

**Michel Chion: Film, a sound art
(Translated by Claudia Gorbman).
New York: Columbia University Press. 2009**

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MedieKultur 2010, 48, 141-144

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | www.smid.dk

The online version of this text can be found open access at www.mediekultur.dk

Since the beginning of the 1980s, French film (music) theorist and composer Michel Chion has stood out as an author with his original and interesting texts on sound in film. His thinking and concepts have proven highly influential and have become widely acknowledged, but at the same time, his writing has often been criticised for being idiosyncratic and generally short of stringent theoretical anchoring. Regarding the latter, *Film, A Sound Art* is no exception. It is, to a large degree, a treatise that is built upon its own – that is, Chion's own – premises, which are only sparsely substantiated. However, this is how it must – and should – be, given that the book is not as much about theory as it is an introduction to film history and technique and to a veritable complex of forms of understandings.

Film, A Sound Art is organised into two main parts – *History*, pp.1-186, and *Aesthetics and Poetics*, pp.187-464 – in addition to an elaborate *Glossary*, pp. 465-500, which, as the designation suggests, functions as an independent encyclopaedia, but also is intended as an extended reference table for the book.

Part One is a chronologically organised discussion of film history with particular attention paid to the significance of sound or, rather, the position of sounds in film. However, the ten chapters in this part of the book utilise different thematic approaches, successfully including overarching discussions in which an epoch and its general characteristics are in focus, chapters in which the focus revolves around biographical, structural or genre-specific items, and chapters that are disposed more towards technical and technological developments and achievements. In this way, the angle and the perspective are continuously chang-

ing and the reader is guided from one point of observation to another; in itself, an almost filmic artifice that helps to secure a varied, highly inspirational form of presentation.

Whereas the first part is organised according to historical progression, focusing on epochs, inventions and shifts, the second part, including sixteen chapters, is systematically structured on the basis of selected forms, techniques and means related to sound in film. This disposition seems relevant and felicitous at the same time. To a certain degree, the second part builds an anthology of articles that examines and describes subjects and questions about the use of audio-visual means of expression in film. As such, the individual chapters are dedicated to specific subjects, dealt with in a more or less isolated fashion, and which all include an impressive amount of examples. On their own, the chapters are interesting and inspiring and, every now and then, one feels a strong encouragement to hurry down to the local library in order to borrow a particular film.

Both of these main parts are interposed with character-centred breaks of almost biographical observance. One such character is Charlie Chaplin, whose reluctant transition to talkies is described with empathy and a strong emphasis on how the challenge led Chaplin to rethink his narrative form and dramatic means, almost leading to a fundamental change in his artistic *raison d'être*. Among other characters, who are introduced in the same way, we find Welles, Tarkovsky and Tati, film-makers who have already taken a prominent position in Chion's earlier writings. Jacques Tati's films and techniques in particular appear generously as examples throughout *Film, A Sound Art*.

Generally, the book's examples and references stem from American and, hardly surprisingly, French films. The Italians are well represented too, but there is a dearth of examples from, for instance, British and German film even though Chion is obviously aware of the great and lasting influence of film-makers from these countries. For someone who is not familiar with French film and its cinematic history, it could be difficult to see and hear the examples with an inner eye and ear. However, Chion is very good at description and bringing film scenes to life. This is a great help, but it is obvious that a solid insight into French film would make it easier to follow Chion's deductions and arguments.

The book is filled with original observations. For instance, one important point for Chion is that sound, even in the period he names the 'Deaf', is not merely implicitly included by means of visual suggestion or represented as a musical accompaniment (performed in the theatre), but is, in spite of its absence, a contributory factor to the pictorial language and to the editing of the film – such as a shot of an alarm bell in which the hammer is in obvious motion. Thus the sound 'sounds' as a function of its representation in the visuals.

Compared to Chion's earlier publications, there is not much new in terms of theory and way of thinking. Some of Chion's – often controversial – concepts, such as *added value* and *synchresis*, may well have been sharpened and clarified, whilst others have been moderated, but the sum total is that *Film, A Sound Art* maintains positions already taken by Chion. Thus, the strength of the book is not its originality – at least not within the discourse already established by Chion – but rather its thoroughly exemplified discussions.

Chion is a good writer, and even though Gorbman's translation does not always seem fully freed from the original French text, the book is not difficult to read. It is very pleasant and engaging – and in our time, it is a great exception to find that the person behind the text is so easily felt and always seems to be present. *Film, A Sound Art* is no mere exercise or dry essay, but an engaged and engaging book carried by Chion's great interest in his topic and field. But precisely herein lies its greatest weakness. Chion's impressive insight and overview much too often lead to a taxing situation in which the number of examples becomes too extensive and too recitative, disturbing the rhythm and flow of the text. It is highly peculiar that Chion – or the editor – has not chosen to disguise the many examples as notes, because they only serve to substantiate that one or another analytical point is not just idiographically but also nomothetically valid. As the book progresses, this element becomes more and more annoying and it is almost damaging to the second part, which loses much momentum and rhythm because of this. Despite its personal views and conceptions, the book's historical first part is in every respect an exemplary guide to film history as viewed from the perspective of sound. The composite second part, however, does not invite continuous reading in the same way. Instead, its chapters can be used and read as separate articles without any loss.

The book is also in another sense highly personal. Just as Chion's concepts generally are not substantiated by, or compared to, established theories from, for instance, cognitive psychology, perception theory, aesthetic theory, and so on, there are very few references to other film (music/sound) theoreticians, their thinking or their concepts. In this respect, *Film, A Sound Art* is not really an introduction to the field and its prominent concepts and sources. Other writers are mentioned, although generally just ephemerally and typically solely to discuss or question a certain point or notion.

The Glossary is a good tool, helping the reader to grasp Chion's many concepts and terms. However, it would be more functional if the book's references were not just implemented from the main text to the glossary, but also worked the other way around such that main text occurrences of a given glossary entry were also included. This is not the case and, regrettably, the entries are also not included in the separate, and otherwise extensive, index. By itself, the glossary is not complete. Searching for certain references is fruitless even though they appear in the main text (e.g., *banlieu*). It is a shame that the references in the index are imprecise (e.g., some of the references to Visconti).

Film, A Sound Art is a very interesting publication through which Chion strengthens his position as one of our time's most original writers and theoreticians striving to understand audio-visual communication. Its strength is its readability and enormous empirical foundation. Its weaknesses are its lack of theoretical explication and stringency, its failure to integrate other theoretical fields and, not least, its lack of references to other works and theories on sound in audio-visual media.

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