by the audience too.

As the concept of interdependence is introduced, a solo instrument softens the insistent rhythm of the music with a melody, accompanied by children's voices and the sound of people having fun and being together. The sound of doors creaking open follows, ending with one slamming shut. Gandini and Møller spent a great deal of time getting this sound exactly 'right' (Gandini 2021), a kind of suspended cadence, which is then followed by the explicit conclusion in Bauman's words: 'So at the end of independence is not happiness; at the end of independence there is emptiness of life, meaninglessness of life, and utter, utter unimaginable boredom.'<sup>2</sup>

## Elusive truths

Sound is many, often contradictory things at once. It is clear and ambiguous, evidence and doubt, fake and real. Sound is a trace, a ghost, a signifier of feeling. It tells us about the past, the present, and the future; it is contingent and transient; it lives inside and outside our bodies. It is what connects the source to the listener, shaped by both and belonging to neither. Technological advances have made sound into graspable, collectable, classifiable objects, and there can be no doubt the process allows us to manipulate this strange material in many new, creative ways, but it also, at times, obscures its real nature, its potential for 'truth'. I have shown how conceptualizing sound as an object is not straightforward. In Coppola's *The Conversation*, the sound object—in this case a sound file—crumbles, degrading rapidly from evidence into traces so we, by listening, are implicated in the construction of a multitude of possible truths. In Neville's documentary, the

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<sup>2</sup> Bauman quote from 6:45: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7GL\\_HFCXbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7GL_HFCXbs)

written word collides with its possible realizations as sound. Yet while we react strongly to the possibility of recreating a voice, film-making makes abundant use of foley—‘faking’ how an actor’s body ‘speaks’—without audience objections. It is only in uniquely produced sonic performances, and not simply the selection of sound objects (sound files) from a library, that an audience can trace the feelings the director and actors want to portray on screen. The use of sound in creative documentaries is an example of sound’s contradictory nature lending itself to use as a tool for fabrication, imagination, and stylization: in short, as a way to reach elusive truths.

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