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Authors	Jordan, Randolph
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Composing Perception: Hildegard Westerkamp Meets Gus Van Sant (A Video Essay)

Randolph Jordan

Abstract: *This video essay explores the relationship between the soundscape compositions of Hildegard Westerkamp, the films of Gus Van Sant, and the writing of Danijela Kulezic-Wilson. The piece presents Westerkamp's composition "Doors of Perception" in its entirety with accompanying sequences from the Van Sant films that have used her work as part of their sound design, along with other of his films that do not. The sequences from* Elephant *and* Last Days *are positioned according to the timing of the excerpts used in the films, only now it is the films that are integrated into the soundscape composition rather than the other way around. For the rest of the composition, I speculate on what it might have been like to hear "Doors of Perception" in other films by Van Sant, excerpting a few sequences from across his filmography loosely synchronised around a few key points that suggest correlation between sound and image in similar ways to how Van Sant mapped the composition into* Elephant *and* Last Days. *These thematic connections support Danijela Kulezic-Wilson's arguments about the new perceptual engagements opened up under Van Sant's influence by soundwalking and music concrète within his filmmaking practice.*



Figure 1: ***Composing Perception: Hildegard Westerkamp Meets Gus Van Sant*** **(Randolph Jordan, 2024). Screenshot and link to video essay.**

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In Gus Van Sant's films *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), the filmmakers incorporated a soundscape composition called "Türen der Wahrnehmung (Doors of Perception)" into certain sequences. Hildegard Westerkamp originally created the half-hour composition for an on-site installation at the 1989 Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria, and it was subsequently released in a shortened twenty-minute version on CD. It consists of field recordings of a wide variety of elements structured around the sounds of doors opening and closing, inviting spaces into each other that ordinarily would not coexist. This makes the piece especially intriguing as a choice of pre-existing music for the films, as its sounds are more likely to be heard by the audience as "sound effects" created by the sound design team rather than "music" imported from elsewhere.

The blurring of boundaries between environmental sound and music has long been a material starting point for soundscape composers floating in and around the field of acoustic ecology, as Westerkamp has been since the early 1970s. The role that this form of composition can take within film sound design has been the subject of some scholarly attention since Van Sant's films were released, and this attention formed the basis for my initial encounter with Danijela Kulezic-Wilson at the Music and the Moving Image conference at New York University in 2011, where I presented a paper on the subject of Westerkamp's piece in *Last Days*. We had much to talk about then, and have both written a fair bit more on the topic since, referring to each other back and forth as our ideas progressed over the years (Jordan, "Work", "Ecology", and *Acoustic Profiles*; Kulezic-Wilson, "Sound Design", " Gus Van Sant's Soundwalks", *Musicality*, and *Sound Design*). I have been particularly influenced by Danijela's thinking around the idea of sound design as "the new score" ("Sound Design", *Sound Design*), referring to the integration of all levels of the soundtrack into a single unified whole, as well as the function of soundscape composition in allowing audiences to experience films as pieces of "audio-visual musique concrète" in their own right ("Gus Van Sant's Soundwalks"). I have wondered how these ideas might extend backwards through Van Sant's filmography to hear the early seeds of the highly experimental approach to sound design employed in his later films. When it came time to design a video work in tribute to Danijela's scholarship, it was an easy choice to attempt an extension of our exploration of Van Sant's audiovisuality around the work of Hildegard Westerkamp.

The premise of my *Composing Perception* montage is to reverse the relationship between Westerkamp and Van Sant established by the films. In *Elephant* and *Last Days*, we encounter Westerkamp's work as integrated into the logic of Van Sant's filmmaking so that we might think of "Doors of Perception" as part of the cinematic worlds in which it is presented. But what if we flipped things around so that our encounter with Van Sant's films was structured around the logic of Westerkamp's work? In this spirit the montage presents "Doors of Perception" in its entirety from start to finish, employing only the slightest editorial intervention to extend three moments of silence as reading pauses to allow for more comfortable presentation of excerpts from Danijela's writings that speak to the role of soundscape composition in opening the audience up to the fullness of audiovisual musique concrète. The sequences from *Elephant* and *Last Days* are positioned according to the timing of the excerpts used in the films, only now it is the films that are integrated into the soundscape composition rather than the other way around. For these sequences, I allow the sound design from the films to filter into Westerkamp's work, just as Westerkamp's work filtered into the sound design within the original films. For the rest of the composition, I speculate on what it might have been like to hear "Doors of Perception" in other films by Van Sant, excerpting a few sequences from across his filmography loosely synchronised around a few key

points that suggest correlation between sound and image in similar ways to how Van Sant mapped the composition into *Elephant* and *Last Days*. Some of these are presented as image only, as with *Mala Noche* (1986) and *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), so that only "Doors of Perception" provides their re-imagined soundtracks. In other cases, as with half of the sequences from *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Paranoid Park* (2009), some sound is brought through from the original soundtracks to hear how Van Sant's earlier approaches to sound environments might have meshed with Westerkamp's work.

My approach to sonic layering demonstrates how closely the art of film sound design mirrors that of soundscape composition. "Doors of Perception" blends field recordings with bits of pre-existing music. The film soundtracks also blend location recordings, sound effects, and other pre-existing music (like "On Bended Knee" from Boyz II Men, "Moonlight Sonata" from Beethoven, and "Walk Through Resonant Landscape #2" from fellow soundscape composer Frances White). In laying some of the sound design from Van Sant's films atop of Westerkamp's composition, I illustrate Kulezic-Wilson's argument for how the proximity between soundscape composition and film sound design can inform our thinking about a film's audiovisual entirety.

On the level of the image, all the film excerpts I have chosen are thematically linked by depictions of altered perception, be it through drug use or otherwise, inviting correlation with the title of Westerkamp's piece, alluding to Aldous Huxley (*Doors*) just as it forms an aesthetic strategy informed by the soundwalking practices of acoustic ecologists that invite alternate perceptual habits (Westerkamp, "Soundwalking"). These thematic connections support Danijela Kulezic-Wilson's arguments about the new perceptual engagements opened up under Van Sant's influence by soundwalking and music concrète within his filmmaking practice.

Acknowledgment

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Randolph Jordan is a media scholar/practitioner whose work lives at the intersection of film sound, acoustic ecology, and critical geography. His new book *Acoustic Profiles: A Sound Ecology of the Cinema* is available from Oxford University Press. He teaches in the Humanities department at Champlain College in Montreal.