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Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard, by Albertine Fox. I.B. Tauris, 2018, 274 pages.

Caitríona Walsh

Enfant terrible, celluloid deity, and self-construed "composer" of film, Jean-Luc Godard requires scant introduction in any undertaking that concerns the on-screen arts. Over the course of a multidecade career, the French-Swiss director/screenwriter/ critic has solidly fastened his cinematic omnipotence. His presence is plainly felt both in his output—where his insurgent instincts are etched into the audiovisual essence of on-screen events and personae—and in the ever-augmenting literature on film. Even while classical-realist and Hollywood-centric avenues of investigation have continued to exert a colossal impact on screen media production and scholarship, Godard has skilfully leveraged his outlander status, and cemented his leviathan influence. Tirelessly blazing trails, he spotlights countless creative methods that veer from more well-trodden paths, demanding that filmgoers and scholars alike should look, listen, and feel with revived brio. Albertine Fox has opted to take up the gauntlet, gleaning a hitherto untapped wellspring of insight from the director's oeuvre. In her newest publication *Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard*, she zealously burrows into its shadowy slivers, splinters and fractals, uncovering obscure oscillations, absences, and excesses, and probing the implications of these "infinite permutations" of vision, sound, and sensation (28).

The book's title cuts to Hecuba, succinctly illuminating its foremost investigational intent, and its auditory imperative. Fox contends that "thinking film acoustically means thinking spectatorship differently" and, for this reason, she seeks to donate a distinctively aural perspective to the "rich and sprawling" territory of Godard's lesser-explored post-1979 multimedia releases, including feature films, CD soundtracks, and video series (2, 12). In so doing, she rebukes the obstinate ocularcentric themes and visual biases of the bulk of screen-media-centred discourse. As such, her approach parallels other academic admonishments of the Cartesian impulses of contemporary consumerist cultures, which wilfully hone the visual sense whilst ostracising the others—part of a "pictorial turn" that awards absolute supremacy to the image (Marks 139; Ashby 23). Intentionally countering these tendencies, Fox absolves the most detrimental prior sins of omission, exposing the paramount sound phenomena in Godard's later works—a time when the director worked with "buoyancy, acuity and fluidity" in an overt effort to carve out a fresh approach to sound cinema (32, 28).

In point of fact, she succeeds in going further still. Moving beyond hermetic, exclusionary accounts of sequestered senses—hearing versus seeing—she unmasks many stirring moments of multisensory mergence. This conjures the spirit of Godard as a radical combiner who boldly bends and blends the assembly-line edicts of mainstream filmmaking. Rescripting the conventional commandments for constituent parts, criss-crossed sounds and images come to mingle and mirror one another like mystical prisms—such that sound becomes visible, and image audible. A playful instance of these metamorphic processes occurs in *First*

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Name: Carmen (*Prénom Carmen*, 1983), when musical staves turn rogue and loose themselves from the printed page, and from strict sound, racing defiantly into the on-screen image (78). With similar verve, Fox explicates the visceral acumen of Godard's work, and the intensity of our reactions to it. She includes multiple descriptions of powerful, haptic sensuality, and vivid audiovisual gesturing, depicted through the muscular motions of musicians' fingers, for example, and the "energetic exertion of their bodies" (78). By unveiling mixed-sense entanglements like these, she speaks to the burgeoning sphere of research concerning corporeal cinema, aptly acknowledging what Ara Osterweil has described as "the embodied condition of spectatorship", which provokes us to "feel, see and even smell the sound of film in our bodies" (6, 13).

Following on from the book's introductory material, and a cogent rationale of its organisation and "experimental and freewheeling" cross-disciplinary bases (2), its main corpus follows a septet structure. This commences with a cohesive overview charting the emergence of a new breed of sound cinema, and a compelling historiographical account of influential ideas around *musique concrète* and acousmatics, along with a synthesis of critical concepts by titan thinkers on sound, most notably Pierre Schaeffer and Michel Chion. The analyses here narrow in on unorthodox aspects of Godard's earlier and new wave films—titles like *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960), *My Life to Live* (*Vivre sa vie*, 1962), and *Alphaville* (1965)—all of which make seditious use of soundtrack tactics through sudden musical severing, steadfast sound–image disjunction, disembodied vocalisations, and uproarious ambient noise that devours dialogue and music. Fox shows the continued predilection for aesthetic extremes both within and between film titles, revealing how audio-viewers are alternately spoiled with "sparkling" sonic collages of "eclectical musical styles and citations", and subjected to lengthy stints of deafening silence (21). Crucially, the book's early chapters serve up a formative exposition of many of its cardinal themes. The author clearly articulates Godard's resistant stance toward creative constraints, and his rebuttal of the banality of homogeneous, mass-media manufacturing. She also indicates his understanding of sound and music as potent enzymes for exposing the cynical mechanisms of politics, class, and commerce. Of chief importance among the ideas teased out is that of the director's staunch efforts to bolster the profile of film's aural faculties—to transcend soundtrack subservience through autonomous, foregrounded sound inclusions that are treated as equal rather than enhancement, and even allowed to take ideological and structural precedence right from the inchoate filmmaking stages.

In the chapters that follow Fox continues to cleave apart these conceptual kernels, creating a welcome continuity between core considerations and case studies. She reiterates the leanness of existent research that scrutinises Godard's soundtracks—for instance vis-à-vis the 1979 title *Every Man for Himself* (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*). This is in spite of the fact that the film constitutes an "explicitly musicalised audio-visual form" (29), assembled around operatic excerpts from Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876). Its triptych depictions of intimate relationships hinge around an image track that is scrupulously sliced and spliced to the music (rather than the reverse scenario), formed from spectral snippets of the *Suicide!* aria that are "erased", "preserved", and "ciphered"—or cannibalised by the oddball electronics of Gabriel Yared's original score (36, 43). Fox extends these investigations of transmutation to *Passion* (1982), where the boundary-blurring *mise en abîme*—fashioning a film within a film—is invoked through a salmagundi sonic stew. Piquant harmonica inflections bleed into Maurice Ravel's reedy tones, and the clamour of traffic, combining with an asynchronous voice track to create a "fluid sonorous texture, like a wrinkle in the film's fabric" (58–9). The power of cinematic physicality is also reprised on sundry occasions—in relation to *First Name: Carmen*, for example, where Fox expands the antecedent sonic analyses of Annette Davison, though arguably with an increased aptitude for artful description. She includes synaesthetic accounts of mellifluous sonic waveforms that swell and subside as the incorrigible title character

assumes “an undulating pose that drolly simulates the swollen shape of a self-contained Rodinesque figure” (69).

On certain occasions Fox’s imaginatively rendered examples summon up tentative audioscapes, with slight, seeping trickles subtly sculpted in sound, and “subversive areas of sensation [that] unfurl as flakes of speech, melody and movement curl into our ears” (83). In other instances, she deals in abrasive descriptions of scratchy timbres, and macabre scenes where lunar musical whimsies are twinned with hands that appear “scratched and bloodied, as if engulfed in flames” (199). In this way she convincingly demonstrates the director’s extraordinary versatility and malleability of style. That said, it is equally apparent that, for Godard, audiovisual approaches of varying extremes begged a comparable response. Their common aim was to incite inquisitive engagement with the on-screen material, rather than the stupefying passivity promoted elsewhere. This intended outcome is reinforced throughout both his output, and the book itself, with Fox continually affirming that auditory elements are set up to thwart the typical anaesthetising reliance on sound—what others have variously referred to as the soundtrack’s “charming” and “palliative” methods (Donnelly 23, 5), and “hypnotic” affect (Kalinak 29–30)—deviously calibrated to render audience members utterly untroublesome. Godard does just the opposite through “inventive acoustic experiments” that “demand a plural and fluid critical response” (3).

In summary, *Godard and Sound* is eloquently written, with abundant evidence of exhaustive research and fastidious compilation. Its material is synthesised with commitment and care, excellently balancing both macro and micro aspects of its designated subject matter, and intuitively threading through its overarching themes whilst still giving mention to many engaging details of the minutiae pertaining to individual productions, and their respective sources of inspiration. Admittedly, there are places that would benefit from a more robust stamp of authorship on the part of Fox, and where an amplified measure of assertiveness on her part might have further strengthened the thrust of her arguments, appealing as they are. On occasion other authors are given the last word in crucial segments where Fox has herself undertaken the greater part of the scholarly toil. Given the impressive density of content, there are also sentences that could be fissured into more concise and immediately comprehensible mouthfuls. The *codetta* that follows the “Shadows and Sparks” conclusion seems somewhat nonessential—though it is a fitting nod to Godard’s penchant for addenda and postscripts, and his commitment to creating unresolved business.

An especially commendable attribute of the discursive content is that it continually acknowledges the collaborative processes involved in generating celluloid output. This enables Fox to avoid a potential pitfall of prior publications, and particularly those investigating Godard’s later works, namely the erasure of collective involvement. She points to this oversight early on, and proceeds in a manner that skilfully sidesteps the quixotic image of the prodigious, director—cloistered, fetishised, and afforded consummate creative control. She concretely concedes Godard’s stylistic moxie, and his technical and aesthetic initiatives, whilst also crediting his cohort of collaborators—for example sound recordist François Musy, who teamed with Godard in service of “forever pushing the limits” of possibility (194). Musy contributed *First Name: Carmen*’s threnody gull calls, also partaking in a crossmedia, three-way dialogue with Godard and record producer Manfred Eicher to compile accompanying audio CD releases for the director’s on-screen output. Undoubtedly, Godard’s foremost ally and creative kindred spirit is his long-time partner—the photographer/writer/filmmaker Anne-Marie Miéville—with whom he jointly established a dynamic sound-image workshop, extensively experimenting in multimedia domains of video, film, and television, and with novel techniques like speed variation and altered motion. While recognising bountiful partnerships like these, Fox also gazes further back, charting preceding influences on the films analysed. Far from

emerging in vacuity, Godard's works contain a wealth of canny intertextual nods and winks, owing discernible debts to past champions in a miscellany of creative realms—Bach, Bacon, Beckett, Beethoven, and Bizet, to cherry-pick just a few.

The practice of scanning multiple temporalities to garner meaning also encourages *us* to accept Godard's challenge, by actively participating in an audiovisual dot-joining process. It spurs us to do our own digging, willing that we trace the lineage of distinctive aesthetic traits found in more recent films—the intrusive typewriter tap in *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), the tumult of quotidian machines turned foul in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011), the bleak sonic spareness of *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007), and the gonzo multisensory bombardments of *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé, 2009) and *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2017). There is yet more to be done in unravelling these connections, but Fox certainly does an admirable job in arousing our curiosity. She stimulates us to step inside Godard's polymodal prisms and cinematic cyphers, to rummage for significance and, sometimes, to simply yield to the obfuscation of his *idées vagues* and strange soundtrack incantations.

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