To Lisa
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee—Maureen Turim, Anastasia Ulanowicz, and Eric Kligerman—for guiding me through the process of researching and writing my dissertation. I would like to thank especially Barbara Mennel, my dissertation chair, for her super-human level of attentiveness, support, and critical acumen. Lastly, I would to acknowledge the contributions to this dissertation from original committee member Scott Nygren, who passed away in 2014. His work and life were incalculable influences upon me, as they were for anyone lucky enough to have had him as a teacher.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound in the History of Film</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical Sound Theory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Sound Theory</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward an Investigation of Cinematic Noise</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 REVEALING THE AUDIBLE WORLD: NOISE IN DZIGA VERTOV’S ENTHUSIASM</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing and Reproducing Reality Through Noise</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Historical Context of Enthusiasm</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Technology of Enthusiasm</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filming and Recording Enthusiasm</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Artificiality of Conventional Sound Realism</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Speech in Conventional Sound Realism</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissolving Language into Sound, Documenting Sound as Noise</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Noise Through Montage</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward a New Spectorial Perception Through Noise</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 YOU ARE NOT A UNITY: NOISE, MEDIA, AND LABOR IN JEAN-LUC GODARD’S TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER AND BRITISH SOUNDS</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise in Godard’s Direct Sound Recording and Sound Montage</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct and Montage Noise in Two or Three Things I Know About Her</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brechtian Political Representations of Noise and Work in British Sounds</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise and Political Self-Reflexivity</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THE SHOUTING THAT CONSTANTLY WASHES OVER US: NOISE, IDENTITY, MEDIA, AND POLITICS IN RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER’S IN A YEAR OF THIRTEEN MOONS AND THE THIRD GENERATION</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fassbinder, Maximalist Aesthetics, and Noise</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Year of Thirteen Moons, Capitalism, and Noise</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise Environments, Technological Mediation, and the Failure of Language</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Third Generation and Sonic Terrorism</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Documentary Noise</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL: NOISE, TRASH, AND THE FEMALE STAR IMAGE IN DAVID LYNCH’S ERASERHEAD AND INLAND EMPIRE ....... 130

A Different Type of Noisemaker .................................................................................. 130
Lynch’s Noise ............................................................................................................... 132
Noise, Trash, and Perception in Eraserhead ................................................................ 134
Noise, Trash, and the Female Image in Inland Empire .................................................. 149
Toward an Immersion/Distanciation Dialectic .............................................................. 158

6 CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................ 160

LIST OF REFERENCES ................................................................................................. 163

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .......................................................................................... 170
“Aural Assault: Noise, Perception, and Politics in the Cinema” argues for the aesthetic and political efficacy of noise in the cinema. Investigating the work of filmmakers who intentionally reproduce or create noise, “Aural Assault” demonstrates that the presence of this unorthodox sonic element in the cinema challenges conventional sound realism and its ideological underpinnings. Since the 1980s cinema sound studies has sought to redress the image-centered tendency of film theory and analysis. Yet sound studies scholars have traditionally prioritized sonic elements that reinforce the film industry’s conventional sound recording, mixing, and editing practices, which typically privilege human speech and soundtrack music over other sounds. This hierarchy fails to reflect the manner in which noise comprises much of our sonic reality, rendering human speech just one more aural element amidst many other, and frequently louder, sounds. Moreover, this hierarchy does not account for the mediation of recording technologies and techniques that are typically used to filter and mix out “unwanted” sonic phenomena.

“Aural Assault” argues that the films of Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and David Lynch feature noise not merely as a nose-thumbing
gesture to “proper” cinematic sound recording and representational procedures, but as a self-reflexive means of representing issues and phenomena rarely depicted in mainstream cinema: the mediating properties of the cinematic medium, the physical violence of industrial labor, the ideological confusion induced by media saturation, and the exploitation of women by the Hollywood filmmaking machine. “Aural Assault” examines the larger issues concerning the limitations of conventional cinematic language in representing political and social realities, the influence of sound technology upon cinematic aesthetics, and the various types of listening—and perception—activated by specific audio-visual strategies. Noise in the cinema is significant in this regard for challenging not only what can be represented on screen, but also how it can be represented.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Cinema was born into a world of noise. Conceived in inventors’ laboratories in the late nineteenth century, the first movie cameras and projectors debuted in societies still undergoing radical cultural, economic, and sonic transformations initiated by the Industrial Revolution. At that historical moment urban culture steadily eclipsed traditional agricultural life and work, with large numbers of families migrating from rural areas to seek employment in urban centers. With the ascension of the modern city came the explosion of modern noise: loud, abrasive, jarring, disruptive, and often physically debilitating auditory phenomena from fast trains, massive crowds, clamorous machines, and other acoustic products of modernity. In this regard cinema played a special role as both modern invention and modern art form, documenting, transforming, and reflecting upon the very cacophonous conditions in which it took part.

“Aural Assault” investigates and understands sonic noise in the cinema not as simply the opposite of “acceptable” sound, but as a multifaceted product of technological mediation that challenges conventional sound realism. I have coined the term “conventional sound realism” to categorize the unwritten rules of cinematic sound representation that accord aesthetic and narrative significance to images over auditory elements, to seamless audio editing and mixing over disruptive audio editing and mixing, and to vocal intelligibility over ambient sound. In challenging the tenets of conventional sound realism, sonic noiseforegrounds the machinations of illusionist cinematic language and encourages a spectatorial awareness of the cinema’s relationship to larger industrial, technological, and ideological practices.
In close readings of select films by Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and David Lynch, “Aural Assault” demonstrates the manner in which noise can be employed to document industrial and technological phenomena typically omitted from cinematic representation. It will also demonstrate how these directors create noise by combining and juxtaposing separate sound sources through experimental sound editing and mixing procedures. Through these sound strategies the directors of my study encourage the spectator to reflect on the political, social, economic, and ideological ramifications of cinema’s relationship to industrial labor and technological mediation. Their work connects the noise produced by modern industrial and capitalist societies to technological mediation, underscoring the ways technological mediation acts as a “channel” through which cinematic sounds—as well as visual phenomena—are rendered and reconfigured. In using noise to “reveal the audible worlds” (as per Vertov’s aspiration) of their own artistic strategies and devices, the filmmakers of this study foster a self-reflexivity borne of a political engagement with cinematic representation, perception, and reception.

This study does not simply rediscover noise as a valid sonic element for aesthetic production and contemplation—the musical avant-garde (starting with the Italian Futurists and most famously taken up by John Cage) has championed the artistic legitimacy of noise since the early twentieth century. Furthermore, as I will show later in Chapter 1, in recent years several cinema scholars have studied the intentional use of noise and its various attendant meanings in commercial and experimental filmmaking. Instead, “Aural Assault” analyzes strategies by directors who understand noise as central to representing industrial labor and technological mediation. For these directors,
making noise heard through the cinema is alone not enough to subvert conventional sound realism and its political, social, technological, and ideological ramifications. Rather, for these directors the cinema itself must be heard through noise, and through noise the cinema must be recognized and critiqued as an industrial and technological machine that re-renders, rather than objectively captures, reality.

Thus, to cinema and sound studies this dissertation contributes an analysis of noise as a sonic element for deconstructing conventional sound realism and foregrounding cinema’s industrial, technological, and ideological bases. Noise brings forth the materiality of sound—a materiality typically deemphasized in the reproduction and representation of ordinary sound elements—and the medium’s machinic properties. Even though scholars have looked at Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch’s films as reflections upon filmmaking, and even though these directors have, on less frequent occasion, been studied for their use of noise, “Aural Assault” analyzes their use of noise in connecting cinematic representation and perception to industrialization and technological mediation, in the process confronting cinema as a product of both.

**Sound in the History of Film**

In the first decades of the medium there initially existed a major obstacle preventing cinema from accurately capturing, reconfiguring, and allowing spectators to make sense of modern noise: synchronized sound recording and playback was as yet technically unfeasible. Cameramen, directors, and film exhibitors could thus only allude to the noise of the modern world. This they did at first by simply making visual records of people, objects, and situations that produced noise. Ironically, early filmmaking and film-watching situations were in many senses much noisier than those of today: for instance, a typical early twentieth century nickelodeon inspired and accommodated
participatory noise from audiences unhampered by institutional and cultural restrictions concerning spectatorial behavior and reception of the image (Châteauvert and Gaudreault 189).

Still, in the first three decades of the twentieth century filmmakers sought ways to imply or evoke noise through purely imagistic means. German Expressionist and Soviet Montage directors employed distortions of *mise-en-scène* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*’s warped, anti-realist set designs that “scream” madness) or violent shot juxtapositions (*October*’s jerking, rattling, jump-cutted machine gun) to suggest noise without the aid of actual synchronized recorded sound. Yet once synchronized recorded sound was made feasible at the end of the 1920s another setback for representing cinematic noise occurred. So many technical difficulties arose in achieving synch sound that the cinematographic innovations of cinema’s first three decades largely vanished amidst the film industry’s constant vigilance against mistakes in the production process. One of those mistakes was the intrusion of noise—usually from the cinematic apparatus itself (camera, lighting equipment, etc.)—onto the film soundtrack. Thus the inception of synchronized recorded sound brought on the banishment of noise from conventional modes of film production and exhibition.

Just as noise has been a largely neglected or marginalized element within cinema, so has noise been neglected or marginalized in cinematic theory and criticism. Because it arrived late to cinema, film sound itself was for a long time—after an initial but brief period of interest—considered by most scholars and filmmakers only a support for the image, and thus not a significant object of study or practice. But even after sound began to be extensively investigated and researched in the mid-1970s, cinematic noise
was still considered an unworthy topic. Long associated with errors or flaws in cinematic construction, and for even longer considered generally unpleasant auditory phenomena, noise was and still is largely thought of as mere sonic detritus rightly expelled from the seamless soundscapes of classically influenced cinema. The discussion of noise as a sonic element possessing a plethora of aesthetic applications, possibilities, and implications in relation to the cinematic image has only just begun.

In order to provide a theoretical foundation for “Aural Assault,” Chapter 1 will orient the reader as to the major trends and evolution of scholarship dedicated to sound in the cinema. I will then provide an overview of the few recent investigations of noise in cinema studies and how I depart from them. Finally, I will summarize my argument for the subversive role noise plays in select films by Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch; I will also address my argument’s relation to previous theories and findings in scholarship on sound and noise in cinema. Ultimately my study will discuss two types of noise: loud, harsh, abrasive, and disruptive sounds from industrial and technological sources in the real world, and noise created through the cinematic editing and mixing of individual aural components to create combinatory noise. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss both types of noise and thus investigate the manner in which Vertov and Godard reflect on both cinematic documentation and montage through their reproduction of industrial noise and through technologically mediated noise. Chapter 4 discusses Fassbinder’s reference to technologically mediated noise in the real world through sound montage. And Chapter 5 explores David Lynch’s construction of noise from synthesized and distorted sounds that are almost always detached from their sources. My study thus considers the alternation of documentary and mediated noises and then moves toward
a consideration of an exclusively mediated mode of noise representation. In this way I
study multiple yet related instances of cinematic aesthetics challenging conventional
sound realism and the ideology of “transparency” that dominants our understanding of
and interaction with technological mediation. In doing so I show how a through-line
exists in the work of Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch in their use of noise to
reflect upon the industrial and technological bases of cinematic production and
perception.

**Classical Sound Theory**

Theoretical and scholarly work on recorded sound in the cinema has radically
evolved since the late 1920s, when synchronized recorded sound first successfully
accompanied moving pictures. Initial major writings on sound in cinema belong to what
Elisabeth Weis and John Belton designate “classical sound theory,” which begins in the
first years of “the sound era” and ends in the late 1940s with the twilight of Hollywood's
golden age and the arrival of post-WWII film movements (the French New Wave) that
experimented extensively with sound recording and editing techniques (75). Some of
the most important filmmakers (Sergei Eisenstein, René Clair, Jean Epstein) and film
theorists (Rudolf Arnehim, Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer) of the silent era contributed
to classical sound theory, mostly by prescribing how recorded sound should accompany
moving pictures (if it should accompany them at all) so that cinema might add a new
creative dimension to its arsenal while retaining its unique place among the arts (76-81).
Weis and Belton point out that such advocacy for “cinematic specificity” was key to
classical sound theorists, most of whom had initially championed the newest artistic
medium for the distinctly modern manner—moving photographic pictures—in which it
expressed meaning and evoked emotion (75).
As I discuss in Chapter 2, in the 1928 manifesto “A Statement,” Soviet filmmakers Eisenstein, V.I. Pudovkin, and G.V. Alexandrov extol contrapuntal sound as the only means to harness cinema’s latest dimension while also maintaining the pure, expressive power of the image. Sound in “natural” pairing with the image—especially in the form of moving pictures that visually represent and play back the sound of talking people—lends a greater reality to what is seen on screen. According to Eisenstein and his co-authors, such sound negates the shot’s ideogrammatic qualities, which allow it to function as a block of material extracted from nature and placed into conflict with other abstract signs to create new and larger meanings. Contrapuntal sound prevents moving pictures and their potential expressivity from being sullied by synchronized aural information; it also creates new juxtapositions between images and sounds not directly related to (or caused by) one another (361). In his own manifestos, fellow Soviet director Dziga Vertov advocates contrapuntal sound juxtapositions but opposes Eisenstein and his co-authors’ hardline stance. Vertov claims an equal interest in other sound possibilities, including conventional sound-image pairings that emphasize the source of unconventional and abrasive sonic phenomena (105-106).

Compared to Eisenstein and his fellow countrymen, film theorists Arnheim, Balázs, and Kracauer are much more suspicious of synchronized recorded sound technology. In “A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film,” Arnheim believes in doing away with sound altogether to restore the expressivity of cinema’s purely visual language. According to him, “silent” films can actually refer to and evoke sound through images better than sound films (114). For Balázs, the only way to prevent sound from intruding on cinema’s universal language of facial expressivity is for
filmmakers to reproduce sonic phenomena to restore for the spectator-auditor’s ears sounds of nature, objects, and spaces that have become overly familiar and thus unnoticed (116-117). And in his essay “Dialogue and Sound,” Kracauer stands alone in preferring dialogue to any other cinematic sound, but he supports the use of dialogue only when the actual content of speech becomes incidental to the strange and sensual aspects of the human voice. Like Balázs, Kracauer sees sound technology affording an objective reproduction of speech that allows man to hear his intonations as an expressive auditory element in the same vein as sound effects and music (130-131).

While Arnheim, Balázs, and Kracauer differ from filmmakers Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Clair as well as from one another in their ideas concerning sound’s creative potential for cinema, these thinkers are united in their concern for the aspects and functions of cinema that distinguish it from the other arts, as well as the manner in which sound can either retain those aspects and functions or else extend them. For all of these thinkers the image remains cinema’s primary means of expression. Yet despite their image-oriented approaches and technological naïveté—and despite their failure to address the issue of cinematic noise—the classical sound theorists remain appreciative of the kinds of sounds that can and should belong in the cinema as well as fully conscious of the materiality of sound. Compared to the conventional concepts of sound representation that would soon be institutionalized by Hollywood cinema and imitated thereafter almost everywhere else, classical sound theory remains relatively open to a world of strange sounds, including sounds made strange because recorded and placed in new contexts.

**Modern Sound Theory**

Weis and Belton designate “modern sound theory” as that which does not start from the premise that synchronized recorded sound is a foreign element intruding on
the purity of the film image. Instead, modern sound theory starts with the premise that sound is as important an element as the image, constituting aesthetic possibilities and potentials of its own (145). Whereas Eisenstein, Arnheim, Balázs, and Kracauer evaluate sound cinema according to narrow criteria concerning cinema’s unique qualities, modern sound theorists Christian Metz, Rick Altman, and Mary Anne Doane evaluate sound according to how it is recorded and perceived in the cinema and how sound in combination with the image produces or reinforces particular ideological effects (146). For instance, rather than proceed from preconceived notions concerning what sound in cinema should be, Christian Metz in “Aural Objects” first asks what sound in cinema is. Metz understands sound in cinema as perceived in the same way sound is perceived in real life—that is, not as sound in and of itself, but as produced or generated by objects and people. There is, therefore, no such thing as the direct perception of sound, but rather perception of sound informed by an understanding of sound in context with the world in which it exists: “[T]he perceptual object is a constructed unity, socially constructed . . .” (159). Sound in cinema, according to Metz, must be studied as one more signifying element among other signifying, though usually visual, elements. Metz thus lays the groundwork for an investigation into the social and ideological factors that make noise—which can signify areas of industrial and technological production typically elided in mainstream filmmaking—constitute a threat to conventional modes of cinematic sound representation.

However, Metz also states that “auditory aspects, providing that the recording is well done, undergo no appreciable loss in relation to the corresponding sound in the real world” (161). Against this claim that the cinema offers a completely faithful
reproduction of sound—a claim echoed by Jean-Louis Baudry and Stanley Cavell, among others—Alan Williams shows in “Is Sound Recording Like a Language?” that sound in cinema is just as much a mediated representation as the visual image. He demonstrates that sound changes in quality, timbre, volume, etc. depending on where it is recorded, by what it is recorded, and through which devices cinema spectators/auditors listen to it (63). Rick Altman makes a similar point in “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound” and “Sound Space” concerning the wide range of material manifestations of recorded sound. He emphasizes the fact that, contrary to popular belief, sound recordings are representations and not unmanipulated or unrendered reproductions. Spatial representation is especially important in this regard: the space in which sound is recorded, and then the space in which sound is played back and heard, significantly informs sound gathering and perception (“Sound Space” 48). In summary, sound representation is to these scholars not an objective phenomenon, but rather a subjective experience or, as Altman has it, an “event” that is unique for every variable that influences its production and reception (“Material Heterogeneity” 19). These scholars thus lay the groundwork for more specific investigations into the way noise as an uncommon and unconventional sound element can make the viewer aware of the constructed and mediated nature of filmic representation as a whole. Metz, Williams, and Altman provide practical technical as well as theoretical categories and concepts for contending the inherent “unnaturalness” of conventional sound recording strategies. Their work implies noise can be as representable in the cinema as any other sound—that noise remains typically unheard
is a result of conventions concerning representational seamlessness and palatability, and not the result of the impossibility of its reproduction.

In this direction James Lastra offers a valuable historical understanding of the difference and divergence between sound reproduction and representation in *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity*. Expanding upon Williams and Altman’s ideas, Lastra explores the difficulties involved in Hollywood’s transition from silent to sound cinema. He investigates the aesthetic and ideological debates that attended the development of sound technologies from the nineteenth century to the early sound era, and provides perhaps the best definition of the unwritten rules that comprise what I call “conventional sound realism.” According to Lastra, engineers and inventors debated the competing purposes of sound technology during the emergence of sound recording and playback. Inscription and simulation constitute the two major modes of recording. Inscription involves the consciously mediated *representation* of sound; simulation involves the supposedly pure, unmediated *reproduction* of sound (22-23). The inscription-simulation and representation-reproduction binaries set parameters for sound engineers who made their way from the radio and record industries to the American film industry in the late 20s and early 30s. Simulation privileged sound reproduction as the best way to mimic what an ideally imagined auditor would hear if viewing a film’s action in real life. This mode forced engineers to record sound in accordance with changes in camera position, angle, etc., which often caused problems in offering intelligible dialogue or a consistent volume in both “foreground” and “background” sounds. For example, a cut from a close-up to a
medium shot of someone speaking would require a parallel sound transition from a louder, “closer” voice to a fainter, more distant one.

Sound engineers eventually—though often with great resistance—adjusted their initial criteria for sound recording to the classical continuity style, which, due to its need for maximum seamlessness and “invisibility,” was ill-suited to vocal unintelligibility and dynamic volume changes unless motivated by subjective character perception. But the criteria adjustment was undertaken when these engineers adjusted their notions of ideal audition to include selective perception and psychological naturalism (the idea that in real life people hear, or hear best, what they want or need to hear). Conspicuous technological interventions in sound quality were thus abandoned for transparent treatments of sound as influenced by the principles of the classical continuity system (138-43).

Lastra covers the aesthetic implications of the historical victory of sound representation over sound reproduction: sound intelligibility, especially the intelligibility of dialogue, trumped sound fidelity in order to accord with the spectator’s alignment and identification with the camera (140). In a similar vein, Mary Anne Doane understands cinematic representation as obfuscated by conventional sound cinema practices, resulting in the privileging of intelligibility (especially vocal intelligibility) as well as the inconspicuousness of the cinematic apparatus. According to Doane, conventional, Hollywood-led filmmaking uses blooping, carefully implemented fades and dissolves, artificial sound effects, and dubbed voices to preserve the illusion of a fully integrated, always intelligible reality that one becomes immersed in rather than critically evaluates (57-58). The filtering of unwanted sound to improve technological sound reproduction’s
signal-to-noise ratio plays a major role in reinforcing this illusion of reality (58). Doane also recognizes three distinct spaces in which cinematic sound operates: the fictional diegesis to which the sound “belongs,” the screen from which the sound appears to emanate, and the theater in which the sound resonates and is perceived. Through specific illusionistic techniques conventional cinematic practice conceals the signification and thus ideological implications of the final two spaces to produce a dominant and overwhelming realism in the first (56). Thus Doane advocates a deconstruction of conventional cinema’s illusory integration so that its dominant ideologies can be appropriately exposed and debunked. At stake for Doane, and at stake for the directors at the center of my study, is a dismantling of “natural” and “inherently true” ideologies reinforced by Hollywood’s illusionary, conventional naturalism. Also at stake is a dismantling of the falsely non-fragmented Hollywood spectator whose belief in his/her individual agency outside the influence of social and cultural space is buttressed by a unified cinematic spectacle (61). Rather than support a spectacle of unification and transparency, Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch use noise to make the viewer aware of the disparate elements that comprise the final cinematic product as well as the critical and self-reflexive work necessary for understanding this non-illusory, non-unified product.

**Toward an Investigation of Cinematic Noise**

Williams, Altman, Lastra, and Doane explore the institutionalization of technological, aesthetic, and ideological conventions within Hollywood cinema, but they rarely if ever touch upon the specific role noise has played as an impediment in the establishment of a fully illusory, integrated, and intelligible audio-visual experience. Even Michel Chion, whose *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* is perhaps the most
encyclopedic treatment of the possibilities and implications of recorded sound in cinema, barely mentions noise. Indeed, if noise is defined as “a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission,” then few scholars have analyzed the implications of noise in cinema (Attali 26). And while the role of sound in the work of Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch has been frequently studied, scholars often overlook these filmmakers’ use of noise in relation to specific sounds, images, and themes. This is unfortunate because even as Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch use noise to contest the hegemonic aesthetics and ideological implications of conventional sound realism, they also use noise to reflect on the particular connections among cinema, industry, and technological mediation.

Throughout this study I will make reference to, and enter into conversation with, scholars who have investigated the role of noise in the films of Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch. Meanwhile, other recent investigations of noise’s subversion of conventional cinematic language and reception draw different conclusions than do I concerning noise’s challenge to conventional sound realism and its ability to encourage a self-reflexive mode of spectatorship. In “Physical Spectatorship: Noise and Rape in *Irreversible,*” Laura Wilson analyzes noise in Gaspar Noé’s controversial art house film *Irreversible* (2001). Wilson argues that by inducing physical anxiety and nausea, the sub-bass frequencies that accompany the film’s infamous extended rape scene undermine any voyeuristic enjoyment spectators might take in viewing a character’s sexual violation. According to Wilson, Noé challenges cinematic representations of brutality by preventing spectators from identifying with the rapist, instead forcing them through the visceral pain inflicted by the soundtrack to identify and sympathize with the
physical suffering of the victim. Wilson makes insightful claims concerning noise’s ability to undermine the voyeuristic tendencies built into conventional viewing situations, but Noé’s noise-based sound strategies have little in common with the systematic political and self-reflexive uses of noise by Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch. Indeed, I claim that the subversive effects of these filmmakers’ works hinge on noise’s distancing, as well as its visceral, characteristics.

Benjamin Halligan’s “‘As If from the Sky’: Divine and Secular Dramaturgies of Noise” discusses aural noise in Hollywood films about religious and/or metaphysical subject matter: Altered States (1980), Wolfen (1981), 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988). In order to imply the appearance of godly power—and at the same time adhere to the Judeo-Christian prohibition against visual representations of the divine—these films employ noise to refer to realms beyond human perception or comprehension. Replacing that which cannot be properly spoken of or seen, noise represses linguistic and visual representations of the divine at the same time as it re-emerges from aesthetic repression: since noise is typically barred from mainstream cinema, its rare appearance at such moments of metaphysical crises makes it a fitting signifier of the holy of holies. Halligan argues that beyond attending the aporetic cinematic events, “noise itself remains the aporia of the disciplines of ‘film studies’” (115). Halligan’s claims about the repressed status of noise in the cinema parallel my own. But like Wilson, Halligan overlooks noise’s subversive potential for distanciation in favor of its overwhelming visceral properties.

Rob Gawthrop’s “Thunder and Lightning: Noise, Aesthetics and Audio-Visual Avant-Garde Practice” is a somewhat haphazard overview of auditory noise in
experimental art, including experimental cinema, from the last century. He briefly mentions Stan Brakhage’s use of buzzing, crackling, sped-up tape, and yelping noises in *Fire of Waters* (1965) in order to (quoting Jacques Rancière) "represent the unrepresentable" of thunder and lightning—why these natural phenomena are unrepresentable remains sketchily explicated. He also provides a gloss on Eisenstein and Alexandrov's *Romance Sentimentale* (1930) and Vertov's *Enthusiasm* by explaining that these films went against the norm of early sound film production by recording sound on location “to construct an audio-visual symphony . . . The use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound and the play between noise, signification and music was, and still is, revolutionary” (168). *Enthusiasm* is explored at greater length, not so much in regard to noise as to sound-picture combinations and dialectics.

Gawthrop also touches upon the challenge Andy Warhol's *Kitchen* (1965) poses to the normative ideological relationship established in the cinema between a singular, dominant speaker (through actors' intelligible dialogue) and a silenced mass (the film’s spectators). *Kitchen* questions this relationship by rendering its dialogue unintelligible for a lengthy duration as characters noisily grind coffee. Finally, two pages are devoted to the films of Jeff Keen, whose soundtracks feature distorted vocals, exaggerated sound effects, hisses, clicks, thumps generated by manipulations on magnetic tape, and white noise created by electronic synthesizers. Gawthrop identifies several forms of noise in Keen’s cinema, a virtual compendium of the noises available to the cinematic experience itself: “incidental, functional, dissonant, cacophonous, of specific signification, and combinations of all frequencies” (177). While Gawthrop’s study might be valuable in pointing to instances of noise in various films, it is too desultory to aid in a
thorough analysis of noise in work containing consistent political and self-reflexive
goals.

Melissa Ragona also explores the presence of auditory noise in the avant-garde in “Hidden Noise: Strategies of Sound Montage in the Films of Hollis Frampton.” Influenced by Eisenstein’s theories of and experiments with contrapuntal sound, Frampton employs vertical montage in films like Zorns Lemma (1970) to critique “rather than reinforc[e] the linear, syntactic, meaning-producing properties of narrative film . . .” (98). In other films like Critical Mass (1971), unconventional sound editing frequently renders the dialogue between a bickering couple unintelligible so that “Frampton rethinks the phenomenological project in terms of a theatrical position that dissolves conventions of dramatic narrative by reducing speech to noise” (109). The work of Frampton and other avant-garde filmmakers such as Michael Snow and Martin Arnold is certainly instructive for representing sonic phenomena and creating sound-image juxtaptospositions beyond those that typically comprise story-oriented filmmaking. However, my study explores work more deeply entrenched in, and yet also in subversive opposition to, conventional narrative cinema: Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch each enter into conversation with conventional sound realism even as they challenge its techniques and principles through the use of noise.

The above studies investigate a singular intention or effect of noise in the cinema: either as a visceral sonic element or as a tool for deconstructing the cinematic experience. Through sustained investigations of select films by Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch, my study analyzes the aesthetic potential of noise in cinema both as a visceral and distancing sonic element, and does so to explore the ideological
challenge noise poses to conventional sound representations and sound-image relations. In Chapter 2 I investigate Vertov’s *Enthusiasm*, his first sound film, by exploring noise in relation to the edicts of his Soviet filmmaking rivals as well as the constrictions of conventional sound realism. In this light Vertov’s theoretical understanding and critical practice with noise emerges as a logical outgrowth of his fascination with sound recording technology’s ability to deconstruct sound representation and to document the sonic textures and phenomena of industrial labor. Furthermore, Vertov’s dual approach to cinematic sound corresponds to his advocacy for cinema’s dialectical status as an apparatus for documentary reportage and technological amplification, extension, and manipulation of perception. As I will demonstrate in several close readings of *Enthusiasm*, at certain moments Vertov uses noise to index reality and document the sonic effects of advanced technology and industry that were almost entirely elided from conventional cinematic representations of the modern world. However, at other moments Vertov uses noise as a synthetic element composed out of jarring, discordant, and thoroughly anti-realistic sound montage techniques, and in this way calls attention to the illusory nature of conventional cinematic representation itself.

Vertov employs noise to deconstruct and expose the artifice of sound and image relationships. I thus depart from the conclusions of John MacKay, who has interpreted noise in *Enthusiasm* as advocating an exclusively Socialist perception. Instead I read Vertov’s employment of noise as engaging a self-reflexive mode of perception that questions the inherent transparency of ideological communication through cinematic representation. I also depart from the conclusions of Oksana Bulgakowa, who reads
Vertov’s use of noise as purely symphonic. In contrast, I read Vertov’s noise as encouraging a self-reflexive perceptual experience of audio-visual material rather than a purely musical experience that should be appreciated and evaluated according to traditional Western artistic standards. In *Enthusiasm* neither perception nor political consciousness are spearheaded by audio-visual knowledge and mastery—instead they are continuously challenged, contradicted, resisted, and elaborated by noise.

In Chapter 3 I discuss Jean-Luc Godard’s employment of noise in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967) and *British Sounds* (1970) as an index of urban construction and industrial labor as well as a synthetic creation unique to technological mediation. As pointed out by Alan Williams, Godard aims for documentary realism in opposition to conventional, classical realism, and does so by refusing to mix his soundtracks so that they privilege intelligible dialogue. Instead Godard creates a democratic soundtrack in which all sonic elements are mixed equally, resulting in cinematic sound environments in which ambient sounds overwhelm conversation and create a veritable cacophony of aural information. Williams also points out that Godard foregrounds noise as an isolated sonic element that can call attention to the artificial construction of cinematic soundtracks and cinema as a whole.

Thus Vertov’s sonic investigations are taken up and advanced by Godard, whose *Two or Three Things* foregrounds construction and urban noises as documents of political, social, and industrial upheaval in Gaullist France, even as the film also foregrounds the mediation of such recordings in both his own work and that of conventional media. In a similar vein, *British Sounds* documents noise in a British automobile plant and creates noise on its own soundtrack with additional voiceovers.
With this two-pronged approach Godard forges links between mediating recording devices and factory-style machine production, both of which contain technological structures molded by the socio-economic forces of late capitalism.

In Chapter 4 I investigate noise in two films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in relation to the media commodification and reification. I analyze *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978) and *The Third Generation* (1979) to demonstrate how Fassbinder puts into play simultaneous and often contradictory sound signifiers from a multitude of diegetic and extra-diegetic sources, creating a chaos of aural information. The overwhelming dissonance of this information challenges the manner in which one should “read” an audio-visual palimpsest. I argue that Fassbinder’s noisescapes represent identity fragmentation through contemporary media’s dissolution of ideological stability and cohesion. Fassbinder’s creation of noise based on simultaneous sound sources not only challenges the tenets of conventional sound realism but also links the auditory chaos of contemporary media to the logic of capitalistic exploitation and ideological reification. Thus in this chapter I move away from issues concerning noise and direct, documentary sound recording to explore the role of technologically mediated noise in critiquing the marginalization of self-expression and the commodification of political rebellion through capitalist media.

In Chapter 5 I argue that in *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Inland Empire* (2006) David Lynch uses loud, harsh, and complex noises in tandem with the “visual noise” of his images to immerse the viewer in fictional worlds while also forcing the viewer to remain continually aware of the constructed nature of those worlds. As defined by Anne Jerslev, visual noise in Lynch’s films takes the form of images made complicated and
disorienting through distortion, blurring, superimposition, opacity, abstraction, and dense tactile textures ("Visual ‘Noise’ in David Lynch’s Lady Blue Shanghai [2010]"). Evoking haptic encounters with the image through his close-up, abstract, and often distorted filming of materials and bodies (i.e., visuals made palpable via superimpositions, low shutter speeds, etc.), Lynch creates fully absorbing visual fields that also distance the viewer from conventional verisimilitude. As an extension of and complement to visual noise, Lynch’s auditory noise collapses the distance between the screen and the viewer by creating a visceral sensorial experience.

For this chapter I employ the work of Salome Voegelin, who argues that noise foregrounds the materiality of phenomena by immersing the viewer in an experience of perception that intensely impacts the physical body. I also use Voegelin’s work to show that such perceptive immersion need not come at the expense of critical and cognitive understanding. In Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art, Voegelin demonstrates how noise resists any semiotic meaning that might enable the perceiver to focus exclusively his or her attention on the object of perception at the expense of his or her own subjectivity (45-46). Through noise Lynch creates a considerable gap in Eraserhead between the spectator’s critical, distanced experience with audio-visual information on the one hand and the protagonist’s immersed experience on the other. I then show how Inland Empire uses mediated noise to encourage the spectator to take a critical position in relation to the Hollywood female star image and persona in particular and the conventional cinematic spectacle in general.
CHAPTER 2
REVEALING THE AUDIBLE WORLD: NOISE IN DZIGA VERTOV’S ENTHUSIASM

Representing and Reproducing Reality Through Noise

Before he became a pioneer of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s and 30s, Dziga Vertov thought of and experimented with art in almost exclusively sonic terms. For all its aesthetic variety and rivalry, Soviet cinema of Vertov’s era was guided by a common mission: to fashion drama and ideas through exclusively imagistic means instead of those imitative of literature, theater, or music.1 Yet sound proved the instigating element in Vertov’s ultimate gravitation toward cinema. The filmmaker explains as much in a personal recollection:

It began early in life. With the writing of fantastic novels (The Iron Hand, Uprising in Mexico). With short essays (“Whaling,” “Fishing”). With long poems (Masha). With epigrams and satirical verse (“Purishkevich,” “The Girl with Freckles”). It then turned into an enthusiasm for editing shorthand records, gramophone recordings, into a special interest in the possibility of documentary sound recording. Into experiments in recording, with words and letters, the noise of a waterfall, the sounds of a lumbermill, etc. And one day in the spring of 1918 . . . returning from a train station. There lingered in my ears the sighs and rumble of the departing train . . . someone’s swearing . . . a kiss . . . someone’s exclamation . . . laughter, a whistle, voices, the ringing of the station bell, the puffing of the locomotive . . . whispers, cries, farewells . . . And thoughts while walking: I must get a piece of equipment that won’t describe, but will record, photograph these sounds. Otherwise it’s impossible to organize, edit them. They rush past, like time. But the movie camera, perhaps? Record the visible. . . . Organize not the audible, but the visible world. Perhaps that’s the way out? (40)

Those studying Vertov’s early sound films often quote this reminiscence, but few remark upon the implications of the filmmaker’s questions concerning cinema’s ability to

---

1 Although Eisenstein came to cinema by way of the theater and Vertov, as I shall show, came to cinema by way of poetry and literature, both directors as well as contemporaries like Dovzhenko and Pudovkin were primarily interested in utilizing and emphasizing a technique they saw as unique to cinema: the juxtaposition of disparate images. While they found analogies to montage in older artforms, these directors insisted that cinema should not depend on verbal text, traditional acting, or sound cues in order to generate emotional and intellectual meaning.
duplicate and refashion the world. Seeking a “way out” of technological reproduction bereft of political critique (apolitical documentary) and creative representation bereft of perceptual experimentation and subversion (escapist aestheticism), Vertov placed at the forefront of his artistic concerns the expansion of perception and political awareness through cinema.

In this sense, noise in *Enthusiasm* (1931)—Vertov’s first and most radical sound feature—performs a special role in foregrounding the conditions and functions of technological reproduction and representation. By reproducing industrial noise and transforming “natural” sounds into noise, Vertov extends human perception of sonic phenomena in a confrontation with industrial production, labor, and its resulting products, including cinema itself. That Vertov performed such self-reflexive investigations in the context of cinema’s recent reinvention as a medium of recorded images and sounds is no accident: *Enthusiasm* is the first cinematic primer on thinking through the aesthetic possibilities and political responsibilities of a new technologically-dependent audio-visual language.

*Enthusiasm* contains three distinct sections. The first is stylistically different from the succeeding two, and acts as a sort of prologue or “overture” by announcing the film’s aesthetic and political intentions. In it, a young woman listens to an electronic transmitter through which she communicates with a male voice representing “Radio Leningrad.” Often the sounds in this section are revealed as issuing from the transmitter. The main narrative of the overture concerns the conversion of an Orthodox church into a workers’ hall by the townspeople of Leningrad. This section therefore equates a new perceptual experience at the cinema—in which recorded sounds are
heard in conjunction with recorded images—to the transition from the technologically backwards Czarist Russia to the technologically advancing Soviet Union. The second section documents the mines and foundries of the Donbas, or Don Basin, which was Ukraine’s iron and coal capital. This section documents the large variety of noises produced by industrial machinery and tools. The third and shortest section depicts agricultural farming and harvesting in the Don Basin. A similar focus on machine noise is present in this section as well.

The final two sections of *Enthusiasm* promote Stalin’s Five-Year Plan, which mandated the mass collectivization of industry and agriculture in order to speed the Soviet Union toward socialist self-sufficiency. The film thus reinforces the Stalinist line that the objectives of the Five-Year Plan were met within the first four years, though it unsurprisingly neglects to mention the vast human cost (arrests of political opponents, the dislocation of entire regions of peasants) of this economic and social upheaval (MacKay 29). In this sense *Enthusiasm* serves as a propaganda film, and can be seen as championing Stalinism, or at the very least glossing over its dire consequences.

Keeping *Enthusiasm*’s function as propaganda in mind, I argue that the film undermines the very propagandistic elements it at first appears to employ so blindly. This chapter will demonstrate how *Enthusiasm*’s complex and self-aware use of noise challenges what I call conventional sound realism—in this way the film reveals how cinematic conventions reinforce illusionistic, manipulative representations of reality.

The film accomplishes a self-reflexive critique of its structures and strategies not only in the highly self-conscious representation of noise in its overture section, but also in its reproduction of the sounds of the Donbas foundries in the second section. Though
they differ significantly from one another, these two approaches toward sound recording
and editing render modern technology and industry aurally “visible.” In a survey of
Enthusiasm’s sound strategies, Lucy Fischer points to the film’s invocation of a
revelatory and self-conscious mode of spectatorship:

Vertov in his radical concern with mass consciousness wants the viewer of
his documentary films to be continually aware that he is watching a film.
He wants to break the mesmeric spell of the cinema to ensure its didactic
powers. . . . For Vertov the people must have knowledge and not belief;
and to ensure this, one must subvert the power of the cinematic illusion.
(251)

This encapsulation of Vertov’s interest in cinematic self-reflexivity extends to
Enthusiasm’s unprecedented reproduction and representation of noise. Bearing the
traces of reproduced and manipulated sound, noise in Enthusiasm encourages the
viewer2 to question the modern work of technologically reproduced art in terms of its
ideological functions, modes of production, strategies of shaping and influencing
perception, and status as an ocularcentric medium. Such challenges serve as
stimulating provocations that force the viewer to understand, as well as viscerally
experience, a modern sensorial realm of ubiquitous industrial and technological sound.

In positing Enthusiasm’s noise as a self-critical, anti-illusionistic tool for
unmasking the deceptive language of cinematic realism, I enter into conversation with
John MacKay and Okana Bulgakowa. MacKay argues that with Enthusiasm Vertov
“hopes to establish cinema as a kind of surrogate public space or . . . a ‘sensory agora,’
wherein the perceptual worlds of different segments of Soviet society—as registered by

2 Though tempted to use the term “auditor-spectator” because it more specifically and accurately
describes the subject’s full sensorial experience in encountering Enthusiasm, I have elected to use the
terms “viewer” or “spectator” due to their familiarity to most readers and due to the unspoken implication
that film viewers/spectators are also film listeners.
the camera and sound recording apparatus—could at once be experienced, contrasted, compared, and ultimately grasped as familiar elements of an expanding sensorium” (4). He goes on:

Cinema as “agent of convergence” is less an instrument for moving through and absorbing “the universe” as such, and more a device through which different worlds might be brought into the same perceptual space. In *Enthusiasm*, the worlds of labor (industrial sound) and of cultural production (music and mass spectacle) “converge” in an effort to make the one comprehensible—and even enjoyable—to the other. (17)

Vertov’s project, according to MacKay, hinges on an education of the viewer in the sensory lives of those working in trades and environments of which they would otherwise remain unaware. Essential to this educational process, technology mediates different experiences—perceived as informational as well as sonic noise—into socially intelligible events.

Bulgakowa concentrates on the “music and mass spectacle” aspects of the film, arguing that Vertov organizes *Enthusiasm*’s seemingly disruptive and chaotic noises into rhythmically sensible, pleasurable structures. She writes, “*Enthusiasm* follows a musical form and is thus related to a very specific medium. Vertov structures the film as a symphony, in this case as program music, with a narrative that employs the principles of repetition, variation, transposition, contrast, and counterpoint of visual and acoustic leitmotivs” (219-20). Bulgakowa goes on to provide an overview of the theoretical, technological, and political context of *Enthusiasm* in order to analyze the film’s soundtrack according to formalist properties and procedures.

I am in agreement with MacKay that Vertov aims for an extension and expansion of conventional perception for political ends, and with Bulgakowa that *Enthusiasm* is no Dada-esque exercise in cacophonic randomness but instead a meticulously executed
work of sonic (as well as visual) art. Thus, I will extensively refer to her historical and technological overview of the production of *Enthusiasm* in order to provide context for the film’s unique aesthetic. But I wish to qualify MacKay’s claim that *Enthusiasm*’s radical use of noise “help[s] make otherwise incomprehensible material understandable on more familiar terms” and that the film “becomes a space where viewers experience a sensory expansion that is at once a cognitive and a social expansion, a place for encountering other citizens in terms of what they experience every day” (17). I also wish to depart from Bulgakowa’s musical or structural recuperation of noise: while Bulgakowa seeks to reestablish bourgeois notions of musicality for *Enthusiasm*’s soundtrack, I argue that it is precisely Vertov’s use of noise in the film that produces an audio-visual experience irreducible to previous sound frameworks, as well as one highly critical of conventional frameworks as they relate to cinematic structure.

Vertov employs unconventional cinematic sound devices—on both the reproduction and representation ends of the aesthetic spectrum—in order to disrupt conventional auditory language. Noise thus acts as a tool of dislocation that engenders a critical awareness of cinematic communication as illusory and highly manipulative. In my view, *Enthusiasm* does not only immerse the newly educated viewer in a novel form of musicality, as in Bulgakowa’s reading of the film, or a technologically enhanced vision of the utopian Socialist network, as in MacKay’s reading. Rather, the film makes the viewer aware of the mediated nature of technological reproduction by using noise as a disruptive reminder of such technology’s slippages and shortcomings in reproducing and representing the external world, including industry, labor, and sound itself.

Noise held great significance for Vertov because of its similarities to montage:
built from a combination of multiple sound sources or else produced by the technological modulation of recorded sound, noise can be created by manipulation or constituted by elements that on their own or in their original state were intelligible and pleasant. By using noise to disrupt seamless sound editing as well as sound-image matching, Vertov challenges the naturalization and concealment of technological mediation in cinematic representation, subverting the cultural and social conventions upon which standard technological mediation is based. Furthermore, by privileging the reproduction of industrial noise—or machine “speech”—against conventional sound realism’s privileging of the human voice, Enthusiasm confronts viewers with the typically concealed processes and aesthetic parameters of sound recording technology. Vertov also employs industrial and technological noise to emphasize the visceral dimension, rather than the linguistic or verbal dimension, of sound. By morphing language into noise Enthusiasm jettisons linguistic communication in order to challenge the standard conception, and practical employment, of sound as a mere addition to silent cinema. In this conception, cinematic sound reinforces the dominance of the image as the medium’s primary channel for communicating information. For Vertov, both aural and visual tracks possess equally expressive potential: his experimentation with sound-image relationships by way of auditory noise encourages a radical re-thinking and re-positioning of cinema as a hybrid medium rather than a “single-channel,” ocularcentric one.

The remainder of Chapter 2 explores the connections between the historical context, technology, and production of Enthusiasm; the ideological implications behind conventional cinematic sound principles, including those related to the human voice;
Vertov’s early sound influences, theories, and experiments in transforming language into sound and documenting noise; and montage theory. These sections trace the political, practical, and aesthetic conventions Vertov challenged by intentionally employing noise as a significant cinematic element. I then explain how Vertov used noise in *Enthusiasm* to realize long-held theories concerning language, sound documentation, and the creation of new aesthetic elements through the juxtaposition and manipulation of pre-existing ones. Finally, each section provides in-depth readings of individual scenes, shots, and sound-image relations from *Enthusiasm*. These readings demonstrate Vertov’s ability to question conventional sound theory and aesthetics, particularly in his multivalent use of noise. They also show Vertov’s interest in the reproduction of noise in the external world as well as the representation of noise as created by the cinema itself. ³

**The Historical Context of Enthusiasm**

*Enthusiasm* marked the culmination of an intensely fraught period during which Vertov spent considerable time and energy testing the workability of mobile sound recording. Not coincidentally, this was also the period in which Vertov fell precipitously from grace within the politically charged Soviet film industry, which was moving increasingly away from the “formalist” cinema he was accused of making. Four years

³ It is worth noting that questions remain concerning the original relationship between *Enthusiasm*’s sounds and images due to the destruction of the film’s original soundtrack. In 1977 Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka restored the film to its ostensible original state, but according to Bulgakowa this restoration is incomplete (224). Kubelka claims to have restored the film by following Vertov’s intentions for tight synchronization between sound and image, though he admits to doing so “without any written or other references,” and “only on the basis that [he] was a filmmaker who understood Vertov’s way of composing” (Fischer 36). Bulgakowa maintains that “[w]e do not really know which passages [from *Enthusiasm*] should be asynchronous,” and that “[t]he version suggested by the prints from the Russian film archive Gosfilmofond and from La Cinémathèque Française is . . . much more radical” than Kubelka’s restoration (224). I have had access to only the Kubelka-restored version of *Enthusiasm*, and have based my observations and analyses on it.
after his firing from the Moscow Film Committee in 1926, Vertov was dismissed from the VUFKU, the Pan-Ukranian Committee of Cinema and Photography. Vertov’s refusal to renounce or curtail his experimentation only reinforced his status as persona non grata within an industry that even in its most liberal periods championed fiction over documentary filmmaking, let alone the kind of experimental documentary that had flourished in the 1920s with the rise of the montage school of the avant-garde.

To make matters even more difficult, within an already contentious industry cinematic sound was the latest issue to divide filmmakers, critics, and bureaucratic overseers concerning its technical feasibility, aesthetic function, and right to exist. This was largely due to the administrative chaos and bureaucratic disorganization that made sound’s arrival onto Soviet movie screens an unnecessarily tumultuous and awkward undertaking. By the early 1930s sound cinema had only just arrived to the impoverished and technologically stagnant Soviet Union, while for four years the American film industry had developed and mastered sync-sound recording. In her study of the Soviet film industry’s awkward transition into the sound era, Natalie Ryabchikova provides an apt summary of the major factors that created this situation: confusing and inefficient studio reorganization; an indecisive approach toward studying and learning from American and European sound technology; and, especially, inadequate funding of domestic cinematic invention (86). Overall, the lack of advanced technology in the Soviet Union cinema made sound increasingly vulnerable to the hardened agendas of dominant political and artistic forces. These forces were, first, the Stalin regime, which at The Party Conference on Cinema of March 1928 made official its support of the conventional, anti-experimental, and “intelligible” style and content of Socialist Realism;
and, second, the acclaimed and entrenched montage-oriented fiction filmmakers who had staked their art solely to the power of the image (Titus 38).

Opposition to The Party Conference and its dictates came naturally to Vertov, who saw the sound conventions of Socialist Realism as illusionistic and a mere prop for dialogue-driven fiction films. Opposition to the montagists proved more complicated. In 1928, Vertov’s aesthetic opponent Sergei Eisenstein co-signed, along with V.I. Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov, a now famous manifesto titled “Statement on Sound.” In it these filmmakers strictly advocated “[o]nly the contrapuntal use of sound vis-à-vis the visual fragment of montage” because such use “will open up new possibilities for the development and perfection of montage” (361; italics in the original). At first glance such a stance would appear close to Vertov’s own aims concerning montage and its radical juxtaposition of disparate cinematic elements. Yet Vertov contested Eisenstein and his co-authors’ statement with his own declaration:

Declarations on the necessity for nonsynchronization of the visible and audible . . . don’t amount to a hill of beans . . . . In both sound and silent cinema we sharply distinguish between only two types of film: documentary (with real dialogue, sound, etc.) and acted (with dialogue, sound, etc., that are artificial, specially created for the filming).

Neither synchronization nor asynchronization of the visible with the audible is at all obligatory, either for documentary or for acted films. Sound and silent shots are both edited according to the same principles and can coincide, not coincide, or blend with one another in various, essential combinations. We should also completely reject the absurd confusion involved in dividing films according to the categories of talking, noise, or sound. (Kino-Eye 105-06)

To Eisenstein and others in his circle, sound signaled an inherently limited cinematic element: if not used for “vertical montage” (the nonsynchronous collision of sound and image), sound would only further buttress the conservative illusionism of “filmed
theater,” of which Socialist Realism was the native representative. In his survey of Soviet experiments with “graphic sound” (the name given to direct tampering with magnetic or celluloid soundtracks), Nikolai Izvolov also discusses the larger trends of the Soviet avant-garde. In the following quotation he explains the holding pattern Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov effectively promoted in grafting simplistic forms of montage onto recorded sound:

The asynchrony of image and sound as an aesthetic principle, promulgated in [“Statement”], reduced sound to the status of a mere constituent, no more than a mechanical device, in the overall montage structure of the film. This method—a fundamentally conservative one, aimed at preserving the earlier achievements of montage in the silent era—was appropriate for the very brief transitional period from silent to sound film. Its aesthetic potential hardly exceeded that of monochrome color separation plates. (33)

In contrast, Vertov placed himself in an unpopular alternative position, as explained by Masha Salazkina: “Many experimental strands of artistic practices [during the early sound era of Soviet cinema] placed sound at their conceptual center rather than merely testing and marking its limitations; however, they could not easily fit under the explanatory category of ‘montage’ or ‘counterpoint’” (7). Rather than simply apply basic montage principles to sound, Vertov believed the potential of montage to be entirely contextual—that is, montage could only be effective depending on the specific audio-visual information it was called upon to communicate (Fischer 254-55). While in some cases Enthusiasm realizes Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov’s concept of vertical montage, the film mainly emphasizes the juxtaposition of environmental noises and editing suite-manufactured ones, and does so through a complex matrix of sound image-juxtapositions involving both synchronization and asynchronization as well as diegetic and extra-diegetic sound, on-screen and off-screen sound, and multiple
combinations of and transitions among these.

The overture of *Enthusiasm* deals heavily in complex and category-resistant sound-image relationships. For instance, an early scene featuring the film’s own musical conductor offers simultaneous yet incongruous sounds. The orchestral music ends once the conductor finishes waving his baton, but a gesture of his hand “activates” the sound of tolling bells. Furthermore, the bells mix with the continuing sound of a metronomic pulse. Here Vertov challenges the tenuous—and arbitrary—distinction between diegetic and extra-diegetic sound that had been established in the silent era through live musical accompaniment, which acted as cinema’s primary extra-diegetic sound element. Though currently diegetic because they play at the conductor’s command, the bells force a similar sound from earlier in the film to become retroactively extra-diegetic since there is no way they could have emerged from both the orchestra performance and the documentary footage of various views of the church they earlier accompanied. The ambiguous diegetic/extra-diegetic status of the bells emphasizes their role as filmic material rather than clear, uninterrupted sound emitted from an on-screen source.

Furthermore, the noise created from the combination of the bells and the metronomic pulse highlights each sound’s materiality, the physical qualities of sonic phenomena that act corporeally upon the human senses. The metronomic pulse, for instance, disrupts, disturbs, and interferes with the orchestral music, creating a harsh, material dissonance. In contrast, the pulse and the bells are sonically alike. They counter one another with similarly stiff rhythms and percussive timbres—their combination does not create an incongruity between a pleasant and an unpleasant sound, but instead a jarring, arrhythmic cacophony greater than the material effect each
sound achieves on its own.

The following examples of sound-image pairings prove that Vertov did not hold vertical montage, or the diametrical opposition of aural and visual information, as an absolutely superior aesthetic principle. For Vertov any and all sound principles can be applied to a film, and Vertov demonstrates aesthetic openness by comparing soundtrack noise with moments of relative sound simplicity. For instance, *Enthusiasm*’s prologue comes to an abrupt halt with a shot of tolling bells. This shot is accompanied on the soundtrack by nothing but tolling bells, the diegetic sound one would conventionally expect to hear. Besides the brief moment from earlier in the film in which the young woman using a transmitter turns a knob that emits an electronic squeak, the shot of the bells is the first in the film where a sound and its source synchronize so that the sound appears to issue from the source. The bells become clearly communicated and defined in the absence of any other superimposed sounds that would make it part of an abrasive noisescrape. The shot thus works against the principle of vertical montage, the Eisensteinian concept by which sound contrasts with the image. The next shot—a return to genuflecting churchgoers accompanied by the lone sound of a church choir—acts in much the same manner. Though this sound has less of a direct relation to the diegesis than the sound of the tolling bells, it acts in a similar vein by aligning an image with a strongly associated sound. Thus the shot of the churchgoers and its accompanying sound recall shots from earlier in the film in which the sound of bells and chanting monks accompanied shots of the church and its worshippers. Though the sound sources were visually absent in the shots, the connotations between sound and image made their pairing aesthetically conventional, especially in comparison to many
of the prologue’s complex noise combinations.

The Technology of Enthusiasm

Technological limitations initially presented even stronger obstacles to Vertov in realizing his radical ideas than did the Soviet avant-garde’s dictates concerning vertical montage. Impatient for sound to arrive to the Soviet film industry, Vertov had already stated in 1929 that “[t]he theoretical and practical work of the ‘kinocs-radiocs’ . . . [has] run ahead of their technical possibilities and for a long time have been awaiting a technical basis . . .” (qtd. in Tsivian 355). The “theoretical and practical work” that comprised the mission of Vertov and his Kinoks (an ideologically likeminded team of documentary directors, cinematographers, and editors) included an intimate engagement with quotidian life and labor taking place outside the bounds of recording studios. Such “life-facts,” as Vertov deemed them, could only receive sufficient cinematic representation via technical advances in mobile sync-sound recording. The functionality of such technology was hardly a given, however, and presented a major risk in time, money, and reputation. In the eyes of Stalinist authorities any interest in expanding and innovating sound technology was suspect, as Ryabchikova notes: “The questions of content and form were subordinated [by Soviet authorities] to ideology and were not identical to the earlier problems of ‘methodology.’ If anything, technology became closer to aesthetics, since they were both related to form and, according to the logic of the times, to formalism” (95). Innovations of and improvements to cinematic technology spelled potential change in film production. Sound technology represented to Soviet authorities an addition to silent cinema that only increased its realism—any other modifications sound technology could enact upon production practices and aesthetics might induce unwanted artistic experimentation and subversion.
Meanwhile, Soviet film critics such as Ippolit Sokolov—who had bitterly quarreled with Vertov over the latter’s *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926)—were already sharpening their knives, predicting that advancements in technology that promised filmmakers sound recording beyond the studio would produce nothing but “caterwauling” (Hicks 72). Believing that the recording of actual industrial noises would prove impossible, others “doubted that one could record and reproduce such noises and proposed to create them artificially in the studio, arguing that these noises were not ‘audiogenic’ [conducive to being captured in a sufficient manner by audio technology]” (Bulgakowa 220). But Vertov could not put mobile sync-sound aside for others to test and pioneer, explicitly stating his desire to “move over from the velvet coffin of the soundless studio and plunge into the terrible thunder and iron clanging of the Donbas” (qtd. in Fischer 258). For Vertov, on-location sound recording was not a matter of novelty or technological superiority over his directorial and critical rivals. Rather, it was essential for his practice, providing him with a new yet long-awaited tool for documenting the phenomena of the external world.

**Filming and Recording Enthusiasm**

Vertov’s original interest in sound led him to experiment with pre-cinematic sound technology. Soviet cinema historian Seth Feldman explains Vertov’s frustration with such technology: “Working with a Pathephone wax disc recorder, Vertov attempted to record sounds both inside and outside the studio, and to re-edit them into entirely new compositions. . . . The result obtained with the equipment available in 1917 must have been discouraging. As a result, the stage was set for the frustrated young artist to try his hand at another medium” (*A Guide to References and Resources* 2). Starting in 1929, after the completion and release of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Vertov’s initial
work with sound film for what would become *Enthusiasm* proceeded in two distinct phases. In the first he shot silent footage of the conversion of a church into a worker’s hall. In order to provide sound accompaniment to this footage Vertov enlisted composer Nikolai Timofeev to organize into a score a collection of previously recorded noises, including that of whistles, cuckoo clocks, and metronomes (Bulgakowa 222). Technological manipulations of pitch, speed, and sound placement transformed and distorted these noises, which were eventually edited to create an intricate soundtrack for the overture of *Enthusiasm* (222). This was accomplished in a rigorous manner: “The score defined which noises would be used as leitmotivs and established a precise structure of repeated patterns of different lengths in analogy to musical measures. The images in the sequence were to follow the rhythm of the sound score” (222-23). Such methodical precision kept with Vertov’s strategy of organizing disparate sound elements into an intricate structure to encourage spectators to reflect upon the complexity of technologically mediated phenomena.

The overture represents the pinnacle of the intricacy and precision of *Enthusiasm*’s sound design. At one point the cumulative noise created by the mixing of the tolling bells and the metronomic pulse becomes even more discomfiting with the addition of a church organ. These sounds play over shots of the young woman with the transmitter, which are intercut with shots of genuflecting churchgoers. Here the pleasant sounds of conventional music are associated with the dull conformity of the religiously servile. And yet the music becomes more fanciful, as if to mock the solemnity of the churchgoers’ devotions. Moreover, the change in the tone of the church organ brings with it a different quality of noise—the jarring, jerky metronomic pulse and tolling bells
now contrast with the smoothly flowing and sweet-sounding organ. The incongruity initiated by the combination of the pulse and the orchestral music has returned. At this point, Vertov has firmly established the dizzying complexity of *Enthusiasm*’s aural dimension, one that cannot be reduced to conventional or even rudimentary self-contained rules concerning diegetic and extra-diegetic sound, on-screen and off-screen sound, image-sound association, etc. More than musicality or aesthetic intricacy, the guiding principle for the film’s sound design is self-reflexivity: the above sequence’s complex and shifting instances of sound and sound-image montage foreground the materiality of recorded sound and the inherent manipulability of phenomena captured by technological reproduction.

The second phase of Vertov’s work in sound cinema involved direct recording:

In early March Vertov took a crash course at the lab of inventor Alexander Shorin, a key figure in Soviet sound recording who developed special portable equipment for Vertov’s use. Shorin’s system of radio microphones allowed him to record actual urban sounds: industrial noises in the harbor, sounds of the railroad and the railway station, streets, trams, the Eastern Church service, and the May First rally. (Bulgakowa 223)

Tested successfully by Vertov in Leningrad, Shorin’s mobile sound recording device was brought to Kharkov in June 1930 and then Donbas in July so that Vertov could record the sounds of heavy industrial processes and labor (223). Bulgakowa provides an apt summary of the sound objects and the various methods used by Vertov to record them:

The team ‘filmed’ noises in the mines and foundries: whistles, lorries, shunting engines, sirens—all very noisy objects. . . . Vertov used three types of recording without giving preference to any single method. He recorded image and sound separately, image and sound synchronically but with different apparatuses (image with the silent camera and sound with the sound recording apparatus), and image and sound simultaneously. (223)
Arguably the most controversial aspect of *Enthusiasm*'s technical history involved the circumstances surrounding its exhibition. Originally scheduled for release in October 1930, *Enthusiasm* finally reached the Soviet public on April 1, 1931. Technical difficulties involving theatrical sound equipment caused the delay and persisted into the overdue first run of the film, contributing to its early reputation as an unlistenable barrage. Bulgakowa describes the projection issues as relating directly to noise, with insufficient loudspeakers failing to translate *Enthusiasm*'s extreme range of sounds (223-24). Predictably, Soviet critics derided the film as an assault upon the senses, an intentionally abrasive work that did little to convince spectators of the dignity and honor of industrial labor as per the dictates of Socialist Realism. However, foreign critics able to view the film in superior theaters and through superior technology came away with the exact opposite impression (224).

This is not to say that even with superior theatrical sound equipment Vertov did not test the pain threshold of his audience, as Thorold Dickinson and Catherine De la Roche describe:

> When Vertov attended the presentation of his first sound film, *Enthusiasm*, to the Film Society of London on November 15, 1931, he insisted on controlling the sound projection. During the rehearsal he kept it at normal level, but at the performance, flanked on either side by the sound manager of the Tivoli Theatre and an officer of the Society, he raised the volume at climaxes to an ear-splitting level. Begged to desist he refused and finished the performance fighting for possession of the instrument of control, while the building seemed to tremble with the flood of noise coming from behind the screen. (23)

Fischer concludes that with his penchant for intense noise levels Vertov intended to remind viewers of the lived, physical *experience* of sound within a particular theatrical space. *Enthusiasm*'s critical reception provides a lesson in the ideological stakes of
cinematic sound representation: rather than attend to the ways technological reproduction transforms sonic phenomena—the one possible positive result of *Enthusiasm*’s disastrous run in Soviet theaters—spectators cast blame on a film for failing to accord with conventional sound representation.

Overall, Vertov represents qualities, timbres, and volumes of sound typically unheard in movie theaters by confronting spectators with the expansive and non-“naturalistic” role of the cinematic apparatus in generating such noises—whether in capturing them from the external world or synthesizing them from found sound elements and through technological manipulation. As Annette Michelson writes in her introduction to Vertov’s collected writings, “In the preparation of *Enthusiasm*, his first sound film, [Vertov] shifted the focus of research from exploring the interaction of synchronous and asynchronous sound to distinguishing the fictive from the evidential, the composed from the concrete, entirely redefining the problems and possibilities created by the new compositional parameters of cinema” (*Kino-Eye* xxv). The “problems and possibilities” Vertov addresses with his editing of natural and distorted noises largely center on the aural filtration and censorship put into effect by “conventional sound realism,” an ideologically rigid form of representation Vertov hoped to counteract through noise’s more adventurous sonic palette.

**The Artificiality of Conventional Sound Realism**

In reflecting on the possibilities of technologically mediated sound and in documenting the sonic phenomena of the Donbas, Vertov re-positioned industrial and machine noise as equally significant as the sound of voices and musical instruments. Vertov did so not simply to offer an unusual take on aural beauty, but in order to confront spectators with the fact that conventionally melodic or communicative sound
was just that, a convention of bourgeois taste that would have the sounds of the factory strictly separated from, and marginalized by, the sounds of the concert hall or drawing room. Such aesthetic segregation enacted the kind of division of life from art that Vertov detested; the unwritten rules governing early sound recording and editing reinforced that division.

As summarized in Chapter 1, James Lastra effectively defines these basic unwritten rules. He explains how early American sound engineers quickly discovered that sound simulation, or the supposedly unmediated reproduction of sound, could not work with continuity editing. Sound simulation calls attention to changes in camera position and angle as sound is adjusted in volume and quality to accord with what the spectator would hear from characters and environments when they are audio-viewed from various vantage points—a direct violation of the principle of seamlessness and inconspicuousness that guides continuity editing. Furthermore, sound simulation often fosters unintelligible dialogue and dynamic volume changes, making sound editing just as conspicuous as imagistic editing. Thus sound engineers worked, and continue to work, according to unwritten rules guided by sound inscription, or the conscious mediation of sound. Here sound mediation is not to be foregrounded but instead justified according to selective perception and psychological naturalism. No matter what the distance of the camera from the subject, dialogue should be made consistently intelligible to the viewer—and thus unchanging in volume as well as unobstructed by noise—because in real life we want to hear what others are saying (Lastra 138).

The overture of *Enthusiasm* habitually attacks and questions conventional sound realism with its loud, strange, and disturbing industrial sounds. An example occurs in
the shots that follow the synchronized (and quasi-synchronized) shots of the tolling bells and genuflecting worshippers. The first shot returns to the tolling bells, with an accompanying sound of bells noticeably warped to a lower pitch. The next several shots return to the genuflecting worshippers while also adding a new visual element—ragged, bumbling drunks. Both the first shot of the bells and the next several of the drunks are accompanied by the distorted sound of a church choir, which at one point is aurally superimposed with a low frequency drone.

With the shot of the bells and their warped sound Vertov creates an incongruity between image and sound by manipulating a formerly sonorous and identifiable sonic element into something atonal and less identifiable—the recognition of the sound as that of bells persists only because of the evidential image. As if to divorce sound even more radically from the image, the next series of shots consists of people (the worshippers) who are associated with the choir that is now warped on the soundtrack. The shots of the bells and the drunks transform sonorous and identifiable sound into noise to disrupt a conventional image-sound link; in the succeeding shots of the worshippers, a sonorous and identifiable sound is transformed into noise to trouble the associations created and reinforced by a conventional image-sound link. A conventional link might associate the devoted worshippers and the drunks with sounds from a religious ceremony that is meant to save their souls. In Vertov’s hands, however, the distorted sound of the choir disturbs the representation of behavior associated with both unthinking superstition and addiction. Here Vertov demonstrates how noise alters the fixity of sound-image associations when violating conventional sound realism’s dictates concerning sound intelligibility and dynamism.
After a couple of shots featuring, first, a bell (with tolling on the soundtrack) and, second, drunks (with a choir on the soundtrack), Vertov introduces a new shot: a steam valve positioned behind a set of telephone lines. The sound that accompanies this shot is a whistle like that of a train, but seems to have been cut into smaller aural fragments interspersed with brief moments of silence. Technological intervention appears responsible for producing the fragmented sound—the stuttering seems artificial, as if it were a mechanical intrusion upon a flowing and uninterrupted “natural” sound. The extremely brief silences that disrupt the communication of this sound exacerbate the visceral or material impact created by the reverberatingly shrill whistle. Again, noise subverts the seamlessness of conventional sound realism—both in the uninterrupted continuity of sound and in the “natural” matching of that sound to its on-screen source—to call attention to its constructedness.

The Role of Speech in Conventional Sound Realism

Mary Ann Doane’s “Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing” explains how conventional sound realism, in accordance with classical continuity editing, privileges the human voice above all other sounds. Sound mixing and editing that aims for a conventional and entirely stylized “realism” effectively creates a hierarchy of sonic phenomena: “Because the microphone itself . . . is not sufficiently selective, because it does not guarantee that the ideological values accorded to sounds and their relationships will be observed in the recording, hierarchization is undertaken and standardized in the mixing process” (58). Over and above sound effects and music, dialogue assumes the summit of this hierarchy because it “reinforces, in [Jean-Louis] Comolli’s terms, the identification of ‘discourse and destiny’ in Hollywood fictions and the concept of the ‘individual as master of speech’” (58). According to Doane, bourgeois
capitalist ideology manifests itself in conventional sound realism’s preservation of “the status of speech as an individual property right—subject only to a manipulation which is not discernible” (58). Doane’s essay demonstrates how instead of foregrounding technological mediation’s work on the subject’s vocal emanations, conventional sound realism maintains the illusion that sound representation—like visual representation—faithfully and objectively transcribes external phenomena, preserving without interference the subject’s verbal expressions of her personhood. Rather than present the subject’s act of communication as an encounter with technology that transforms and colors that communication, conventional sound realism disassociates the subject from the cultural and social factors that shape any act of mediation. The subject’s ability to be heard, and her privilege of being heard, through recording technology is disguised as inevitable, a naturally occurring circumstance. Thus conventional sound realism perpetuates the chimera of the neutral subject, existing outside historical time and social space.

In Enthusiasm Vertov attempts to acclimate the viewer to the specific meaning of individual industrial noises by creating a transition from human speech to machine “speech.” Recognizing the sheer density, richness, and diversity of his collected sound objects, Vertov subtly re-casts the role of human sound communication. In the beginning of the Donbas section the human voice synchs with its source so that it appears unmediated—a preparatory move to accustom viewers to the film’s new emphasis on sound reproduction. But as industrial noise becomes the focus of this sound reproduction the human voice begins to possess diminished communicative power. For instance, after a shot of the mechanical sifting of rocks (with matching
sound), a shot of black leader follows, accompanied by the voice of a male orator. One might argue the “blank shot” encourages the viewer to pay greater attention to the quality of the orator’s voice. Far more significant, however, is Vertov’s de-emphasis—if not subversion—of the voice’s documentary and propagandistic authority. In contrast to the industrial noises, the narration varies little throughout the Donbas section—“An affair of honor!” “A Point of Glory!” “An Affair of Courage and Heroism!”—and so the words of the narrator become monotonous filler, just as the black leader monotonously “fills in” for visually substantive shots.

*Enthusiasm*’s machine “speech” practically and effectively opposes the hierarchical dominance of the individual human voice in conventional sound realism. Other scholars have seen in Vertov’s sound practices evidence of the fulfillment of more lofty artistic and social goals. For instance, MacKay contends that sound montage in *Enthusiasm* engenders an expanded perception that makes the individual viewer cognizant of the whole of the social sphere, including the “noise” generated by labor that is usually ignored in popular media as well as everyday life (4-5). This argument corresponds to Vertov’s desire to create what the filmmaker himself called “an army of cine-observers and cine-correspondents with the aim of moving away from the authorship of a single person to mass authorship with the aim of organizing a montage vision—not an accidental but a necessary and sufficient overview of the world every few hours” (qtd. in Hicks 17-18). Putting such goals into even more ambitious terms, David Tomas summarizes Vertov’s ultimate aim as a “total, global reflexively conscious sensory ecology [that] would not only reach into the depths of every citizen’s mind in an unprecedented way . . . [but] would reformat and reprogram each mind in the name of a
collective critically self-conscious panhuman Mind [sic]” (63). According to MacKay and Tomas, Vertov attempts to connect the spectator with other viewers, subjects, and filmmakers through a technological network of machines and its resultant sounds and images. As Tomas suggests, through such a network a mass consciousness subsumes the individual experience of cinema.

Vertov never realized a mass authorship, collectivity, or “panhuman Mind” through his work and methods of production: the film’s enactment of a posthuman consciousness through the mediated processing of the entire social body and its informational output remains largely inchoate. More immediate is *Enthusiasm*’s challenge to vocal sound representation, which exposes and reflects upon the inherent technological mediation of cinematic sound recording. In addition, Vertov equalizes sound in relation to the image rather than subordinating sound to a more dominant image, a move reflected in his refusal to create an early sound film merely demonstrative of the filmmaker’s ability to synchronize vocal emanations with actors’ moving lips. In making this move Vertov challenged the ocularcentrism of sound cinema, and through *Enthusiasm* he championed a hybrid medium in which two distinct functions—the playback of moving photographic images and the playback of recorded sound—stand on equal footing in communicative and evocative power. Investigating Vertov’s pre-cinematic sound experiments will further reveal the centrality of anti-verbal sonic textures to his anti-ocularcentric theory and practice.

**Dissolving Language into Sound, Documenting Sound as Noise**

*Enthusiasm*’s de-emphasis of the individual voice in favor of a machine voice has roots in Vertov’s interest in recording technology’s unique relationship to language as sound. It behooves us to return to the lengthy, fascinating reminiscence from Vertov that
begins Chapter 2 in order to understand these roots. First, Vertov mentions literature as his initial artistic medium of choice, but then admits to deconstructing the materials of literary expression in order to create non-verbal soundscapes ("Into experiments in recording, with words and letters, the noise of a waterfall, the sounds of a lumbermill, etc."). In order to record industrial noise Vertov would eventually embrace technology in the form of early sound recording devices. Even then, Vertov’s respect for the evidentiary quality of sound reproduction did not move him toward a narrow understanding of technology’s functions.

Well before his discovery of cinema, Vertov engaged in four types of experiments in what he later called “rhythmic montage of verbal and acoustic material”: word montage; noise montage; poems recited to music by Aleksandr Skriabin, the Symbolist composer whose theories on synesthesia sought to blur music and words; and “the Laboratory of Hearing,” a proposed scientific approach toward understanding, recreating, and re-shaping sound (Tsivian 23). Like his avant-garde forefathers, Vertov desired with these experiments to break words and letters down into fragments of raw sound rather than leave them intact as instruments of linguistic communication. Stripped of its inculcated semiotics, language could be reconstituted into non-verbal noise. In this regard Vlada Petric, in a detailed study of the Vertov’s European avant-garde roots, notes the influence on Vertov’s experiments of “the linguistic theories and experiments done by the Soviet formalists, especially their investigation of poetic structure, the musical function of words, and the subliminal impact of syntax” (Constructivism in Film 25). As with so many early twentieth century avant-garde artists, Vertov sought the
dissolution of language to pursue its extra-linguistic aesthetic properties and possibilities.

The sound experiments of *musique concrete* composers, the Italian and Russian Futurists, and other groups within the early twentieth century avant-garde—all of whom strongly evoked or captured sound from real world environments—also influenced the young Vertov to gravitate toward machine noise rather than human speech. Bulgakowa references Georges Sadoul’s groundbreaking Vertov scholarship in making the connection between the filmmaker’s early sound theories/experiments and F.T. Marinetti’s *mots en liberté*, Balilla Pratella’s 1911 Futurist manifesto, Luigi Russolo’s 1913 *Art of Noises*, the Futurist Bruitists’ performances, and “Guillaume Apollinaire’s ideas and practice of words-noises recordings from 1914” (237). As the first artists to use noise in their art, the Italian Futurists employed traditional musical instruments and also invented new ones so that they could mimic the harsh and abrasive noises of the modern industrial world. The Futurists may have inspired Vertov, but he disagreed with their primary focus on imitating noise. Likewise, he criticized Walter Ruttmann’s *Melody of the World* (1929) because the “sound part of the film was composed of music and artificially imitated sounds” (qtd. in Bulgakowa 221). Vertov’s interest in the sonic documents of industrial labor and human-machine interaction led to his use of noise as opposed to traditional sound elements, including human speech. He would not imitate industrial sound for documentary-oriented sound recording: only the concrete aural evidence of industry—no matter how loud and abrasive—could provide such direct documentation.

---

4 Sadoul’s work remains untranslated.
A reading of the Donbas sequence reveals *Enthusiasm*’s most striking examples of direct sound documentation and increasing emphasis on industrial noise in place of human speech. Unlike the overture, this section features no intercutting to representations of technological sound mediation—instead, Vertov wants the viewer to attend to the sound qualities enabled by sound reproduction. According to Fischer, this shift in focus (which also extends to the film’s third “agricultural” section) accords with a new elaboration on the “semantic use of sound,” or sound in its role in the communication of linguistic meaning (256, italics in the original). A shot in which a party organizer makes a speech about mobilizing for the Five-Year Plan illuminates the contrast between the overture and the Donbas section. Synchronized sound allows the man’s words to match the movements of his mouth, thus making it appear as if the sound directly issues from the image. A sound-image relationship such as this is illusory, a convention of sound realism. Western ideology claims that the human voice possesses inherent communicative value as a sonic extension of the free individual. The shot of the man speaking references this ideology, and provides a contrast to subsequent shots portraying the communicative value of industrial noise rather than human speech. These noises become increasingly fixed to their specific machine sources.

The first two shots of the Donbas foundries feature, respectively, workers walking into a mine and workers performing calisthenics. Over these shots a warped drone and a light percussive sound play on the soundtrack. Light whistling and then a heavy rattling accompany shots of a horse in a mine and, subsequently, a worker in a mine. As with the two preceding shots, the sounds heard over these two shots cannot be
precisely attributed to what is shown in the frame—the sounds are too ambiguous and the shots do not depict anything that might synch with the content of the soundtrack. This sequence is then twice repeated with subtle variations of shot and sound content, maintaining the basic pattern of (1) a drone and percussive sound accompanying shots of workers walking into the mine and workers exercising, and then (2) a light whistling and a truck rattling accompanying shots inside the mine.

The first instance of a precisely synchronized sound-image relationship arrives with a shot of the large wheels of a rotating belt and its attendant clanging and increasingly high-pitched whirring. As if to reinforce this synchronization, the next shot depicts a supervisor shouting commands, accompanied by the expected diegetic speech. Succeeding shots twice repeat similar content (rotating belt, commanding supervisor) to establish a new pattern and impart the ascendance of synchronized sound.

The next sequence consists mostly of synchronized shots in which loud, abrasive, and grating industrial noises emanate from their machine sources: the halting motor of a conveyer belt as workers sort through rocks, the rumbling sound of a locomotive as it passes over railroad tracks, the lurching, grinding, and percussive clang of cranes, dozers, and hooks as they perform their work. One could continue with such a list if it weren’t impossible to drown in written detail of such a large variety of noises. The overwhelming sensuousness of industrial noise—a sensuousness that cannot be adequately or neatly translated into language—embodies the entire purpose of Enthusiasm’s sound reproduction: to portray in a visceral manner technological processes.
Creating Noise Through Montage

For Vertov, the documentation of sound preceded the manipulation of sound through recording technologies, though eventually these different modes of technological mediation would merge and intertwine: “I must get a piece of equipment that won't describe, but will record, photograph these sounds. Otherwise it's impossible to organize, edit them” (40). A dual approach toward the documentation and arrangement of sound would become the overriding strategy of Vertov’s unique brand of experimental documentary filmmaking, in which “life caught unawares” by the motion picture camera becomes imbued with meaning through rapid and complex montage. According to Vertov, the filmmaker’s observations through a camera, and his ability to organize these recorded observations with editing equipment, render him a man-machine hybrid:

Into the jumble of life resolutely enter: 1. kino-eye [the Russian word “kino” means “cinema”], challenging the human eye’s visual representation of the world and offering its own “I see,” and 2. the kino-editor, organizing the minutes of the life-structure seen this way for the first time. (Kino-Eye 21; italics in the original)

Bulgakowa similarly notes an affinity between the Russian Futurists’ notion of zaum or “transrationality”—a sort of universal language transcending culturally specific codes of communication—and Vertovian montage’s ability to extend, expand, and amplify human vision by abolishing the limitations of “time, space, causality, [and] speed” (219). Petric sees a Futurist influence in Vertov’s later “theory of intervals,” in which the juxtaposition of two shots containing movement within the frame constitutes the single most powerful unit of montage. Note the manner in which a Futurist concept of sound provides the model for this theory: “Vertov and [Elizaveta] Svilova [the director’s wife and editor]
achieved this [in *The Man with the Movie Camera*] by systematically reducing shot length from longer ‘pieces’ to one-frame shots, so that gradually the shots begin to function like musical phrases analogous to the ‘laddered’ verse of the Futurist poets, which was meant to affect the reader not only contextually, but also on an auditory level” (“Dziga Vertov as Theorist” 35). In *Enthusiasm*, his follow-up to *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Vertov would engage this “auditory level” directly through the reproduction and representation of noise.

For Vertov noise was the sonic equivalent of montage: several individual sound sources or else technological mediated sounds forming a cacophonous, multilayered aural whole. Noise as sound-montage recurs throughout the overture of *Enthusiasm*. For example, at one point the metronomic pulse becomes overlaid with orchestral music. But any expectation of a conventional soundtrack dominated by an extra-diegetic music score is thwarted by an abrupt cut to a bronzed Tsarist crown (part of the exterior of a church) accompanied by a sound cut to tolling bells. The next shot returns to the woman at the radio transmitter, accompanied by an abrupt sound cut to the metronomic pulse and orchestral music. The succeeding shot presents a high angle of a Christ statue as well as the sound of the tolling bells, and thus the viewer might assume that Vertov has begun to juxtapose two distinct sonic worlds through parallel editing: on one hand the overlaid metronomic pulse and orchestral music, both heard or created by the woman at the transmitter; on the other hand the presumably extra-diegetic sound of tolling bells attendant with various images of the church (and, in the case of the crown, the Tsarist regime). Whether the depicted church is actually the source of the tolling bells is not as important as the fact that the tolling bells possess direct associations with
the Russian Orthodox Church and its rituals; contrarily, the metronomic pulse and orchestral music possess no inherent association with sound recording and transmission. Thus Vertov contrasts the aesthetic and ideological flexibility of ontologically ambiguous sounds to the aesthetic and ideological recalcitrance of identifiable sounds. Mixing the melodious orchestral music with the mechanical, grating metronomic pulse proves noise to be not only the combination of dissimilar sounds, but also a fluid signifier that can comment on or appear to issue from attendant images whenever and wherever possible. The tolling bells, contrarily, prove to be the sole property of the obsolete authoritarian institutions with which they are associated.

This example from *Enthusiasm* demonstrates how the dissonance of constructed or manipulated noise foregrounds the illusion of the cinematic medium’s reproduction of sound. Vertov never thought that montage, despite its ability to encourage extra-human perception, should fashion an overwhelming spectacle disabling the spectator’s critical faculties. Instead, for Vertov the finished film must always bear traces of its construction, revealing the artifice of cinema and foregrounding the manner in which the medium encourages specific modes of perception and knowledge. In this sense the theories and principles of the Constructivist movement heavily influenced Vertov. More populist and directly concerned with the political impact of art than their Futurist predecessors, the Constructivists proposed that the whole of a performance or artwork emerges from conspicuously distinct—as opposed to seamlessly integrated—components and elements (*Constructivism in Film* 7). Those encountering a Constructivist work of art become aware of its process of manufacture, of its status as a product of labor rather than a naturally existing item intended for thoughtless
consumption. Similarly, through its distorted and/or combinatory sound qualities, constructed or manipulated noise could point the viewer to the technological basis of cinematic sound.

Constructivist principles guide the entirety of *Enthusiasm*, especially after the woman at the transmitter makes her final appearance toward the end of the overture. As a meta-cinematic representative of technologically mediated communication, the woman is replaced by a movie theater interior being progressively filled by spectators. Jeremy Hicks suggests in his survey of Vertov’s oeuvre that the overture of *Enthusiasm* “present[s] the spectator with a perceptual process, a gradual emergence into sense . . . with the woman wearing earphones, who appears only in this section, drawing our attention to the act of listening itself” (73). If this is so, then the theater acts as a meta-cinematic representation that calls more attention to the act of looking than the act of listening. And yet, the sounds of a garbled radio transmission and the singing of “The Internationale” accompany the final shot of the theater, which has filled to capacity. In this shot Vertov brings together, first, self-reflexive depictions of technological mediation and viewer reception and, second, an instance of asynchronization in which the combination of sound and image forges a circuit of between mediator and receptor. Technological mediation qualifies even “The Internationale,” associating the Socialist workers’ anthem with media production and dissemination rather than the natural expression of the people.

Unlike the Constructivists, “Vertov was less inclined to restrict his filmmaking to . . . a factual approach and instead strove to achieve a balance between an authentic representation and ‘aesthetic’ reconstruction of the external world” (Petric 8). To use
Petric’s terms, montage transforms Vertov’s “life-facts” into technologically mobilized and ideologically organized (according to the higher socio-economic principles of Socialism) “film-facts,” even as the latter correspond to the elements of life originally captured by the camera (8). Vertovian cinema forms an ontological-epistemological dialectic—that is, a synthesis of reality and its aesthetic reconfiguration—through a process MacKay describes as the “twin bases of ‘kino-eye’ practice—the strict reliance on ‘documentary’ materials and a radicalization of montage in the direction of absolute perceptual mobility—as the coexisting halves of an apparently unstable cinematic aesthetic” (4). These “twin bases” comprise the experimental nature of Vertovian documentary film. The photographic basis of cinema creates a strong, lifelike connection between the world depicted on screen and the real world itself—what Neale calls “an existential link . . . between sign and referent, representation and reality” (20). MacKay accurately summarizes how the anti-realistic images generated from montage and other camera and editing devices (superimpositions, reverse-motion, etc.) make the final cinematic product surpass ontological links to the real world. Similarly, through technological mediation (sound mixing and editing) and Constructivist and montage strategies, sonic documents become aesthetic noise objects. Furthermore, Vertov qualifies the “radicalization of montage in the direction of absolute perceptual mobility” through a continuous self-reflexive representation of cinema’s inherent mediation rather than technological perfection.

Taking into account Constructivist principles allows one to see the other side of Bulgakowa’s assessment of sound montage in Enthusiasm as a form of musical organization of noise. She writes:
The principles that Vertov developed by transforming noises into a musical symphony were based on montage and relied on varying the speed of recorded sounds in post-production. Montage allowed him to combine established quantities of selected and recorded noises, which he treated like leitmotivs (to use traditional terminology) or samples (to use a more recent term). He could cut them, put them in loops, and combine them according to principles of musical composition. The repetitive structure of the rondo form was particularly appealing to Vertov. By varying the recording speed, he was able to change the sound pitch and introduce gradation similar to ascending or descending scales. (221-22)

As much as he emphasizes noise’s similarities to music and its lexicon (rondo forms, ascending and descending scales), Vertov emphasizes the foreignness of noise as an aesthetic element comprised of disparate, familiar elements. By generating startling and discordant material from that which is sonically pleasant and accessible, Vertov highlights the artificial “objectness” of all material recorded and represented through technological mediation. While *Enthusiasm* invites repeat viewings (and listenings) for the spectator to understand and appreciate the complex patterning of its noises, the film also upends conventions governing cinematic sound representation to encourage a self-reflexive perceptual experience of audio-visual language. By both building noise and breaking apart quotidian sounds (especially the human voice) into noise through technological mediation, Vertov’s film reveals in abrasive and discomfiting fashion the processes and parts that constitute the illusion of cinematic integrity and seamlessness.

**Toward a New Spectorial Perception Through Noise**

In Chapter 2 I have demonstrated how *Enthusiasm* remains a landmark in the history of cinema not only for advancing location sound recording and for applying *musique concrete*-like sound sampling and manipulation to film, but also for encouraging through the use of noise a new and still audacious perceptual engagement on the part of its viewers. *Enthusiasm*’s noise reflects upon cinema’s complex
relationship to the technological reproduction and representation of reality. By recording and creating noise in *Enthusiasm*, Vertov makes even the most seemingly excessive and superfluous aspects of reality—sonic detritus—occasions for reflecting upon the technological and social construction of meaning. In Chapter 3 I investigate how Jean-Luc Godard continues Vertov’s noise strategies by using documentary sound recordings and montage sound representations to investigate technological mediation’s relationship to urban re-structuring and factory labor.
Noise in Godard’s Direct Sound Recording and Sound Montage

After Enthusiasm and up until the end of his life Dziga Vertov curtailed his extensive experimentation with cinematic noise in order to comply with the dictates of Socialist Realism. While in the first few decades of the sound era several major directors—including Rouben Mamoulian, Orson Welles, and Sergei Eisenstein—experimented within cinema’s sonic dimension, none of these figures followed Vertov’s path in using noise to investigate cinema’s relationship to larger technological, social, and industrial practices.

In this regard the films of Jean-Luc Godard stand as groundbreaking. More than any other figure in the decades following the establishment of synchronized recorded sound, Godard has thoroughly and consistently subverted conventional sound-image relations by incorporating noise into his aesthetic repertoire and thematic preoccupations. Godard has made sound that otherwise seemed virtually verboten according to the unwritten rules of cinematic practice an essential component of his work, and has legitimized noise as an artistically vital element in questioning the social, cultural, aesthetic, and political forces that influence cinematic representation. Indeed, Godard uses noise not only to critique conventional sound-image relationships, but also to investigate cinematic representations of media communications and industrial labor. Starting in the late 1960s, when his films became explicitly politically, Godard made sure that the subversive tendencies of noise would carry through in both content and form.
Yet in their relatively conventional soundtracks and timid engagements with social and political issues, Godard’s early films contain only hints of the radical strategies that would follow. In the shorts that precede and roughly coincide with the watershed feature-length debut *Breathless* (1960) and its successor, *Le Petit Soldat* (1963), Godard largely adheres to synchronized recorded sound that privileges dialogue and extra-diegetic music above all other auditory elements. He eschews direct sound recording in favor of post-production overdubs that create illusionary sound-image pairings, and the only incongruous matches between sound and image occur at the level of generic parody, as in *Une histoire d’eau’s [A History of Water] (1961) refusal of documentary tradition in its substitution of a philosophical and digressive voiceover for a factual and authoritative one.

In comparison to its legendary and massively influential attacks on conventional camerawork, editing, characterization, and narrative structure, *Breathless* itself contains a relative lack of sonic experimentation. Direct sound, a hallmark of Godard’s later work, remains noticeably absent from the film, while the sound mix privileges dialogue and an extra-diegetic jazz score by Martial Solal over its other sound elements per industry standard. However, a few moments from the film foreshadow Godard’s later interest in auditory noise as a central component of a radical cinematic vocabulary. In the celebrated opening sequence, for instance, a gunshot resounds with a conspicuously loud volume and distorted timbre. Its incongruity with the image makes this noise exceedingly strange—while in the preceding shot the protagonist Michel aims a gun out a car window, the shot that accompanies the firing noise depicts passing trees and the

---

5 The film was actually produced in 1960 but blocked from distribution for three years due to censorship from the French government.
sky as seen through the window. In addition to the action presumably occurring off-screen, the gunshot’s excessively noisy qualities suggest that Michel hasn’t pulled the trigger at all but rather has only imagined doing so. By divorcing sound from image and exaggerating the noisy qualities of an already violent sound, Godard counters conventional sound realism to evoke the fantasy life of his protagonist. This kind of expressionistic approach to sound exemplifies Godard’s brief uses of noise in his early films. Such noise might encourage the spectator to recognize the constructed nature of a film’s diegesis by calling attention to the cinematic material from which it is constituted, but it does so primarily at the level of the narrative by commenting on the characters and their fictional situations.

The future would arrive with Godard’s third film, *Vivre sa vie* (1962), which employs a documentary-like approach toward capturing live sound during the filming of fictional scenarios. With its cinéma vérité-esque6 direct sound recording and lack of sound mixing (i.e., all sound is captured on a single auditory track), *Vivre sa vie* (1962) marks a significant turn from conventional realism to the reproduction of noise in real environments. Richard Roud provides a detailed description of the film’s sound strategies:

> In some cases . . . the mixing was done live on the spot, and several microphones were used; but in others, as in the first sequence in the café, only one microphone was used to capture both the dialogue and the atmospheric noises of the café. Generally when one hears a jukebox in a film, a disc has been recorded directly on to tape, with a little bass added to imitate the low-fidelity boom. In this café scene, the jukebox was actually recorded live. (67)

---

6 The influence of French cinéma vérité pioneer Jean Rouch on Godard cannot be overstated.
Roud also summarizes the significance of Godard’s sound recording strategies in Vivre sa vie: “It was . . . the first ‘commercial’ film made outside a studio without any kind of sound montage”7 (67). So novel and revolutionary was this approach toward sound recording for fiction filmmaking that upon the film’s release Jean Collet reported with great excitement to the French technical journal La Revue du son that with Vivre sa vie a spectator could now for the first time hear the natural clatter and din of the public spaces in which a main character’s story unfolds, and often at the expense of intelligible or audible dialogue (160-2). Godard was standing on the shoulders of a giant: where Vertov risked his career on the technological development of a mobile sound recording unit that would effectively capture non-studio sound, Godard was able in the early 60s to purchase a cheaper, smaller, and more highly refined version of Vertov’s initial device. Godard’s genius was employing that device for fiction filmmaking purposes.

Later in Chapter 3 I demonstrate how Godard’s use of directly recorded noise in a fictional narrative context emphasizes the connection between conventional sound realism and the illusionistic construction of cinematic stories, but for now an overview of Godard’s noise strategies will situate my argument in the context of Godard’s politics of sound. The direct sound recording technique that Godard initiated in Vivre sa vie is responsible for one of two basic types of noise in his films. This first type of noise is recorded directly within real (i.e., non-studio) locations or environments and usually without any other auditory elements added at the sound mixing and editing stage. Though he uses real locations and environments for the shooting of fictional events,

---

7 Roud later mentions that Vivre sa vie does in fact possess one recurring post-production overdub: Michel Legrand’s musical score. The film also contains a couple of voiceovers for one of its scenes, and it appears that Godard dubbed his own voice for that of “The Young Man” with whom the film’s protagonist falls in love.
Godard ensures that his films' sound recordings retain as much ambient sound from these locations and environments as possible. It should be noted that Godard distinguishes direct sound left “unsweetened” by additional overdubbing from direct sound placed at the mercy of abrupt editing. Often in his films Godard will suddenly and without narrative justification break off direct sound and cut to complete silence (as opposed to the ambient silence the recording industry calls “room tone”), only later to cut back to the same direct sound without any forewarning or recourse to narrative logic. Similarly, he will just as often, and without any discernible story-oriented motivation, raise direct sound to abrasive and uncomfortable volume levels—in this sense his sound work from *Vivre sa vie* onward moves away from the sound work in his early films that can be attributed to character psychology. Beyond such editing tactics, however, Godard’s use of direct sound recording captures and communicates the aural “violence” already present in everyday life. By recording the honking and screeching of cars, the reverberating din of busy cafes, the pervasiveness of urban construction, and the unwieldiness of communications devices (squawking walkie-talkies, distorting tape players, et al.), Godard employs direct noise to confront the spectator with the unadulterated sounds of modernity’s cacophonous media dissemination as well as the oppressive aural markers of technological progress.

Direct noise recordings would remain relatively simplistic in their effects if Godard didn’t combine this strategy with sound montage, the second type of noise in his films. Through sound montage noise is created, or “built,” from multiple sound sources: like Vertov before him, Godard manufactures an aural chaos by combining and clashing sonic elements. Sometimes Godard circumvents the technical process of editing by
choreographing narrative events to foster auditory noise in the form of sonic cross-currents: Anna Karina and László Szabó’s simultaneous, competing monologues in Made in U.S.A. (1966) are exemplary in this regard, and might be deemed a pro-filmic, pre-editing form of sound montage since the overlapping voices are produced specifically for the camera (and sound recorder) and are not captured as pre-existing ambient noise. In addition, the previously explained propensity of Godard to break off and cut back into direct sound also applies to his penchant for dropping overdubbed noise in and out of the sound mix. More typically and frequently, however, Godard foregrounds the editing process by creating noise from multiple sound sources in post-production. Such noise can result from dubbing extra-diegetic music, voiceover narration, and sound effects on top of direct sound recordings, or else can result from the clashing of two or more extra-diegetic overdubbed sounds. As with many sounds in Vertov’s Enthusiasm, individual sounds in Godard’s purposefully abrasive mixes are not necessarily noisy in of themselves. Rather, they become noise when colliding with one another. The difference between Vertov and Godard lies in the moments the directors employ sound montage: where Vertov saves his most intensive noise-generating montage for the section of Enthusiasm that is also the most worked on in terms of shot juxtapositions, Godard uses sound montage—however minimal—to create sonic noise that competes with and comment on raw documentary footage connoting a film’s direct relationship to reality.

In Chapter 3 I analyze two Godard films from the late 60s, Two or Three Things I Know About Her and British Sounds, to demonstrate how both types of noise foreground the mediation inherent in cinematic depictions of advanced technological
communications and industrial labor. Noise in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* and *British Sounds* disrupts traditional channels of cinematic and technological communication, and thereby encourages a self-reflexive meditation on the distinct auditory elements and audio-visual techniques that structure representations of industrial capitalist society.

My readings expand upon the work of scholars who have written about Godard’s use of noise. While these scholars provide general explanations and analyses of Godard’s artistic intentions in consistently employing noise across his films, I investigate the specific political and self-reflexive meanings created within particular Godard films. For instance, in drawing connections between the themes and motifs of *Comment ça va* (1978) and information theorist Claude Shannon’s influential 1948 article “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” Kevin J. Hayes suggests that Godard intentionally introduces noise into his transmission of images and sounds in order to make the spectator recognize the mediation of information through technological communication systems (74-75). For Hayes, Godard’s films repeatedly imply the question, “To what extent can we endure extraneous noise yet still receive an intended message?” (74). I believe this question points toward more specific instances in which Godard investigates the ideological ramifications of noise in cinematic representations of technological communication and industrial labor—especially when noise is not a distortion of the message but instead the message itself.

Colin MacCabe investigates more specific ideological ramifications of noise in Godard’s films. According to MacCabe, auditory confusion constitutes only one manifestation of noise in Godard’s work, since noise occurs wherever Godard
complicates, subverts, or questions conventionally transparent cinematic forms, or forms that appear ideologically neutral (146, footnote). In foregrounding noise over more conventional cinematic sonic signifiers, Godard disrupts the calcified, outmoded methods of auditory communication that have stultified societal discourse in conventional films (146). Similarly, Douglas Morrey contends that noise in Godard’s films gives rise to unique and novel modes of communication that resist the blockages, repressions, and inadequacies of official language and other depersonalized forms of informational exchange (66-67).

But what are the specific novel modes of communication that Godard affects through noise? In “Godard’s Use of Sound” Alan Williams explores the radical mode of perception Godard invokes through a dual strategy of recording and mixing sound. Williams sees Godard's direct sound recordings as foregrounding aural sensuousness, or materiality, over vocal intelligibility. As delineated in Chapter 2, such practices conflict with classical Hollywood sound practices that consistently subordinate ambient noise to intelligible dialogue and thus obscure the materiality of sonic phenomena. On the other hand, Godard’s sound montage does not simply integrate direct sound recordings into an illusionary unified sonic field, but rather keeps constituent auditory elements separate and distinct (342). This method stands in opposition to the standard Hollywood practice of making sounds appear to emerge naturally from images and blend into a seamlessly integrated audio-visual tapestry (339). Williams concludes that by emphasizing the individuality and interrelation of distinct auditory phenomena, Godard attempts a cinematic realization of Brecht’s “separation of elements.” This artistic method seeks beauty in the dissonance, rather than the harmony, created in bringing
together discrete stylistic elements. Such dissonance challenges conventional notions of artistic form by using juxtaposition to foreground the phenomenological specificity of materials that cannot be understood apart from their social and cultural contexts (344). Williams’ work leads the way toward specific analyses of two important subjects of Godard’s most explicitly political work—how media mediates the concrete manifestations of existing social realities, and how the noise inherent in contemporary industrial life and labor can foreground the mediation of technological communications systems.

Two or Three Things I Know About Her and British Sounds offer cogent examples of Godard using noise to dissect conventional film grammar while also creating unique and novel cinematic structures to depict the noise of industrial society. In addition to foregrounding directly recorded sounds of contemporary life, Godard’s films of the late 1960s use noise to foreground the specific structural relations and social implications among technologically rendered audio-visual elements. In Two or Three Things those elements are primarily media communications, while in British Sounds they are primarily the technological devices central to industrial labor. In both films noise-generating machines are investigated in relation to the representational ethics of the cinema.

Two or Three Things marks Godard’s first major use of noise in investigating technology’s—and, more specifically, cinema’s—role in replicating and critiquing the politics of contemporary social life. Two or Three Things features direct recordings of urban construction as well as the noise generated within modern housing projects that are the product of such construction. Noise communicates the violence, rupture, and
upheaval of the architectural, geographic, and financial re-arrangement of Paris. But the noise that Godard creates from the juxtaposition of multiple sound sources within and beyond the fictional diegesis—including that of communication technologies—critiques direct sound recording as a transparent reproduction of social realities.

In *British Sounds* Godard and co-director Jean-Henri Roger employ minimalist noise reproduction and montage to reflect upon political representations of industrial labor. *British Sounds* was the first completed film made by the Dziga Vertov Group, the politically radical filmmaking collective founded by Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin in 1968. In its work the collective consistently emphasizes noise in order to counter the image’s privileged place in the conventional hierarchy of narrative, dramatic, and ideological importance. *British Sounds* both reproduces and constructs noise to challenge even the polemical cinema tract’s claim to an absolute revolutionary truth through objective documentation, and especially through its recordings of labor. By combining the direct sound recordings of a noisy British automobile manufacturing plant with several stylized voiceovers expressing revolutionary rhetoric, Godard and Roger place into conflict traditional documentary truth claims with self-reflexive meditations on the communication of social realities through cinematic representation.

**Direct and Montage Noise in Two or Three Things I Know About Her**

In his commentary for the Criterion Collection DVD of *Two or Three Things*, Adrian Martin notes that Godard has given extensive credit to Rene Levert, the film’s sound engineer, and Antoine Bonfanti, the film’s sound mixer, for understanding that certain noises only exist when a soundtrack becomes saturated with multiple, interwoven sonic elements. Martin further explains that in implementing Godard’s instructions Levert and Bonfanti make the spectator of *Two or Three Things* aware of
the relations between sounds and, subsequently, the overall structure of the film’s sound design.

Foregrounding relations and structures was becoming paramount to Godard by the time he directed *Two or Three Things*. While self-reflexivity and anti-illusionism inform his previous films, Godard’s concerns reach a crisis point in *Two or Three Things* so that the elements comprising the film are thoroughly dissolved, torn apart, studied, and questioned. In a short manifesto written for the film’s release, Godard explains the deconstructive aims of *Two or Three Things*: “Basically, what I am doing is making the spectator share the arbitrary nature of my choices, and the quest for general rules which might justify a particular choice” (239). He adds, "I watch myself filming, and you hear me thinking aloud. In other words, it isn't a film, it's an attempt at a film and presented as such” (239). A byproduct of one of the film’s central metaphors—the extensive urban re-planning of Paris—and a result of the film’s aggressive and reflexive montage sequences, noise is central to *Two or Three Things*’ deconstructive attempt at a self-critical cinema. Noise results from breakdowns in the technological ordering of society—Godard’s methods of capturing and creating noise are attempts to make sense of this newfound disorder.

*Two or Three Things I Know About Her* is famous in part for having been made simultaneously alongside the other feature Godard shot in 1966, *Made in U.S.A*. While legend of the films’ concurrent creation isn’t exactly true\(^8\), the rough coincidence of their productions as well as their proximate release dates encourage a comparison of their

---

\(^8\) Godard boasted of having filmed *Two or Three Things* during the day and *Made in U.S.A.* at night during a shared period of time (he also suggested that exhibitors project the films together by alternating their reels), but in reality the productions only overlapped for less than a week (Dixon 72).
uses of noise. A satiric and experimental re-working of the *film noir*, *Made in U.S.A.* was Godard’s last major genre homage until *Prénom Carmen* (1983). The film employs an extensive palette of loud and harsh sonic elements, almost all of which take the form of conspicuous post-production overdubs (as with the cartoonish sound effects—exaggerated telephone rings, car horns, and airplane landings—that interrupt all mentions of a particular character’s last name) or else contending, simultaneous sound sources contrived from stylized narrative situations (as with the above example involving Karina and Szabó). As befits its investigation and ultimate rejection of Hollywood filmmaking, noise in *Made in U.S.A.* represents scrambled information—loud, distorted, and an overwhelming number of sounds allow the film to resist any imitation of *noir*’s recognizable iconography and, by extension, mythology.

In contrast to *Made in U.S.A.*, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* belongs to no recognizable genre. While often described as an “essay film,” *Two or Three Things*’ blends fiction, documentary, and the film diary, covering a day in the life of Juliette Jeanson (Marina Vlady), who lives in a modern high-rise apartment complex at the edge of Paris. Her husband works as a car mechanic, her young son attends school, her even younger daughter attends a strange daycare center cum brothel, and in order to make ends meet Juliette interweaves work as a prostitute amidst daily chores and shopping. Frequently Godard interrupts this fictional scenario by either having his actors describe what they’re feeling or sensing in the moment or by having them speak directly to the camera while answering questions delivered through an earpiece. He also frequently intervenes in the fiction with observations, commentaries, and asides that he whispers in voiceover, and he frequently cuts away from the narrative action to record
images of the surrounding world (the shimmering leaves of trees, the ongoing razing of urban construction) that may or may not directly bear on the story.

Accordingly, where he introduces overdubbed noise into the world of *Made in U.S.A.* in order to undermine its narrative and generic conventions, Godard in *Two or Three Things* documents noise for investigative purposes, and when he does introduce overdubbed noise into the film's fictional scenarios he does so by way of a complex sound montage that foregrounds the presence of the technological apparatus. If *Made in U.S.A.* marks Godard's farewell to Hollywood convention, *Two or Three Things* employs new strategies for making sense of a world that cannot be understood via preconceived categories. Literal and figurative noise thus emerges from the film's search for a cinematic language that might effectively capture the complex unfolding developments of contemporary life. Thus in *Two or Three Things* noise stands for something more than Godard's embrace of artistic materials traditionally designated as extraneous and wrong. Just as Vertov positioned noise in *Enthusiasm* as central to the technological mediation of a future society, so does Godard in *Two or Three Things* position noise as central to cinema's intervention in, as well as contribution to, socio-economic disenfranchisement, conflict, and disorder.

The first sound heard in/from *Two or Three Things* is that of construction vehicles and equipment. The noise of these machines—loud, grinding, unceasing, and inhuman—accompanies the opening credits. But when photographic imagery appears immediately thereafter in the film's first proper shot, the construction sounds abruptly end. They are replaced first by complete silence (not "room tone") and then, a few seconds later, Godard's hushed voiceover narration. The first shot documents the urban
construction contemporaneously taking place in the immediate suburbs of Paris where housing projects and superhighways were transforming an old European city into an anonymous modern metropolis. Godard has explained that *Two or Three Things* originated in a *Le Nouvel Observateur* article by Catherine Vimenet concerning the turn to prostitution by housewives living in the newly restructured and redesigned suburbs (Monaco 178).9 The film’s early voiceover directly indict Paul Delouvrier, Minister of Planning for the Paris region under the De Gaulle administration, as personally responsible for masterminding the development of overpriced and dehumanizing environments that force people into financial bondage and psychological despair (178).

Godard approaches the abovementioned material and its socio-political associations by separating sound from image. Rather than use documentary footage to place a stamp of authenticity upon a fictional story, Godard takes apart the rawest, most evidentiary elements of *Two or Three Things*—the construction shot and its attendant noise—to foreground their cinematic representation. Auditory noise showcases cinema’s ability to manufacture a substitute reality as well as to document existing reality—no amount of post-production wizardry could possibly recreate the unmistakable sound of machines involved in urban construction. But Godard divorces noise from the photographic source that would more firmly ground it in a conventional cinematic reproduction of reality. He also dramatically opposes the construction noise to the artificiality of pure film silence and the clearly overdubbed sound of his own voiceover. He thereby demonstrates that even as recorded noise evokes raw reality, the

---

9 Originally published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* number 77 on May 6, 1966, Vimenet’s article is titled “Prostitution dans les grands ensembles?” and is currently available through *Le Nouvel Observateur*’s online archives. It is unavailable in English.
brutal and unpleasant qualities of that noise also foreground its function as a signifier—
noise as a cinematic element refers to a once existent reality and is not reality itself. The
next several shots reinforce this point. The film’s second shot—a long shot of another
construction site—contains synchronized sound and image. But the next two shots drop
the construction sounds completely out of the mix, again replacing them with Godard’s
hushed voiceover. The separation of sounds from images continues in several similar
sequences throughout the remainder of the film, reinforcing the tension between
documentary realism and experimental deconstruction.

More than formal exercises, these sequences compare the Gaullist regime’s
technological restructuring of the physical, social, and psychological space of Paris to
Godard’s cinematic representation of the visual and sonic traces of that restructuring.
For Godard, the cinema can only represent external evidence of the Gaullist regime’s
oppressive project and not the complex motivations and forces behind that project. By
separating external evidence into its constituent parts Godard exposes the inadequacy
of technology to provide its users with a unified and in-depth portrait of social reality.
That the spectator of Two or Three Things encounters noise as the first of these
constituent parts suggests cinema can communicate the sonic menace of mass
_technological upheaval and fragmentation precisely because the cinema takes part in
similar upheaval and fragmentation.

The first major narrative scene of Two or Three Things, in which two men
transcribe a speech by Lyndon Johnson, creates noise from various sound sources to
explore the disunity of cinematic representation. After introducing Juliette, as well as
Vlady, through voiceover, Godard provides a close-up of a French language edition of
Raymond Aron’s 1967 study “18 Lectures on Industrial Society,” a close-up of a transmitter/tape recorder, and then a wide shot of the same machine. Dialogue accompanies all three shots: as with much of the film’s direct address devices, Vlady seems to break character by informing Godard and/or the spectator that she is looking “at the floor, that’s all.” The noise from Juliette’s housing complex contends with her (or Vlady’s) recitation—the yelling of children is especially prevalent in the mix. It should be noted that because they occur off-screen, the sounds of the children acquire a sinister or threatening tone—it is impossible to tell if their yelling is an expression of joy, fear, playfulness, or anger. Later, this ambiguous tone will be echoed in the brothel/daycare center scene where the simultaneous sounding of loud doorbells, crying toddlers, and dialogue produce a cacophony that captures the inappropriate mixing of child- and adult-related activities. In both scenes the separation of sound from image allows the noisy associations of blended diegetic sounds to flourish on their own rather than depend solely on the image for meaning.

The juxtaposition of Aron’s book with a close-up of the transmitter/tape recorder’s circuitry implies that the machines that represent the world to its users are as much products of industrial society and its discontents as are the characters of Two or Three Things. Indeed, later in the film Godard’s own voiceover explicitly conflates the ontological status of human beings and the objects through which human beings

---

10 The Criterion Collection DVD edition of Two or Three Things translates this title as “18 Lessons on Industrial Society”.

11 Throughout Two or Three Things Godard asks his actors questions through earpieces, and the actors respond to these questions by directly addressing the camera—Godard’s questions cannot be heard by the spectator, while the actors’ answers can be heard. Due to the fact that the questions seem to refer frequently to the actors’ immediate surroundings (“What are you looking at?”), Godard throws into doubt whether the actors are responding in character or as themselves.
communicate: “Objects exist. If we pay more attention to them than people, it’s because they exist more than those people. Dead objects are still alive. Living persons are often already dead.” The first shots of Two or Three Things established through noise a parallel between the industrial restructuring of society and the film’s own technological (de)construction. Those shots also implied that in its representation of spatial and social upheaval industrial noise can only be honestly studied as a cinematic element and not as a faithful reproduction of reality. Now, at the beginning of Two or Three Things’s first major narrative sequence, Godard emphasizes in visual terms the technological composition of a machine capable of aural reproduction even as he foregrounds the noise the machine transmits. This sequence suggests that the cinematic apparatus as represented in and used for Two or Three Things will not reproduce a perfect copy of external reality but instead reveal itself as creating informational noise.

The next shot is a static long take/long shot of Juliette’s husband Robert (Roger Montsoret) and his friend Roger (Jean Narboni), backs toward the camera, taking turns tinkering with and listening to the transmitter/tape recorder. Appropriately, the spectator never hears the sounds to which the characters listen. Through headphones the characters appear to listen to Lyndon B. Johnson justifying the bombing of North Vietnam, but the spectator can only assume this is the case because whichever man listens to the machine ostensibly repeats Johnson’s speech (the other man transcribes the spoken recitation on a notepad). Robert and Roger constitute single communicative and transcribing units within a larger set of mediations—the transmitter/tape recorder, the cinematic apparatus, and Godard himself—that transform the content and quality of a message relayed from sender (Johnson) to receiver (spectator).
After the long take Godard cuts to another close-up of the transmitter/tape recorder: smoke curls over its circuitry as accompanied by the overdubbed noise of airplanes and explosions. Godard substitutes loud, distorted, and overlapping sounds in place of Johnson’s speech to foreground communication technology’s production of noise in place of seamless auditory information. Johnson’s speech represents the sort of message disseminated by authorities that believe the media exists to replicate faithfully the commands of authority, no matter how Orwellian or immoral. Rather than simply reproduce it, Godard first represents Johnson’s speech traveling through a series of filters. He then obstructs it altogether, replacing the speech with violent sonic elements that signify the outcome of imperialistic and militaristic rhetoric. Furthermore, the mismatch between sound and image in this shot produces a fantastic scenario: the imagined destruction of Robert’s transmitter/tape recorder. No plane within the fictional diegesis of Two or Three Things produces the smoke or the noise, and the noise has no indexical connection to the smoke. But the juxtaposition of sound and image creates the impression that Roger’s radio/sound recorder is either under attack or malfunctioning to the point of self-immolation. Here Godard refuses to represent technological reproduction in a sacrosanct manner: just as the noise of informational blockage nullifies Johnson’s speech, so does an overwhelming barrage of sonic violence represent technology as physically fallible and perhaps even ideologically impotent.

Two or Three Things’ complex representation of sound recording technology contrasts with that of Made in U.S.A. Roud provides an apt description of the latter, which largely consist of close-ups of a tape-recorder:

[T]here are long passages of the film in which we listen to an almost completely incomprehensible tape-recording of Richard [Politzer]’s voice.
Willfully so, for when Paula later records a message herself on the same machine, we can hear it perfectly. Richard’s tapes are a collage of political speeches and of course we are not supposed to understand every word—just to get a jumbled impression of jumbled speeches. Nevertheless, it is a painful experience, and one which can enrage an audience. (97)

By refusing a narrative explanation for the tape-recordings’ fluctuating audibility, Godard calls attention to his manipulation of sound quality and volume through the cinematic apparatus. But Godard also associates noise with the confused political rhetoric of Richard Politzer (voiced by Godard himself), a murdered member of France’s old-guard political Left. Through his recitation of a Dadaist hodge-podge of revolutionary phrases and slogans the film largely portrays Politzer as confused, ineffectual, and obsolete. The matching of sound and image in the tape-recorder scenes reinforces the link between the content of speech and noise. Since sound emerges from the machine, Made in U.S.A. encourages the spectator to surmise that the tapes have become garbled due to a problem with one of the original sources for the recordings—namely, Richard’s voice—and not the machine itself. (Richard is also associated with noise through the soundtrack’s cacophonous obfuscation of his last name, as described above). Thus noise functions in Made in U.S.A. as an auditory symbol of Richard’s ideological fuzziness as well as the ideological issues inherent in cinematic representation itself. In contrast, it is not Lyndon B. Johnson who produces noise in Two or Three Things, but rather an entire system of technological and institutional conventions that transmits the president’s words without properly placing them under investigation. The film does not represent Johnson’s voice; instead the machinery that records and transmits his words is represented along with the human beings who operate such machinery. Rather than use noise as a placeholder for the rhetorical violence of Johnson’s official speech and
the violence it sanctions, Godard uses conspicuous sound-image juxtapositions to foreground the artificiality of seemingly unobstructed communications systems. These juxtapositions produce sonic disruptions that highlight the potential blockages in the technological transmission of sound. Godard’s indictment includes the cinema, an instrument of the media that typically promotes and reinforces the interests of industrial society. The only way it may not, Godard suggests, is to turn it into a noisemaker.

**Brechtian Political Representations of Noise and Work in *British Sounds***

After the deconstructive efforts of his final “mainstream” films of the late 60s, *British Sounds* assumed importance as an initial attempt in Godard’s cinematic “return to zero.” Godard used the phrase “return to zero” in his films and interviews throughout this period to explain his desire to break with mainstream (i.e., Hollywood) film structures and methods that reinforce capitalist ideology. Producing, distributing, and exhibiting films outside the industry and within underground media circuits through the Dziga Vertov Group, Godard during this period investigated dominant cinematic forms and created radical, oppositional ones. Imitating the formal structures of dominant cinema, even outside commercial film circuits, would negate the entire purpose of a radical political cinema. Searching for new methods and modes of communication through sounds and images would offer spectators more participatory, challenging ways of engaging with images and sounds.

Central to this project, at least in its incipient phase, was a minimalist approach toward film form: the creation of complex and multivalent meanings through the relatively simple arrangement of cinematic materials. According to Godard, minimalism opposes mainstream Hollywood productions in which the cinematic experience presents an overawing array of sensory information that leaves the spectator no room for critical
thought or reflection. In a 1970 interview with the *Evergreen Review* Godard explained his insistence on working with, and only with, basic audio-visual building blocks:

> We [the Dziga Vertov Group] made a step forward when we tried to reduce all those so-called technical problems to their utmost simplicity. When you read a book on photography, whether by Hollywood photographers, whether by Kodak, it looks like building an atomic bomb, when it is not. It's really rather simple. So we are trying to make only a few images, work with no more than two tracks, so the mixing is simple. For the moment, most moviemakers, except some underground moviemakers, work with ten to twelve sound tracks and mixing lasts one week. The mixing is only three or four hours for us. We just work with two tracks and possibly later with one track, because with one track, we can really have simple sound again. But for the moment, we have not the political capacity of working with one track. This is the political stage, not simply a problem of techniques. (qtd. in Carroll 52)

Rather than equating the complexity of cinematic representation with complex cinematic technique, Godard posits another equation: the more one distills cinema to its basic elements, the more room can be made for the deconstruction of cinematic methods and meaning. By reducing cinema to simple forms, one can better understand the operation of its individual components so their subsequent development into intricate structures can be critically observed and evaluated.

Among the few sounds Godard felt significant enough to include in the films of the Dziga Vertov Group are those best described as noise. Indeed, noise is often the only type of sound present in the films of Godard’s politically radical phase. One of the first films Godard directed after his renunciation of mainstream filmmaking (but before his Dziga Vertov Group collaborations) was the notorious *A Film Like All the Others* (1968), which is almost entirely comprised of footage of (barely glimpsed) student activists debating political issues in a field. The film’s soundtrack features direct sound from the students’ conversations as well as competing overdubbed voiceovers from an
unidentified man and woman, both of whom recite various political or historical texts. The result is a sound montage that produces aural chaos. Likewise, in later Dziga Vertov Group films Godard often superimposes voices as well as other sounds upon direct, documentary sound recordings, thus strongly impeding the spectator’s clear understanding of any single auditory source. Through these kinds of sound montage Godard undermines the possibility of these films entering into the commodity culture of mainstream film production, distribution, and exhibition. More importantly, he undermines any possibility of the films serving the function of traditional political propaganda. Godard’s political films bar spectators from gaining easy access to meaning. Viewers instead must work and struggle for that meaning, and often must confront and make sense of informational noise to do so.

For Godard, the combination, or re-combination, of individual cinematic components does not lead to a natural and inevitable integration but instead a self-conflicting whole comprised of multitudinous ideological factors (technological, political, social, economic, etc.). Mainstream cinema does its best to conceal the conflict of such relations in order to repress the ideological factors that produce them or else to present them falsely as the natural, harmonious, compatible order of life. Godard explains the connection between his minimalist, deconstructive approach toward cinematic form and the ideological disunity he wishes to reveal in the spectator’s encounter with his films:

You belong to a certain society today in America, or we in France, [and] you just think that when you are speaking that your words and your structure, that they go together, that there is a complete unity. But there is no unity. There is a continuous struggle between what you say and what you think and the way we are living in a certain social condition. You are not a unity. You are trying to be a unity, but the fact is you are not. And the movie [British Sounds] represents that in a very simple way—it’s just image and sound—it’s not just adding together—it’s a struggle. Hollywood
wants to just add them together there on the screen, just like you put a
stamp on a letter.

When asked, “Exactly what do you mean by a film as a unity?” Godard responds:

Well, to build it economically and aesthetically, as an ideological product
for a different purpose. What is a bourgeois moviemaker doing? He is
dealing with image and sound. He’s building too. But for what? To achieve
a truer presentation of reality, he’s using hundreds of sound tracks, so that
when you step on this carpet, you have the very sound of your foot on this
carpet. But it means no more than that. He thinks it is real, but of course it
is not. We are using the same elements, but in the way we use them we
are transforming them. Our purposes are quite different. (64)

Godard points out that Hollywood films use images and sounds to construct an
illusionary experience that thrills spectators through the technological virtuosity of its
intricate yet seamless construction. What he offers in contrast are films made through
the paring down of visual and auditory elements to essential components. Through this
strategy each cinematic element becomes more than just politically and ethically
significant. Each element also becomes a conspicuous manifestation of the filmmakers’
artistic and ideological decision-making rather than a predetermined aesthetic choice
adhering to the dictates of conventional representation.

_British Sounds_12 is the film in which the Dziga Vertov Group most effectively
employs abrasive, alienating noise to expose the mechanisms of filmmaking and their
ideological bases, especially those concerning the technological representation of
industrial labor. The film consists of six sections: 1) a tour through a British automobile
plant; 2) a naked woman walking through a house, followed by a close-up of her groin;
3) a reactionary newscast delivered by a fictitious TV news anchor; 4) a gathering of

---

12 The film was released by Grove Press under the title _See You At Mao_. This alternate title was not approved by Godard or Roger.
workers who discuss labor conditions and the steps needed to achieve a socialist revolution; 5) a group of students designing protest posters and creating new, revolutionary lyrics to Beatles songs; 6) a bloody hand clawing and grasping for a red socialist flag. Voiceovers accompany most of the sections. The most famous use of noise in *British Sounds* occurs during the first section in one of Godard’s most extended and audacious long takes: a tracking shot—beginning with a downward tilt but very soon thereafter moving horizontally from left to right—that documents the production of a bright red car along an assembly line within a British Motor Corporation plant located in Abingdon, England. The shot lasts just over ten minutes and is accompanied on the soundtrack by a direct recording of the plant’s loud machinery, the overdubbed narration of a man reading from Marx’s *Capital* and, less frequently, the overdubbed voice of a young girl, prompted by an adult man, reciting some of the most significant historical events of British working class struggle. The young girl’s voice accompanies insert shots of white signs on which numbers and phrases such as “What is work?” are written. During these insert shots the noise of the factory is removed from the sound mix. (The same young girl later recites other significant events in the film’s fourth section.)

The most significant sound element is the direct sound recording of the plant’s brutal machine noises. In the first place Godard and Roger use these noises to represent and communicate information that cannot be represented or communicated through the image. The screeching and grinding of the automobile plant’s machinery privilege the soundtrack above the “image track” in communicating to the viewer the punishing routine of industrial labor. Moreover, Godard and Roger use the ferocity of
factory noise to question cinema’s ability to visually represent labor conditions. Michael Cadé sees the sound in this sequence as representative of Godard’s career-long refusal to depict manual work and the exploitation of the working class except through noise (54). By privileging sound over the image in imparting the conditions of factory labor, Godard and Roger resist the conventions of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking as well as those of mainstream documentary filmmaking whereby image recording confers an inherent truth value onto the object, person, or event so filmed. By having noise dominate the soundtrack, Godard and Roger force cinema’s auditory channel to communicate through an assault on, and not a seduction of, the spectator’s senses.

Godard explains this strategy:

[British Sounds] should be projected very loud, especially during the long tracking shot at the BMC factory that opens the film. The movie was originally made for TV and that terrible noise in it is important. For bourgeois people to be uncomfortable with that scene for only eleven minutes may make them think that those workers must deal with that screeching every day all their lives. (qtd. in Carroll 62)

Rather than filtering or minimizing the noise of the workplace in order to immerse the spectator comfortably in the world of factory labor, Godard and Roger use noise to keep the spectator at a significant remove from it. And instead of offering a vicarious experience of life as captured through the cinema, Godard and Roger question the communicative power of cinematically representing other people’s experiences. A critical appraisal of cinematic representation assumes greater aesthetic significance than non-self-reflexive cinematic representation.

13 Indeed, the film was rejected by the British channel London Weekend Television—for which it was originally produced—in part because of its unrelentingly noisy soundtrack (Monaco 219). (Many scholars erroneously name the British Broadcasting Company as the channel that rejected Godard and Roger’s film [Sarris 57].) Mainstream resistance to British Sounds and its use of noise as a primary sound element recalls the resistance Vertov encountered in the excessively noisy exhibition of Enthusiasm.
Later in his career Godard solves the problem of depicting labor with which he remains experientially unfamiliar. He does this in films like *Tout va bien* (1972), *Numero Deux* (1975), and *Passion* (1982) by representing manual work with which he possesses intimate experience: the production of cinema (Cadé 58). And yet, already in *British Sounds* a metacinematic correspondence appears between machine-related labor and the cinematic technology that records the evidence of that labor. In *British Sounds* the relation between the tracking shot across the factory floor and the factory work itself encourages the viewer to notice similarities between the cinematic apparatus and the modern assembly line. The industrial and technological structures of the cinematic apparatus force the camera into geometrically confined movements—tilting and dollying contained within precisely lateral motions—that determine the manner by which it can record external reality. Similarly, the technological and economic logic of capitalism forces the worker into a rigid, linear, and alienated relationship with the materials with which he must work. In this sense *British Sounds* records the working conditions of the BMC plant without effacing its own labor, since such effacement would align its principles with mainstream documentary’s subscription to an objective, ideologically neutral camera. Instead, by reflecting its own technological and ideological bases (and biases), *British Sounds* encourages the viewer to observe the relation between the cinematic apparatus and the factory setting it depicts, with both existing only in relation to the complex factors that govern their social functions.

How, then, does noise work within *British Sound*’s metacinematic critique of industrial capitalism? Had Godard and Roger made the factory noise the sole sonic accompaniment to the sequence’s images they would have only showcased cinema’s
ability to capture noise without reflecting on cinema’s own unique production of noise. Loud and unpleasant as it is, factory noise unaccompanied by other auditory elements on a soundtrack would come across as a single, uncontested block of auditory information. But Godard and Roger overdub other sound sources over the factory noise and thus create a cinematic cacophony to parallel the noise of the BMC plant. The two sounds that accompany the assembly line sequence bear distinctly oppositional qualities. The noise of the factory is abrasive, unpredictable, non-human, representational beyond the limits of spoken or written language, and captured by direct documentary recording. In contrast, both voiceovers are sonorous, scripted (Godard and Roger use didactic political texts to emphasize this quality), human, representational by way of spoken and written language, and created by post-production overdubbing.

By melding disparate sound sources, Godard and Roger foreground the contention, rather than any possible harmonious relationship, that exists between individual cinematic components. In this way Godard and Roger also call attention to the noise inherent to cinematic technology and production by demonstrating the manner in which cinematic noise resembles industrial machinery. Just as industrialization forces disparate yet related technological operations to manufacture unified products, so does cinema interweave different elements in the creation of a harmoniously integrated “final cut.” Capitalist ideology influences and determines both practices—yet British Sounds reveals the machinations of industrial labor and cinematic production while also exposing these related systems’ cacophonic forms and functions. Conventional sound realism in the cinema fails to represent either the dissonant elements present in manual
labor or the dissonance within its own industrialized technology. In contrast, *British Sounds* makes good on the Dziga Vertov Group’s intention to document the tensions existing within societal structures up to and including those that determine the Group’s films. As per Godard’s interest in returning to cinematic zero and from that point building oppositional film structures, *British Sounds* creates dissonance to foster a cinematic experience in which contentious rather than integrated elements shape the viewer’s understanding of visual and auditory material.

But what of the actual content of the overdubbed voiceovers in the first section of *British Sounds*? Beyond their role as contending and conflicting sounds, how do the section’s voiceovers relate to the Brechtian separation of elements Godard and Roger achieve through noise? Interestingly, Godard later criticized the soundtrack of *British Sounds* not for its noise but for the quotations spoken by the male voiceover. In a 1976 interview with Penelope Gilliat, Godard looked back on the film and commented, “It is not good that we are still obliged to use Marx quotations instead of the words of the worker” (82). Such criticism reflects Godard’s post-Dziga Vertov Group interest in the micro-politics of labor, family relations, and communication. Collaborating in the mid-70s with Anne-Marie Miéville through their co-founded Sonimage studio and workshop in Switzerland, Godard redirected attention to the quotidian events in the lives of everyday French and Swiss citizens—a radical shift from the Dziga Vertov Group’s didactic, “top-down” agit-prop. Compared to Godard-Miéville projects such as *Numero Deux* and its investigation of the effects of socio-economic disenfranchisement on an average family, *British Sounds* appears to evade contact with actual people. Whereas *Numero Deux* gives the marginalized a literal voice, *British Sounds* uses Marx to speak for them.
But Godard fails to give himself (and Roger) enough credit: noise constitutes a unique auditory element that signifies the conditions and experiences of factory labor, even if it bypasses language in doing so. Moreover, *British Sounds* demonstrates how noise prevents sustained or in-depth conversation in the workplace, thereby suppressing workers’ voices. In this context the Marx quotations and the recitation of British working class historical events act as sonic placeholders. As conspicuous overdubs, the voiceovers announce themselves as sound mix additions that fill a gap created by the lack of directly recorded human speech. Rather than have the workers provide content for the voiceovers, Godard and Roger use didactic Marxist texts to comment upon the soundtrack’s directly recorded noise: *Capital* explains the socio-economic causes of the workers’ brutal labor, while the recitation of working class historical events points to past responses to similar conditions. In turn, the factory noise comments upon one of the texts. Any seamlessly channeled communication of *Capital* becomes obstructed by the overbearing sounds of industrial machinery, and possibly because the overdubbed voiceover remains insufficient in correcting specific factory conditions.

Several scholars broach the significance of *British Sounds*’ noise through critical analyses of its sound-image relations. For instance, MacCabe writes:

> As the title suggests [*British Sounds*] is concerned with sounds and how sounds can be used against the image of Britain provided by the Union Jack. The film refuses the defining relations of documentary in which the image functions as confirmation of the sound; instead there is a struggle between the two which composes the film. The correct sound, provided by a Maoist analysis of British capitalist society, is kept in tension with a variety of other sounds and a series of images, none of which provides the correct image of society but which, in their juxtaposition, provide the material on which the spectator must work. (21-22)
MacCabe later suggests that a “correct” sound source at the conclusion resolves the work the spectator must perform upon British Sounds’ dialectically juxtaposed sounds and images.

Both British Sounds and Pravda investigate the form of the documentary, posing the question of what it is to represent the political situation in a country, be it capitalist Britain or socialist Czechoslovakia. Although both films work resolutely against that traditional form of the documentary which simply produces images which accompany and prove the truth of the soundtrack and although the content of the soundtrack is contradictory in places, the films persistently pose the existence of a correct sound and a new relation between sound and image which would produce the correct image to accompany it. This final goal of both films is evident in the similar closing sequences in which revolutionary songs accompany the image of a red flag. (59)

MacCabe exposes the major failing of British Sounds: the film does not sustain the tension among its various images and sound sources. Nonetheless, British Sounds contains long stretches of complex sound-image and sound-sound juxtapositions prior to its formally and thematically reductive conclusion. By combining them into noise through auditory montage, the first section of British Sounds makes sound elements acquire maximum complexity in their political, self-reflexive associations and implications.

**Noise and Political Self-Reflexivity**

Analysis of the opening sequences of Two or Three Things and British Sounds demonstrate that Godard’s use of noise is multivalent, complex, associative, and evocative. It also demonstrates that Godard’s noise produces highly critical observations concerning the technological communication of specific social and

---

14 Though Godard later dismissed One Plus One (1968), one of his pre-Dziga Vertov Group efforts in radical political cinema, that film at least achieves success in leaving unresolved the unfinished fragments of “Sympathy for the Devil,” the iconic song the film depicts the Rolling Stones rehearsing and recording in their London recording studio.
industrial conditions. Beyond representing obstructed communication, the cacophony of industrial society, or sensuous immersion, noise works directly on particular elements, techniques, and practices related to conventional film style and structure. Furthermore, through noise Godard indicts the cinema as inseparable from the exploitative logic of late industrial capitalism. Direct sound recordings foreground noise as a conspicuous product of urban planning in Two or Three Things and industrial labor in British Sounds. Meanwhile, sound montage foregrounds the noise inherent in cinema’s representations of the abovementioned phenomena.

Godard’s debt to Vertov is evident not only in the name of his late 60s filmmaking collective but also in his dual approach to cinematic sound. Vertov initiated the use of auditory noise in the cinema to deconstruct the medium’s sound conventions and unwritten rules. In Two or Three Things and British Sounds Godard puts into practice Vertovian methods by pushing the Soviet director’s concepts and findings into more intense self-critical analysis:

Crucial to the [Dziga Vertov] group’s self-definition was an enlarged conception of montage. . . . for Vertov montage was a principle which had primacy in every moment of filming—the Dziga-Vertov group formulated this principle in the slogan: Montage before shooting, montage during shooting, and montage after the shooting. The constant emphasis of this montage is on separation, on division, on the fact that there is no object constituted outside a practice which simultaneously produces a subject. (MacCabe 42-43)

Vertov subverted the propagandistic tendencies of Enthusiasm by using noise to question the veracity and transparency of the cinematic apparatus. Similarly, in Two or Three Things and British Sounds Godard subverts documentary realism with montage principles and their introduction into the cinematic text of informational noise.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on noise in select works by Rainer Werner Fassbinder
and David Lynch. Unlike Vertov and Godard, Fassbinder and Lynch possess little relationship to the documentary filmmaking tradition, and so my analyses concentrate on a common objective in their extremely stylized works. Both directors use noise to exaggerate the tension between immersive and distanced spectatorial positions, and they both connect this fractured mode of viewing to protagonists whose conflicted identities and perceptual faculties have been influenced by a noise-riddled mediascape.
CHAPTER 4
THE SHOUTING THAT CONSTANTLY WASHES OVER US: NOISE, IDENTITY, MEDIA, AND POLITICS IN RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER’S IN A YEAR OF THIRTEEN MOONS AND THE THIRD GENERATION

Fassbinder, Maximalist Aesthetics, and Noise

Of all the directors in this study, Rainer Werner Fassbinder is the one whose work would seem to have little to do with noise. Fassbinder’s aesthetic is associated mainly with languorous editing, slow camera movements, static compositions, and intentionally flat acting, all of which deflate the emotional impact of his melodramatic narratives and redirect attention to the thematic significance of the economic and psychological pressures of capitalism. In other words, Fassbinder’s cinematic approach, including his work with sound design, has been regarded as primarily minimalistic. But this view places at the margins the maximalist tendency of his late work, which frequently experiments with ostentatious mise-en-scène and camerawork as well as aural noise via simultaneous, overlapping sound sources.¹⁵

It is this use of noise that I will explore in two late Fassbinder films, In a Year of Thirteen Moons (1978) and The Third Generation (1979). Both films create noise from clashing aural elements in order to represent the disorienting effects of capitalist technological progress. Yet Fassbinder also foregrounds the construction of noise as a product of technological mediation and thus encourages spectatorial self-reflexivity concerning the cinematic representation of political and ideological realities. Whereas the political perceptions of Fassbinder’s characters are frequently confused and

¹⁵ A notable exception is Thomas Elsaesser, who reads Fassbinder’s “BDR Trilogy,” and especially The Marriage of Maria Braun, in light of its media sound sources and use of “aural space that extends ‘laterally’ and in depth” (109).
impaired by noise, Fassbinder encourages the spectator to form increasingly critical political perceptions of his work and its representations.

In its engagement with political and social issues through narratives focusing on the lives of ordinary citizens, Fassbinder’s work is to a great degree influenced by Godard’s. Yet unlike Godard, Fassbinder increasingly de-emphasizes the documentary dimension of his filmmaking while emphasizing its blatant artificiality: late films like *Lili Marleen* (1981), *Lola* (1981), *Veronika Voss* (1982), and *Querelle* (1982) take place in the historical past (or, in the case of the last title, a past imagined through the lens of fantasy), and all of these films push to the foreground elements of set design, lighting, costuming, and film stock that are rooted in a conspicuous “movie-ness” rather than traditional authenticity. *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* and *The Third Generation* exist at the cusp of this phase of Fassbinder’s career; the first film of his historically rooted “BDR Trilogy,” *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), is sandwiched between them and the epic historical novel adaptation *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) follows *Generation*. With *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* and *The Third Generation* Fassbinder begins exaggerating the constructed nature of his projects, with sound (and sound in relation to the image) foregrounded to expose cinematic artificiality as well as technological mediation. By using cinematic sound technology to create noise, Fassbinder represents how capitalist media’s disorienting array of information diminishes critical individual and collective perceptions of social reality. Yet at the same time Fassbinder uses noise to encourage the spectators of his films to develop critical perceptions of cinematic language and technological mediation.
Containing some of the director’s most painfully autobiographical material, *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* might seem like an odd project for Fassbinder to have employed maximalist strategies and conspicuous artificiality. The film’s narrative—a continuously abused and rejected transsexual’s journey over the course of several days toward self-annihilation—was inspired by the suicide of Fassbinder’s lover, Armin Meier, whose background as an orphan and professional butcher is the same as that of the film’s protagonist. But the film also shares significant motifs and themes with several past and future Fassbinder works, including *Garbage, the City, and Death*—the play Fassbinder aborted in 1975 when it came under attack for alleged anti-Semitism—and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the 1980 television mini-series adapted from Alfred Döblin’s modernist novel.\(^{16}\) Those two works explicitly focus on the individual’s response to social and economic pressures and, not coincidentally, they are exceptionally noisy works in which visual and aural excess conveys the modern metropolis as a collision of abrasive sights and sounds.\(^{17}\) While one might expect the autobiographical narrative elements of *Thirteen Moons* to occasion a relatively straightforward style through which the story and characters might speak for themselves, Fassbinder instead complicates the cinematic adaptation of real life events by creating a complex network of inter- and extra-textural associations, links, allusions, and quotations. He does so not only to deflect any direct or easily readable connection between the story and characters of *Thirteen Moons* and their real life counterparts, but also to make connections between

---

\(^{16}\) In the published outline of the *Thirteen Moon*’s story, the heroine, Elvira, reads science fiction author Daniel F. Galouye’s *Simulacron-3*, which Fassbinder had adapted five years before into a two-part television film entitled *World on a Wire*.

\(^{17}\) *Berlin*’s created visual noise through extreme low-key lighting, resulting in complaints by television viewers that they could not make out the action on screen.
noise and capitalist ideologies of power and exploitation, and between noise and self-reflexively critiques of technological mediation.

In a Year of Thirteen Moons, Capitalism, and Noise

In a Year of Thirteen Moons centers on the psychological, emotional, and sexual identity of Elvira (Volker Spengler), a transgender woman whose male lover—Christoph (Karl Scheydt), an actor—leaves her. Elvira subsequently re-establishes contact with Anton Saitz (Gottfried John), the man with whom she fell in love when still a man named Erwin. Elvira transitioned on the basis of an offhand remark: once Erwin confessed his love, the heterosexual Saitz refused to return the sentiment and dismissively suggested that it would be easier for him to reciprocate were Erwin a woman. Despite the fact that he never felt that he was truly a woman, nor possessed a desire to become one, Erwin committed the most significant act of her life—undergoing a sex change—in order to gain the approval of another. As Elsaesser notes, in becoming Elvira Erwin ceases to be a desiring subject and becomes instead “his beloved’s love object . . . making the other master of one’s desire” (203). Thus Elvira is represented in Thirteen Moons as a divided subject—not because of her transgendered status, but because of the disconnect between her actions, for which she is solely responsible, and the motivations behind those actions, which are almost entirely dictated by what others think of her, or what she imagines they think of her.

Much scholarship exists on Fassbinder’s representation of Elvira’s queer identity. For instance, Kaja Silverman argues that Elvira’s self-castration counters, and throws into question, phallic authority by taking on a subjectivity that stands outside all traditional gender categories and that seeks pleasure in suffering (218). While acknowledging the value of Silverman’s work, I read Elvira’s transgender identity not
psychoanalytically but metaphorically and politically. Most scenes in *Thirteen Moons* feature monologues in which characters explain or attempt to explain their actions or the actions of others. Elvira receives the most attention in this regard, since even when not speaking she is often the subject of other characters’ monologues. The film is thus structured as a search for identity in which subjects, and especially Elvira, avoid present action in order to justify or understand verbally their past or future actions. However, Fassbinder frequently problematizes communication by using auditory noise to obscure speech and transform verbal expression into one of many auditory elements that comprise noise. In doing so Fassbinder associates the failure of self-expression with an inability to perceive how identity—whether of gender, sexuality, or otherwise—can be dictated and objectified by the desires, fantasies, and values of others. The political dimension of *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* concerns the sources of the noise engulfing speech. These noises are produced by those in power, or rather, by the environments and technologies created by those in power. By reproducing the intensity of this noise, *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* depicts Elvira as unable to achieve self-awareness and a coherent identity within a capitalist system in which perception is overwhelmed by technologized, mediated sound.

Saitz is associated with the noise created by capitalist development and technological ubiquity. A survivor of a German concentration camp who subsequently ran his brothels along the same regimented and dehumanizing lines, Saitz worked his way up the social hierarchy during the postwar era to become a cutthroat businessman. His current work involves buying up cheap real estate in Frankfurt and then driving out tenants to convert these properties into expensive high-rise offices. Saitz’s coded
Jewishness—based on his survival of the concentration camps as well as the similarity of his profession to that of The Rich Jew in *Garbage*—doesn’t reinforce anti-Semitic stereotypes but rather critiques them. At one point a bodyguard explains that Saitz did not devise his capitalist strategies but instead merely executed those created by more powerful authorities. Fassbinder thus works into *Thirteen Moons* the point many critics missed in the controversy over *Garbage*—that Jews were historically forced into social positions and economic roles for which they could be scapegoated. In *Thirteen Moons* Saitz’s coded Jewishness acts as a red herring—the film is not about the inherently Jewish character of capitalism but rather the non-discriminatory nature of capitalism in incorporating into its power structure the very victims upon which it once fed.18

---

18 In “Torments of the Flesh, Coldness of the Spirit: Jewish Figures in the Films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder,” Gertrud Koch argues that *Thirteen Moons* initiates in the director’s work the allegorical “displacement of . . . sacrificial fantasies away from the Jews onto those figures who are predestined in Fassbinder’s cosmos to experience suffering of the body, to experience the torment of the flesh” (35). Koch concludes that Fassbinder’s Jewish characters are problematic representations because they are excluded “among the tormented victims, oppressed minorities, and suffering creatures” that assume central importance in his films (37). There are two major flaws with Koch’s thesis. The first is Koch’s assertion that Fassbinder symbolically removes his Jewish characters from the historical reality of the Holocaust’s physical destruction of the Jewish people. Elsewhere in her essay Koch describes the “sexualized sadomasochistic atmosphere” of the epilogue of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, an atmosphere that colors much of Fassbinder’s depictions of physical and emotional suffering (36). Indeed, this atmosphere is crucial in *Thirteen Moons*, but it contains a twist: Elvira performs the role of masochist even when Saitz refuses the role of sadist. Saitz’s sadism exists almost entirely in his business practices and not in his relationship to Elvira, since his attitude toward her is one of indifference. The power dynamic in *Thirteen Moons* exemplifies the power dynamic that operates frequently within Fassbinder’s entire body of work: the masochistic impulses of minorities, outsiders, women, homosexuals, etc. are exploited by those in positions of power. However, in *Thirteen Moons* Saitz has carried out his economic exploitation in the service of a larger capitalist system. Elvira’s suffering is at the hands of that system, which Saitz represents only by proxy—Elvira mistakes her systematic exploitation for a personal one. Similarly, Fassbinder has located the particular power dynamic between Elvira and Saitz within the postwar capitalist economy and not within the historical pairing of Germans and Jews. Second, the characteristics Koch sees in Fassbinder’s use of “an anti-Semitic motif, which often manifests itself in the form of a philo-Semitic stereotype” do not seem to fit Saitz: “the picture of the Jew as the strict patriarch and man of intellect, law-abiding and austere” (37) The scene in which Saitz directs those around him, including Elvira, to recreate a musical number from the Jerry Lewis-Dean Martin comedy *You’re Never Too Young* (1955) places Saitz in the Lewis role, making him appear infantile as well as a connoisseur of low-brow entertainment. Though he may be law-abiding (within a system that has legitimized corporate maleficence), Saitz never acts austere nor “untouchable, cold, aloof, unattainable, unapproachable, arrogant, [or] taking [himself] for something better” as per the other attributes Koch assigns to Fassbinder’s Jewish characters (37). One of the bitter jokes in the film is that for all of Elvira’s anxiety and dread concerning her reunion with Satiz and his potential reaction to an interview in which she mentioned
Various locations in *Thirteen Moons* constitute spaces that have either influenced Saitz in his business practices or that he has remade according to those practices. For instance, the slaughterhouse where Elvira worked with Saitz evokes the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps that also serve as the template for Saitz's corporate strategies. In this location Elvira attempts to tell her friend Red Zora (Ingrid Caven) about her relationship with Christoph. But Elvira's impassioned speech—in which she imitates Christoph practicing passages from Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*—lapses into hysterical cries and guttural breathing while the soundtrack drowns out her voice with the strains of Gustav Mahler's fifth symphony. The creation of noise through the discordance of multiple sound sources becomes associated with the destruction of existential and physical identity: not only is Elvira's self-expression mediated and qualified by a complex network of texts, voices, and sounds that are not her own, but she speaks as cows are slaughtered, drained of blood, and cut into fragments of meat and flesh.

As a product of technological progress, noise is just as amorphous as capitalism: the noise associated with Saitz follows Elvira throughout *Thirteen Moons*. When Elvira returns to her apartment after taking her prostitute friend Red Zora¹⁹ (Ingrid Caven) to the slaughterhouse she calls out for Christoph, who has already left her. Realizing that he has not returned, Elvira initiates a session of autoerotic asphyxiation. For the first

---

¹⁹ The name of this character is taken from a West German terrorist feminist organization that in turn took its name from a character in Kurt Kläber's children's book *The Outsiders of Uskoken Castle*. These associations connect *Thirteen Moons* to the real life terrorist organizations that would be the target of Fassbinder's satire in *The Third Generation*, and they connect Zora to the fairy tale she tells to Elvira after the latter rediscovers the details of her traumatic early years as an orphan.
time the soundtrack features what Brigitte Peucker calls “disembodied” voices, ghostly choral-like singing that is sometimes accompanied by synthesized music (109). These voices appear to be extra-diegetic, an assumption confirmed by the Vienna Boys Choir record Elvira plays on her stereo—a diegetic source that conflicts with the voices. The collision of the two sound sources produces noise, especially since the disembodied voices fail to remain inconspicuousness in the manner of conventional extra-diegetic musical accompaniment. The spectator might very well wonder whether these voices exist within Elvira’s mind or else within a spiritual realm outside the film’s visual diegesis due to their evocation of a human presence. However, subsequent sequences in the film reinforce the disembodied voices’ association with Saitz. They are heard at the first mention of Saitz when, shortly after the abovementioned scene, Elvira’s former wife Irene (Elisabeth Trissenaar) confronts Elvira about an interview in which the latter made unflattering remarks about the powerful man. The voices can also be heard when a former Saitz employee (Peter Kollek) relates to Elvira the tale of Saitz’s ascendance in the business world and in the scene where Elvira falls asleep in Saitz’s building on her way to meeting him. As Thirteen Moons progresses the disembodied voices appear on the soundtrack more frequently, marking the closer proximity of Elvira to Saitz. The association of the disembodied voices with noise as well as with a blatantly anti-realistic sound register encourages the spectator to attend to Thirteen Moons’ mediated sound design. However much Elvira is inundated by and disoriented by noise—and thus overwhelmed by Saitz’s power—the spectator is reminded continually of noise’s technological construction, of its status as a cinematic device.
Noise Environments, Technological Mediation, and the Failure of Language

Saitz’s association with noise extends to the Frankfurt environs he has restructured through capitalist profiteering. In one scene Elvira enters a video arcade in which various games produce a cacophony of electronic bleeps, bloops, and crashes. Human voices add to the din but also constitute aggressive sounds in of themselves, as when Elvira’s shy yet gentle acknowledgement of a patron is countered with verbal violence. The patron delivers the threat from off-screen—the source of potential physical harm remains hidden to the spectator and therefore known only as a threatening sound. In fact, all of the scene’s sounds are either threatening to Elvira or else reflective of her pain: when Elvira starts to break down and cry, the plaintive Roxy Music track “A Song for Europe” can be heard. Whether the song comes from within the film’s diegesis or from its extra-diegetic soundtrack remains uncertain—the relatively muffled quality of the song would seem to indicate the former, while the lack of acknowledgement on the part of any characters to the song would seem to indicate the latter. Like the patron’s threat, the sound source for “A Song for Europe” remains ambiguously located; the scene’s noisescap subverts conventional sound realism by making it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the status and location of particular sounds, thus throwing the film’s constructedness into relief.

Fassbinder emphasizes the overwhelming nature of noise to the film’s characters by minimizing their significance within the frame. After Elvira is verbally threatened she becomes increasingly hemmed in by compositions that place her in frames within

---

20 “Keep looking at me like that and I’ll cut you into pieces,” is the man’s reply. He refers not only to the violence Elvira has performed on her own body but also the famous slaughterhouse scene earlier in the film.
frames constructed from the arcade’s Byzantine windows, screens, and mirrors. At one moment her head rests within a square opening in the arcade’s wall that is framed by another opening contained within a series of lines drawn on another wall. At yet another moment Elvira is depicted as a reflection of a reflection. In mediating or compositionally constraining human figures the arcade’s mise-en-scène reinforces the disorienting quality of the soundtrack’s noisescape. Furthermore, Fassbinder devotes less screen space to Elvira’s tearful breakdown than he does the violent, primitive, and mindless games played by several patrons in the arcade. Klaus Ulrich Militz describes the effect of the film’s disorienting mise-en-scène in tandem with its soundtrack: “Fassbinder’s use of visual and audible décor is well-suited to bring out the repressive aspects of the business capital’s atmosphere. Breaking up the enclosed character of the respective settings, the extensive use of décor creates clashes between incompatible elements which result in a whirl of visual and audible signs” (170). Militz observes that “the enclosed character” of the film’s interiors are undermined by the refusal in both aural and visual registers of privacy, reflection, and tranquility. Instead, the visual environment of the arcade subsumes Elvira, whose expressive and perceptual agency has been minimized.

Meanwhile, “A Song for Europe” works as a fitting accompaniment to the scene’s visual elements, providing the only aural consolation to Elvira’s breakdown. Even Red Zora’s appearance in the arcade toward the end of scene provides false comfort—Zora first flirts with one of the men who beat Elvira at the beginning of the film and then, upon being told by Elvira what this man did to her, intentionally expresses affection for him (“Well, I like him all the same.”) “A Song for Europe,” on the other hand, seems to
elegize Elvira’s situation: “Here as I sit at this empty café thinking of you/I remember all those moments lost in wonder/That we’ll never find again.” But if the auditory presence of “A Song for Europe” reassures the spectator that Elvira is not alone in her pain, it does so at a remove since it fails to break through the din of the arcade and fully communicate its verbal content.

The next scene takes place at Soul Frieda’s (Walter Bockmayer) apartment, where noise reinforces in an even more aggressive manner the degree to which technological mediation has overwhelmed individual perception and agency. Throughout the scene the music of an accordion or harmonium weaves in and out of the sound mix—whether this sound comes from within or outside the diegesis remains undetermined, or unresolved. At certain points in the scene Elvira and Red Zora play with a spinning top that produces a clacking, metallic sound. Soul Frieda also plays a cassette of Suicide’s terrifying punk classic “Frankie Teardrop,” a ten-plus minute epic built out of an incessant looped beat, increasingly dense synthesizer washes, and singer Alan Vega’s frenzied narrative about a factory worker who, due to financial distress, commits suicide after killing his wife and child. Already structured around swirling noise and Vega’s gut-wrenching screams, the song is edited and mixed by Fassbinder so that certain lyrics are emphasized or else elided, and only in a manner that someone familiar with the song would know was the work of post-production manipulation. Meanwhile, a series of monologues are presented: Soul Frieda relates

---

21 It seems highly likely that Fassbinder selected the Roxy Music track in part for its title. Like In a Year of Thirteen Moons, “A Song for Europe” tells a personal story of heartbreak and romantic regret while alluding in its title to larger (geopolitical, cosmological) concerns.

22 Fassbinder makes it perfectly clear that Soul Frieda does not manipulate the cassette—he merely places it in a tape deck, presses play, and walks away from the source of the music.
a dream, Red Zora tells Soul Frieda the story of Elvira’s transformation into a woman, Elvira explains her feelings of shame and then acceptance concerning her sexual relations with men, and then, after Red Zora expresses her own feelings about men, Soul Frieda tells the story of his mental illness and incurability by psychoanalysis (as an orphan he had no mother or father to refer to in regard to his psychological development).

In one sense this scene retains connections to conventional sound realism: throughout much of the scene dialogue can be heard above other sounds, which often underscore the dialogue and corresponding character actions. But certain moments amplify the stylistic excess of the arcade scene, in which a multi-layered soundtrack makes noise more significant than human communication. In many instances the characters’ voices are overwhelmed or drowned out by the noise created by the accordion or harmonium, the top, and “Frankie Teardrop.” While on occasion these non-verbal sounds provide relatively conventional commentary on character dialogue and actions, at most moments they do not. Indeed, the distorted synthesizer noise that drives “Frankie Teardrop” frequently overwhelms speech for no discernible reason. Furthermore, the song’s narrative is almost completely dropped from the sound mix, with significant lyrical sections lowered dramatically in volume. Considering the fact that Vega’s lyrics—which connect a murder-suicide to the dehumanizing effects of industrial society—echo elements of the story and theme of *Thirteen Moon*, this would appear to be an odd aesthetic decision. But that decision makes sense in light of the vocal elements of the song that Fassbinder leaves intact and therefore emphasizes: Vega’s
abrupt, shrill, and harrowing screams. The sound mix foregrounds the noisiest aspects of the human voice that non-verbally express suffering, pain, confusion, and despair.

Vega’s cries contrast with the ceaseless garrulousness of the characters, whose attempts to explain or understand their pain through language result in failure. For the first time we learn that Elvira’s sex change was undertaken not because she truly felt like a woman or because she desired men, but because the person with whom she was in love told her that he might love her were she a woman—the pain Elvira suffers as a result of a life-altering procedure lies in her own dependence on others’ feeling toward her. But Elvira doesn’t acknowledge the true cause of her suffering, which she describes as the product of the men who currently repulse her. Rather than understand her feelings of alienation and non-belonging as at least partly dictated by her own actions and decisions, Elvira speaks of her feelings as the fault of others. Fittingly, Soul Frieda’s story of his unsuccessful engagement with psychoanalysis parallels Elvira’s inability to understand and explicate her problems through language.23 Soul Frieda demonstrates to Elvira and Zora his antisocial tendencies by lapsing into nonsensical speech as he runs his hands over his face and imitates the gibberish of an insane person. He then devolves into a crying jag when recounting how the limits of language—namely, the inability of psychoanalytic concepts and categories to resolve his issues—prevented a proper diagnosis of his mental illness. Soul Frieda’s monologue includes elements that echo Elvira’s personal story elements (growing up as an orphan

23 Significantly, a nun named Sister Gudrun (played by Fassbinder’s mother, Lieselotte Pempeit) is the one who must communicate to Elvira the details surrounding her early years as an orphan rejected by her biological mother. Not only had Elvira forgotten those details, but when Sister Gudrun tells them to her she faints, as if unable to process the information—language fails even when Elvira is on the receiving end of the communication.
and feeling socially alienated), but more importantly this monologue lapses into noise in a manner similar to Vega’s screams in “Frankie Teardrop.”

Peucker claims that in *Thirteen Moons* authentic self-expression occurs when the human voice lapses into extra-linguistic sound: “Invaded from within by the ‘code of Art,’ Erwin/Elvira’s narrative is the story of a culturally constituted subjectivity. However . . . language itself is infiltrated by the real (of hysterical anguish) through the medium of the voice” (107). Militz reaches a similar conclusion in his reading of the scene in which Elvira and Red Zora speak with Soul Frieda:

The fact that the non-verbal faculties of the human voice are indeed implemented in order to convey the character’s states of mind is supported by the film’s eighth sequence, in which Seelenfrieda’s account of her disturbing experiences is put to a cacophony of what appears to be the voices of insanity. Apparently, Fassbinder’s use of voice inflection and non-verbal human sounds is geared at a direct conveyance of the pressure under which his characters find themselves. (182)

Yet technologically mediated noise also obstructs the “direct conveyance” of the characters’ thoughts and feelings. In *Thirteen Moons* technologically mediated noise reinforces capitalist enterprise’s exploitation and alienation. While “Frankie Teardrop” lyrically protests such conditions, Fassbinder emphasizes the song’s noisiest non-verbal vocals so that it contributes to the very dehumanizing conditions it critiques. It expresses “the pressure under which [the] characters find themselves” through extra-linguistic distortion. Because the aural environment of *Thirteen Moons*’ technology-

---

24 The scene ends with a shot of a handwritten note on the wall of Soul Frieda’s apartment that reads “What I fear the most is if one day I’m able to put my feelings into words . . .”

25 Elsaesser notes: “The ‘I’ that in this film suffers so excruciatingly is an ‘I’ that does not repress suffering, nor does it voice it directly, but ‘ex-corporates’ it: suffusing the film in ways the filmic discourse fails to contain, except by modulating sound effects, light, music, ambient noise into an almost abstract figuration, as in the scene of Elvira weeping in the video arcade” (213).
inundated Frankfurt subsumes verbal expression in obfuscating din, Elvira and Soul
Frieda’s attempts to express themselves as marginalized subjects in capitalist society
either end in evasions of the subject—to speak one’s mind is pointless, for who could
listen?—or else become a noise component within an even louder noisescrape.

On other occasions Militz reads interaction among various forms of media in
Fassbinder’s work as a metaphor for characters’ internalization of social patterns,
expectations, and values rather than as a metaphor for these characters’ “direct
conveyance” of thoughts and feelings. Writing about Fassbinder’s 1970 play Pre-
Paradise Sorry Now, Militz states the following:

Media interplay enables Fassbinder to externalize the emotional drying-out of the characters in the face of cruel social conventions. The
employment of rather epic text types for the depiction of the stifling of living language, the rejection of the standard High German in order to
show the substitution of living language by a self-imposed, artificial language as well as the introduction of an instance of mediation for the
conveyance of the perverted remnants of living language—all these means indicate the extreme extent to which conventional speech patterns
have erased authentic living language and come to dominate the characters’ consciousness. As all these devices can be related to
aesthetic practices in the vicinity of the modern media, it is by means of media interaction that Fassbinder is able to indicate the characters’
internalization of the social other. (80)

Militz sees the ubiquity of media as speaking for Fassbinder’s characters, whose ability
to express themselves in their own words has failed in the face of acquiescence to
hegemonic language. This principle operates in Thirteen Moons. Language repeatedly
fails the film’s characters whenever they lapse into quotation, cliché, or monologue—all
instances of substituting someone else’s words or robotic oratory for authentic
communication. Moreover, in Thirteen Moons overlapping technological recordings
substitute noise for human expression and reciprocal verbal exchange. Indeed,
throughout the film Fassbinder reinforces Elvira’s reification of her emotions and self-expression by depicting her as mute while others speak for her, and often through technological devices.\textsuperscript{26}

*Thirteen Moon*’s gradual substitution of technology for the human and noise for communication culminates in its final scene, the noisiest and most complex in terms of sound design. Several sound sources form a dense, abrasive whole: from outside Erwin/Elvira’s apartment come faint environmental sounds such as traffic; from inside the apartment the Vienna Boys Choir record as well as various conversations between Elvira’s friends, family, and acquaintances; initially heard within a psychiatrist’s (Gerhard Zwerenz) apartment, and then carrying over into the scene’s subsequent locations, Erwin/Elvira’s tape recorded interview; an extra-diegetic pop song that loops over the film’s final freeze frame.\textsuperscript{27} Peucker is most concerned with the role of the voice within this scene’s multi-layered soundtrack, and links Fassbinder’s separation of voice from body via technological mediation to the director’s materialistic, anti-idealistic, and anti-fascist representation of corporeality:

Fassbinder’s text . . . refuses to its very end to harness image and voice, choosing instead to lay its textualities bare. During the final minutes of *Thirteen Moons*, the multiple layers of its soundtrack are at their most prominent, and music never has the function of linking voice to body. . . . As the taped voice of Erwin/Elvira contemplates suicide, that voice’s severance from its source in the body becomes hopelessly final as we come to realize that s/he is already dead. While the recorded voice, separable from the body, continues its search for significance, the body itself has become a corpse beyond significance, wholly consigned to abjection. . . . Neither the skipping record nor the taped interview is

\textsuperscript{26} One of the few exceptions to this rule is Elvira’s interview. However, Elvira’s emotive and sincere self-expression in this interview is not only mediated as a tape recording but also made into a component of a larger noisescap[e that obscures her words.

\textsuperscript{27} Brigitte Peucker hears the “disembodied ‘celestial’ voices” that are heard throughout much of the film—and which I discussed earlier in this chapter—but I couldn’t hear this source in the scene myself (112).
anchored in a body. Instead, the body is rendered mute, and voice, its residue, sings on, embalmed in the mechanisms of technology. (112)

According to Peucker, Fassbinder’s separation of voice from body via technological mediation—both within the diegesis of the final scene of _Thirteen Moons_ and through the film’s various sound strategies—echoes the “end of all signification” that a hegemonic ideology would have the individual obey (113). For Peucker the ideology Fassbinder opposes is fascism, and yet the film provides clues that technologically mediated noise is also a consequence of capitalist production. Saitz’s reappearance in Elvira’s life as a cruelly exploitative force is the final straw that leads her to commit suicide: initiating sex with Red Zora in Elvira’s apartment, Saitz reinforces the commodification of feelings and relationships that guide his capitalist practices and that have allowed him to become a viable power within a system founded on the same principles. Elvira does not resist Saitz’s capitalist code but instead escapes from it, reaffirming its power. As family members, friends, and acquaintances discover her lifeless body, a tape recording plays her voice, which becomes lost within a noisescape similar to those in the spatial environments constructed by Saitz.

Yet _In a Year of Thirteen Moons_ encourages distance between the spectator’s and Elvira’s interactions with technological mediation. Whereas Elvira succumbs to her environment, Fassbinder makes sure the spectator remains intensely aware of the film’s manipulations of sound. Because noise in the final scene of _Thirteen Moons_ is recognizable and perceivable only by the spectator, Elvira’s death disassociates this noise from the protagonist’s immediate perceptions. The purely cinematic aspects of the noisescape start with Elvira’s recorded interview. Initially listened to by the psychiatrist and his nude girlfriend in his apartment, the interview continues on the film’s soundtrack
as the narrative action transfers to Elvira’s apartment. The spectator is made to understand that this aural element cannot possibly be heard by any of the characters gathered at Elvira’s apartment (including the psychiatrist, who leaves his apartment along with his girlfriend in order to check on Elvira). Furthermore, the very last sound of the film—the pop song—emerges suddenly as an extra-diegetic element. Eventually one or two seconds of the song loop repeatedly, ending the film with the infinite non-progression of technologically mediated sound—a melody transformed into noise, the singer’s voice turned into nonsense. In this way Fassbinder sustains the film’s association of noise with the diminishment of human expression. The final scene foregrounds cinematic sound as artificial by featuring disparate aural sources that together form noise and containing individual components that are “impossible” in their relationship to the fictional diegesis.28 The blatantly constructed status of noise is not intended to disorient the spectator in the manner that noise—and along with it, Saitz’s emotional, economic, and aural domination—disorients Elvira. Instead this purely cinematic noise encourages an understanding of technological mediation’s potential to perform critical artistic tasks rather than simply disruptive ones.

**The Third Generation and Sonic Terrorism**

Two films after *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* Fassbinder would make an even stronger connection between capitalism and noise. Following his contribution to the omnibus feature *Germany in Autumn* (1978), *The Third Generation* was Fassbinder’s

---

28 The pop song does not underscore the action in the final scene as would a traditional extra-diegetic musical score: the song plays abruptly and without precedent (*Thirteen Moons* has thus far not featured any similarly sounding music, whether diegetic or extra-diegetic), and in complete tonal contrast to the subject matter of the scene. The song thus stands out in several respects: because of its sudden emergence from beyond the diegesis, because the looping indicates its technological mediated status, and because it adds upbeat music to a tragic scene.
second cinematic reaction to a series of spectacular and tragic events that rocked West Germany in 1977. The most famous of these events were the kidnapping and killing of industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer by the militant left-wing Red Army Faction, and the hijacking of a commercial airliner by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The West German government’s response to these terrorist acts—which involved the overturning of constitutional law and its possible involvement in the mysterious deaths of several incarcerated RAF leaders—has been the subject of controversy for almost forty years. As Fassbinder’s only feature-length film to explore the political and social issues surrounding these events, *The Third Generation* remains provocative for representing terrorism and societal oppression on an elemental level. Rather than understand them as manifestations of ideological extremism, Fassbinder sees terrorism and federal authoritarianism as existing in the very physical and environmental products of contemporary German society.\(^{29}\) The most emblematic environmental structure within *The Third Generation* is noise pollution, which Fassbinder builds cinematically by overlapping and interweaving dialogue, extra-diegetic music, and ambient sound from televisions and radios.

The film’s narrative focuses on an ostensibly left-wing terrorist cell comprised of members who otherwise possess regular jobs and lives. August (Volker Spengler) is the cell leader, initiating its meetings and activities. He also secretly funds the cell with money provided by P.J. Lurz (Eddie Constantine), a businessman who heads a large technologies firm. Susanne (Hanna Schygulla) works for Lurz as a secretary; she is married to Edgar (Udo Kier), another cell member who is also the son of Gerhard (Hark

\(^{29}\) Right down to its bathroom stalls: each section of the film opens with an epigraph taken from graffiti in public men’s rooms.
Bohm), a detective who hunts down the terrorists while having an affair with Susanne. The other terrorists are: Petra (Margrit Carstensen), who seeks to escape an abusive relationship with her husband; Hilde (Bulle Ogier), a historian and feminist who enters into an abusive relationship with Paul (Raúl Gimenez), a new member who has recently trained in Africa; record store employee Rudolf (Harry Baer), whose apartment often serves as the cell’s meeting-place; Ilse (Y Sa Lo), a heroin addict living with Harry; Günther (Franz Walsch), Ilse’s lover as well as an explosive expert just out of the army; and Bernhard (Vitus Zeplichal), Günther’s friend, would-be Marxist intellectual, and cell pariah. August—and, ultimately, Lurz—manipulate the cell into committing increasingly destructive and self-destructive acts until several members finally kidnap Lurz and hold him for ransom.

*The Third Generation* rarely depicts the terrorists working together toward a united goal. Instead, sustained parallel editing portrays the cell’s various sub-groups—created from romantic, criminal, familial, or other divisions—performing distinct yet related actions, some of them dramatic and some of them farcical. At certain points four or five sub-plots vie for the spectator’s attention, with these sub-plots frequently linked through the film’s unique sound design. That is, Fassbinder frequently uses sound bridges to connect scenes and narrative threads, but in a manner that calls attention to the cinematic specificity of this device: typically the sounds that form these bridges come from radio and television broadcasts are not depicted in the film’s diegesis. Many scenes are connoted as occurring simultaneously since the same broadcasts are heard across multiple scenes. Yet the spectator is made aware of the post-production involved
in the formation of the sound bridges since most sounds cannot be fixed to diegetic sources denoting them as present in the same manner as the on-screen action.

Furthermore, with its dense soundtrack of conflicting auditory sources, *The Third Generation* takes up where *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* left off in its unconventional use of noise. Where the latter film features intermittent scenes containing noisecapes built from layers of discordant sounds, *The Third Generation* is comprised almost entirely of such scenes, relentlessly confronting the spectator with surfeit auditory information. Fassbinder employs two main sound strategies: the use of extraordinarily loud environmental sounds that drown out dialogue, and the use of disparate sounds across a spectrum of technological and ontological categories (technological, human, diegetic, extra-diegetic, etc.) that occur simultaneously and at equal volume levels. The former approach occurs less frequently than the latter, upon which my analysis focuses. In an interview featured on the DVD of *The Third Generation*, Juliane Lorenz, Fassbinder’s editor and partner during the last phase of his career, explains the concept and technique behind the film’s unconventional sound bridges as well as its multi-source, equal volume approach to sound design:

For [Fassbinder], this television-madness—television had to be present everywhere as a code or a means of identification. It was a figurative representation of the hysteria that [the terrorists] had partly created themselves. They were bombarded by news. We used actual newscasts of the time. Rainer taped every evening news [broadcast] when he came home. He had already told me two days earlier, “By the way, we’re going to use these as background.” I assumed that the viewer would occasionally be able to hear a radio. During the sound mixing, he asked, “Why did you cut it off after this scene?” I said, “We’re in another room now.” Really conventional, you know. And he said, “No, no, it has to continue. The television is on non-stop.”
Lorenz refers not only to the ubiquity of media-generated noise in *The Third Generation*, but also to its representation of technological ubiquity in a capitalist society. Fassbinder himself pointed out in interviews that *The Third Generation*’s defiance of conventional sound realism coincided with its depiction of modern environments out of which terrorism emerges:

> The film takes place in our modern housing, in our everyday setting. And what’s more typical nowadays than the sounds, the noise, the shouting that constantly washes over us from television, radios, and the streets? Someone wrote about the film that you can’t always make out what’s being said because it’s drowned out by the background noise, the loudspeakers, the radio and television announcements . . . But that’s just what I wanted to point out, not really the thinking of the individual characters, who are completely secondary in comparison to the climate of noise and racket they live in. The terrorism doesn’t consist in my reproducing all that; rather it’s the media, which constantly hammer away at people, who in the meantime have become so hooked and helpless that by now they can’t even manage to push a button to get some peace and quiet. ("Madness and Terrorism" 126-127)

Fassbinder’s point is not simply that noise pollution is equitable to terrorism, but that in a capitalist society terrorist acts become media events, with the ideological motivations of such acts distorted into informational noise. Fassbinder makes this point even clearer in another comment:

> At this point I could easily make the transition to a concrete discussion of the theme of my film *The Third Generation*, since the refusal by the media as well, and perhaps precisely by them, to deal with reality is to my mind one of the reasons why this very reality, this specifically West German reality, has not succeeded in conveying to the individual citizen what I consider the basis of democratic ideas in such a way that real democracy could have established itself, one that was not merely democratic in name and in which the phenomenon of now almost incomprehensible violence in response to violence and still more violence could not have sprung up. ("The Third Generation" 129)
For Fassbinder, technology and media cannot be separated from the political and economic ideologies of the societies that use them. In *The Third Generation* the acts the terrorists commit to combat the oppressive social conditions created by capitalism are transformed into informational content for capitalist media outlets and technologies firms. That content becomes noise as the terrorists inundate themselves with media as insulation from immediate political and social realities.

**Non-Documentary Noise**

Sound figures prominently in the narrative action of *The Third Generation* as well as its aesthetic design. The terrorist group’s codes for clandestine communication involve video players and the clacking row of metallic balls from “Newton’s Cradles,” and several characters work with sounds for professional or creative reasons (Hilde listens to the sexually explicit diary recordings of a seventeen year-old French girl; Edgar composes music on the piano; Rudolf works at a record store; Ilse plays the guitar). In *The Third Generation* the characters often become extensions of the sound-generating media that surround them.

From the outset of the film Fassbinder links the noise that constantly surrounds the characters to the simulated, technologically mediated society in which they live. Throughout the film’s credit sequence synthesizer music and a heavy looped beat synchronize rhythmically to pulsing, flashing credits. After these sounds fade out a television comes to the fore of the soundtrack, initially as static and thereafter as excessively loud broadcasting sounds. In fact, many of the scene’s sounds are exaggerated in volume: the buzzing of a phone, for example, sounds much too loud in comparison to the volume at which it would be heard in real life. Meanwhile, initially *The Third Generation* uses non-aural means to evoke the ubiquity of technologically
mediated information. In the first minute of the film a computer and a television (the latter playing Robert Bresson’s *The Devil, Probably* [1977]) stand against the windows of Lurz’s corporate office, which overlooks Berlin. The computer and the television act as mediating screens stationed in front of a diaphanous surface, obstructing any fully transparent or unified view of the city.\(^{30}\) A few moments later dialogue makes clear the degree to which technological mediation and its simulated informational fields have distracted citizens from concrete socio-political realities. Lurz assures a client over the phone that the current “anti-data movement” that is hurting computer sales will be overcome when imminent terrorist acts create a demand for data-processing technology. Himself a citizen surrounded by auditory and visual media, Lurz implies in his conversation that knowledge of the external world has become undesirable for those who wish to escape from immediate social and political realities.

The terrorists also surround themselves with auditory and visual media in an attempt to leave reality behind for simulated fantasy. In the settings where the cell socializes and plots its activities mediated information becomes noise as several sound sources operate simultaneously, disabling the exchange of political ideas through verbal communication. Such noise creates a feedback loop: the media translates the terrorists’ activities into sonic information that validates their cynical, attention-seeking motivations; the terrorists’ ceaseless interest in listening to sonic information about their own activities prevents deeper discussions or considerations of those motivations. The

---
30 Fassbinder also obstructs any fully unified or transparent view of the scene’s images: the pulsing opening credits discourage the spectator from undertaking a sustained, concentrated reading of the film’s titles even as they disrupt a sustained, concentrated visual reading of the fictional diegesis. The slow tracking shot that surveys Lurz’s office offers only illusory spatial mastery of this location, since whatever degree of visual orientation it provides is undermined by the pulsing credits and mediating screens that obstruct the window.
terrorist cell thus confuses fantasies of rebellion for effective political resistance. The film’s final scene satirizes this idea. The terrorists force Lurz, their captive, to recite a script for a video recording that will communicate news of his kidnapping as well as the terrorists’ conditions for his release. Lurz’s recital is choreographed for media dissemination and consumption: off-screen a terrorist plays a tape of animal sounds associated with a barnyard to make it seem as if they are in a rural area. This simulation through sound recording and playback is associated with the terrorists’ sartorial make-believe: cell members dress in costumes and make-up (as pirates, clowns, etc.) due to the “carnival madness” sweeping the country, but the absurd attire also logically concludes the terrorists’ increasing reliance on false identities and masquerades in carrying out their activities. Fassbinder’s point is not only that the third generation of terrorists are nihilistic poseurs attracted to the revolution to participate in mischief and mayhem. His point is also that terrorism and its counterforces have become nothing more than a consumable spectacle at the expense of productive political dialogue.

Throughout The Third Generation Fassbinder links sonic noise to simulacra and spectacle. In one of the most frantic scenes, Susanne and Edgar rush home to their after Paul’s assassination, which will now force the cell members to “go underground.” Fassbinder cuts between close-ups of Susanne and Edgar reconstructing their appearances and reciting pertinent information (birthdates, occupations, etc.) associated with their new identities. Through cross-cutting the characters’ litanies overlap as a baby screams off-screen. In visual terms the scene is relatively conventional, its cross-cutting no more intricate than that of a typical Hollywood
However, the scene’s sound design is excessively noisy, conveying a surfeit of information and associations. In the first place, the characters’ fevered recitations represent the degree to which their terrorist activities cross over into play-acting and performance. These recitations occur simultaneously so as to produce verbal cross-talk and sonic noise rather than harmonious or useful dialogue, further divorcing their litanies from the political motivations for their role-playing. The addition of the baby’s caterwauling exacerbates the cacophony. The baby never appears on-screen and so must announce its presence aurally, suggesting that Edgar and Susanne ignore their actual domestic and familial obligations as they submerge into their false identities. For Edgar and Susanne, the escape from an oppressive social reality is also an escape into a narcissistic fantasy represented by sonic noise.

Noise’s thematic relationship to escapism and lack of communication is elaborately developed in the film’s noisiest scene. At the mid-point of the narrative the terrorists await the arrival of Susanne and Edgar at Rudolf’s apartment order to commence a meeting. Five simultaneous sound sources: Bernhard reading Mikhail Bakunin’s “Protestation of the Alliance” to Petra; Ilse singing and playing the guitar; a television loudly broadcasting a political discussion among left-wing intellectuals and activists; intermittent conversation among the other members of the group; and a buzzing doorbell. Members of the group inhabit the same space and yet barely speak to

---

31 Indeed, at moments such as this the film appears to appropriate and perhaps even mock the conventions of Hollywood political thrillers—in an essay on his intentions for The Third Generation Fassbinder cites the aesthetically staid All the President’s Men [1976] as a successful mainstream political film (“The Third Generation” 131).

32 At one point Franz [Günther Kaufmann] even complains about the ceaselessness of the sound from the television—“I don’t understand why this crap is constantly on!”—and attempts to lower its volume.
one another. The dense sonic field both reinforces the group’s feelings of alienation and
discontent while obstructing any rational discussion, dialogue, and critical thought.

Fassbinder complements the scene’s intricate sound design with gliding lateral
tracking shots that survey the people and objects in Rudolf’s apartment. These shots
frequently follow August as he roams the room slowly while asking others as to the
whereabouts of Susanne and Edgar. The gliding tracking shots parallel the gliding
tracking shots in the final scene of Thirteen Moons. In the latter film, tracking shots
snake around characters as if to evoke Elvira’s inability to connect (or to have
connected) with them. Conversely, in the scene from The Third Generation the slow
tracking shots make August appear to be sizing up the other characters as potential
marks.33 The overall noisescape connects August’s deceptive and disruptive practices
to the terrorists’ distorted understanding of their role in combating a system that is in
actuality using the group for its own ends.

But if noise within the film’s diegesis keeps the terrorists deluded about their
political motivations and goals, noise as represented to the spectator of The Third
Generation encourages a critical understanding of the relationship between
technological mediation and political reality. The tracking shots allow Fassbinder to
locate the source of particular sound elements that constitute the apartment scene’s
overall noisescape. Frances Guerin states that

the cacophony of voices that competes on the soundtrack is so dense that
it is impossible for the ear to discern them, let alone to comprehend a
single thread of dialogue. . . . In a typical scene, such as the one in the
terrorists’ house, the sound is raucous, it reiterates the constant noise in
the media, of capitalism (for wont of a better word), of the ideological
infrastructures that shape us and dull our sense as they function to

33 The fact that Volker Spengler plays both August and Elvira does not appear to be coincidental.
subsume our thinking and as they take over our very privacy, our most intimate moments. (451-452)

According to Guerin, the film’s soundtrack represents the technological output of a socio-economic system that privileges ubiquitous public consumption and stimulation over personal reflection and communication. But many of the elements that comprise noise speak specifically to—rather than represent generally—the violence and disturbance that result from sensorial overload. For instance, in Rudolf’s apartment the television broadcasts a conversation among left-wing intellectuals concerning the social forces that lead terrorists to commit atrocities in the name of revolution. The following are fragments of that conversation: “I used to say that violence against objects leads to violence against humans. Unfortunately, I was right . . . Not the students . . . the way society is structured produces violence . . . get up at six, be on the bus by seven, or a quarter to seven, if it’s in the area, or even earlier. He’s overburdened . . .” These fragments allude to the violence taking place in the apartment: the barrage of object- and human-generated sound creates an oppressive sonic environment that indirectly encourages acts of violence in feeble, delusional protest against society.

Furthermore, the television in this scene represents the media as a social and technological institution, yet its specific content does not necessarily express an authoritarian ideology, nor does it in of itself constitute noise. The left-wing intellectuals on the television broadcast speak of the causes of social violence: overwork and fear of economic marginality place pressure on individuals who then retaliate against a state that sanctions systematic dehumanization. The intellectuals express these ideas in a free-flowing dialogue rather than through a definitive or didactic monologue. Opposed to this is the Bakunin text, which in content echoes the televised debate and yet as read by
Bernhard is expressed as ideological orthodoxy. Bernhard reads the following:

The instinct to command others in its primitive essence is a carnivorous, savage instinct. Then under the influence of it, it went through all forms of slavery and obedience, gradually taking on a more human form and sometimes regressing into barbarism. Today . . . exploitation . . . money . . . These conditions in society are stupidity, ignorance, apathy . . .

Bakunin’s text echoes the televised debate by focusing on the way the “carnivorous, savage instinct” of violence has evolved historically so that social systems validate barbarism and brute force as a necessary, exploitative means of getting ahead. Instead of avoiding brute force in his own activities, Bernhard delivers the Bakunin text by haranguing Petra, allowing her no opportunity to respond or rebut. (For her part, Petra does not attempt to respond, but instead appears to suffer Bernhard’s haranguing in exhausted resignation.) Fassbinder demonstrates that technological noise is a result of the specifically capitalistic use of media when employed for quantitative and consumptive purposes rather than qualitative and communicative purposes—Bernhard’s reading of Bakunin adds to the room’s overall noisescape while itself coming across as a verbal deluge. The television, on the other hand, does not produce noise: it obstructs a rational understanding of political reality only when used as a devise for the uncritical consumption of constant stimulus.

The camera helps the spectator concentrate on specific sound elements within the noisescape. Guerin describes the film’s images as equally detached and undifferentiating as its sound design:

When in the terrorists’ apartment, the camera is constantly distracted, or indecisive about what it wants to look at. And yet the film’s sound remains constant as we listen to music or to the radio: the conversation between characters is apparently not a high priority. It is as though Fassbinder has gone to extreme lengths in this film to ensure that at every level a barrier is placed between the truth . . . and us, the audience. In The Third
Generation the camera oscillates between observer and another character unsure of its role or identity in this chaotic filmic world; it is neither inside nor outside. Again and again we are reminded that we are prohibited from entering this fabricated world: we are blinded and deafened to what is really going on, even though we are supposedly given an omniscient perspective. (453)

Guerin describes the camera’s often circuitous but nonetheless highly choreographed movements as “distracted,” “indecisive,” and prohibitive of a visual discovery of truth within the fictional diegesis. Yet in The Third Generation the camera is almost always clearly on the outside of the characters (there are few point-of-view shots), frequently allowing the spectator to know more information than any single character (for instance, it alerts the spectator to August’s clandestine rigging of the system that determines which group members are assigned dangerous field work). The camerawork operates in contrast to the film’s soundtrack, which is consistently comprised of chaotic, undifferentiated noise.

The scene in Rudolf’s apartment reveals each sound source visually. Yet Fassbinder also uses the camera to emphasize certain sound sources over others, gradually shifting that emphasis as the scene unfolds. The scene opens with a high-angle medium close-up that immediately reveals the source of the music heard throughout the entire scene: Ilse singing and strumming her guitar. But as the scene continues Ilse receives increasingly less attention from the camera, which follows closely the movements of August and cuts more frequently to the television. By filling the screen with television images Fassbinder foregrounds the political discussion at the very moment one of the roundtable participants speaks of the average citizen’s feeling of being overwhelmed by systematic brutality (“The way society is structured produces violence”). In itself the image of the speaking participant is of little importance; instead,
Fassbinder uses the image to emphasize the source of a single sonic element—the televised speech—within the overall noisescape.

Do these strategies suggest that Fassbinder accords a truth-value to the image that he refuses to accord to sound or noise? If so, does Fassbinder casts aside his critical of technological mediation under capitalism for a naïve faith in the visual? And would such a naïve faith accord with an ocularcentric view of visual media as more efficacious than audiocentric media? In *The Third Generation* Fassbinder fosters unconventional relationships between images and sounds, and especially noise, in order to differentiate the spectator’s and the characters’ perceptions. As exemplified in the scene in Rudolf’s apartment, Fassbinder produces complex relationships between images and sounds to encourage spectators to take up a far more participatory relationship to media than do the film’s characters. In the fictional diegesis technological media becomes ubiquitous noise that constantly impedes genuine political, or even personal, communication. Through the image Fassbinder makes sense of the film’s aural chaos not to domesticate or mitigate its more disturbing effects, but to demonstrate the critical manner with which the spectator might engage the text.

Both films *Thirteen Moons* and *The Third Generation* create gaps between the fictional characters’ susceptibility to media and the spectator’s encouraged critical distance from media. As demonstrated in the analysis of *Thirteen Moons*, Fassbinder distinguishes Elvira’s disorientation through noise from the spectator’s encouraged self-reflexivity through noise. The move from the subtle connections made between perception and politics in *Thirteen Moons* to the more explicit connections between perception and politics in *The Third Generation* parallels similar moves by Godard and
David Lynch. In Chapter 3 I demonstrated how Godard’s use of noise in critiquing the relations among documentary and fiction filmmaking, media, and socio-economic circumstances in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* lay the foundation for the use of noise in *British Sounds*’ more specific critique of media, labor, and politics. In Chapter 5 I demonstrate how the seemingly apolitical cinema of David Lynch possesses political potential in its general and specific critiques of perception through the use of noise. More than that, I demonstrate how Lynch’s work with noise in *Eraserhead* and *Inland Empire* speaks directly to the perceptual immersion and distanciation in Vertov, Godard, and Fassbinder. As the most fantastical filmmaker of this study, Lynch deals with overtly artificial and “unreal” elements of cinematic substance and style. And yet his work also raises questions concerning conventional sound realism and political representation, bringing into focus the inextricability of these questions from cinematic practice and theory.
CHAPTER 5
IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL: NOISE, TRASH, AND THE FEMALE STAR IMAGE IN DAVID LYNCH’S ERASERHEAD AND INLAND EMPIRE

A Different Type of Noisemaker

David Lynch differs from the filmmakers previously discussed in this study for two reasons. In the first place, his films are not explicitly political. While Lynch has discussed publicly his political beliefs, his work is almost entirely devoid of overt representations of, or references to, specific political issues. Vertov and Fassbinder arrived at leftist politics prior to making films, and used their work to incorporate, organize, and disseminate already well-formed political viewpoints; Godard held leftist sympathies relatively early in his career and then produced films increasingly in direct accordance with those beliefs. But Lynch has never embraced a political program, and when he has in rare instances discussed his films as extensions of particular personal beliefs he has connected them to Buddhist and eastern philosophies.

The second reason Lynch differs from the filmmakers previously discussed is the artistic motivation behind his move in the late 60s from the fine arts (where he worked in painting and sculpture) to cinema. As Lynch tells it, this move was predicated on combining sound and image to create an immersive, as opposed to a critical or distanced, spectatorial experience. Lynch recalls his initial longing to create audio-visual work to expand the immersive properties of his paintings: “When I looked at these paintings, I missed the sound. I was expecting a sound, or maybe the wind, to come out. I also wanted the edges to disappear. I wanted to get into the inside” (qtd. Chion 10). Lynch has also associated his interest in the sonic dimension of art with the “enveloping sound” of his childhood (qtd. 6). For Lynch, combining sound and image is inspired by the desire for maximum absorption in experiencing art to the ideal point
where the self becomes subsumed in the artwork and totally lacks self-consciousness.

In their essays, sound recording experiments, and other non-cinematic work, Vertov, Godard, and Fassbinder each theorized or else declared an interest in sound-image disjunctions that might dislocate spectators from the seductive pleasures of aesthetic identification and absorption. In contrast, Lynch has explicitly stated that he looks at cinema as a medium for more effectively marrying sound to image to construct fully immersive fictive worlds.

Typically, scholarship of Lynch’s films takes the director at his word that immersion constitutes the primary objective of his unique sound design. And yet Lynch’s films consistently critique the illusory and absorptive tendencies of recording technologies, especially those of cinema: dense and unidentifiable noises in fantastic fictional contexts foreground the materiality of sound and the machinations of sound-image editing. Scholars appear to have lost sight of this strategy due to the fact that Lynch differs from the main practitioners of cinematic sound experimentation in his focus on aural materiality without also privileging documentary sound recordings. Thus at first blush Lynch’s work with sound appears fully absorbing and immersive because it does not emphasize the difference between the real and the represented. The relative lack of reference to a real world—or documentary sounds from the real world—occasions an extremely nuanced and complex exploration of how noise can disrupt the conventions of cinematic realism. For Lynch, Hollywood realism in the late 20th and early 21st Century possesses no relation to a stable reality. In order to question the ideology of audio-visual illusionism, Lynch’s noise becomes increasingly unreal or anti-realistic. In Chapter 5 I outline the major manifestations and implications of Lynch’s self-
reflexive use of aural and visual noise in *Eraserhead* (1977), Lynch’s debut feature, and *Inland Empire* (2006), to date his last feature. In the former film Lynch uses noise to contrast the limitations of spectatorial immersion with a more critical, self-reflexive mode of perception. In the latter film Lynch expands upon *Eraserhead’s* use of aural and visual noise to critique directly the conventions of Hollywood cinema, especially as they relate to the representation of the female image.

**Lynch’s Noise**

Lynch often uses auditory noise to complement and expand upon visual noise. Auditory noise in his films takes the form of dense layers of treated ambient sound as well as harsh, loud, and overlapping sonic textures from industrial and experimental music sources. Visual noise immerses the viewer in the sensuality of abstract images while also making the viewer fully aware of the ontology of these images as manipulated cinematic material; aural noise creates an enveloping and richly detailed sonic field, both wrenching the listener from the comforts of conventional auditory perception and foregrounding cinematic sound’s technological mediation. The work of Salomé Voegelin proves especially helpful in understanding this apparent paradox: how Lynch’s cinematic soundscapes encourage immersion as well as distanced, critical perceptual. In *Listening to Noise and Silence*, Voegelin explains that aural noise powerfully impacts the physical body by interacting viscerally and sometimes even painfully with the human ear. Noise is thus an extremely immersive sound that collapses the gap between perceiver and perceived. However, Voegelin also explains that noise is an extremely physical type of sound that foregrounds the materiality of sonic phenomena as well as the mechanisms of the human listening apparatus. The materiality of noise encourages the listener to focus attention on the perceptual act of
Voegelin’s dialectical understanding of noise fills in gaps created by other scholar’s readings of noise in the cinema. For example, in her study of haptic, or intensely tactile, aesthetic strategies within the group of experimental films she deems “intercultural cinema,” Laura U. Marks conflates “haptic hearing” with the auditor’s almost complete immersion in the sound or source of sound:

One might call “haptic hearing” that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us as undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to. In some environments the experience of haptic hearing can be sustained for longer, before specific sounds focus our attention: quiet environments like walking in the woods and lying in bed in the morning, or overwhelmingly loud ones like a nightclub dance floor or a construction site. In these settings the aural boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct: the rustle of the trees may mingle with the sound of my breathing, or conversely the booming music may inhabit my chest cavity and move my body from the inside. (183)

Marks creates an exclusive association between a tactile experience of listening (as sometimes occasioned by noise) and the merging of perceiver and perceived (“the aural boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct”). In contrast, Voegelin attends to the multivalent sensations and perceptual modes activated by auditory noise. Her reading of the perceptual experience generated by noise grants the listener greater agency and awareness while also foregrounding the material complexity of noise. For Voegelin, auditory noise can encourage a perceptual experience at once deeply immersive and deeply material.

In Lynch’s films noise works in a similar manner, creating an absorbing aural field while simultaneously challenging the spectator to reflect upon her subjective perceptual
experience. Often Lynch employs aural noise in conjunction with visual noise—especially in the form of junk, garbage, and debris—to invoke a perceptual experience attuned to marginal and excessive phenomena. Rather than simply immersing the spectator in his fictional worlds, Lynch uses noise to encourage the spectator to concentrate on the distinct elements that comprise those fictional worlds as well as the manner in which these elements are arranged. By foregrounding the perceptual experience encouraged by *Eraserhead*, Lynch contrasts a dialectical spectatorial mode affected by noise—at once absorptive and critical—with the non-critical, wholly immersive spectatorial mode of the film’s protagonist. Later in his career Lynch conflates the spectator’s perceptual experience with that of his protagonist. In this way *Inland Empire* extends a dialectical appreciation of noise to accommodate a critique of the representational politics of classical Hollywood realism and its relation to the female star image.

**Noise, Trash, and Perception in *Eraserhead***

*Eraserhead*’s use of noise relates directly to the film’s unique production history and *sui generis* style. Initially funded by the American Film Institute in 1971, the film lost its financial lifeline once Lynch decided to make a feature instead of a short. During the remainder of *Eraserhead*’s gestation period Lynch spent significant time procuring non-AFI funding from independent sources (Rodley 76-77). The resulting sluggish cash flow can be attributed in part to potential investors’ unwillingness to take a risk on *Eraserhead*’s lack of convention and resistance to categorization. For instance, the film mixes aesthetic, narrative, and thematic elements from various “disreputable” genres: *noir*, horror, exploitation, and the avant-garde. Lynch has claimed unfamiliarity with avant-garde cinema, but *Eraserhead*’s persistent and overwhelming sonic noise bears
similarities to the soundtracks of avant-garde films, such as Bruce Baillie’s *Castro Street* (1966), which also blends various industrial or industrial-sounding noises (Sitney 170-172). Furthermore, like many avant-garde works, the film possesses sparse dialogue and thus frequently communicates story information through non-verbal sound. Visual noise in the film—its focus on object texture and materiality—bears similarities to much avant-garde cinema (e.g., Stan Brakhage) as well as horror, from which the film’s murky environments and decomposing and/or inhuman bodies seem to be drawn (Schneider 9-10). Lynch could have only made *Eraserhead* so unorthodox, especially in terms of the prominent use of aural and visual noise, by working outside mainstream channels, where adherence to conventional realism is one of the foundational principles in assuring spectatorial comfort and cinematic readability.

*Eraserhead’s* attack on spectatorial comfort, especially as pertaining to conventional sound strategies, begins immediately and persists until its conclusion. Such a sustained attack encourages an alternative mode of perceptual engagement by creating a consistent rift between what the spectator perceives and what Henry Spencer, the film’s protagonist, perceives. Henry lives in a world of visual and aural garbage. He dwells in a dumpy apartment in a run-down sector of an unnamed industrial city, inheriting against his will the responsibilities of domestic partnership and fatherhood when his girlfriend, Mary X (Charlotte Stewart), gives birth to a premature baby that might be a mutant, alien, or monstrous deformity. Henry attempts desperately to escape those responsibilities by (day)dreaming, engaging in a possible affair, and, ultimately, killing his child and himself. Yet Henry’s attempts to separate from the world fail because he refuses to acknowledge positively the noise of his own perceptions.
Seeking to suppress the effects of industry, pollution, and disease, Henry also forsakes a perception that would allow him to embrace the potential beauty of his noisy environment. By distancing the viewer from Henry’s perceptions while also encouraging immersive perceptual modes, Lynch leads the viewer of *Eraserhead* toward the acceptance of noise that Henry refuses. Lynch performs this perceptual comparison by using noise to shift between immersive and distanced modes of spectatorship.

The film’s first scene functions as a prologue. In it, superimpositions of unidentified figures and objects alternate with tracking shots and extreme close-ups of rock-like textures. The first shot introduces Henry laying horizontal across the bottom of the screen, with his head on the right. The bottom edge of the frame cuts off the left side of his body. As the shot progresses Henry’s body comes into full view as it floats from the bottom to the top of the screen, soon passing over, via superimposition, a planet appearing just above Henry’s right temple. During this shot a thick, incessant wall of drone-like noise fills the soundtrack. The addition of another layer of whirring noise increases the overall soundtrack volume as Henry floats toward and then exits the left side of the screen. The drone continues to increase in intensity as the camera tracks toward the planet.

The second shot of the prologue appears to be a tracking close-up or extreme close-up of the planet’s rocky terrain—the shot scale is difficult to determine due to the lack of an intermediate shot between the first extreme long shot (of the planet, with Henry superimposed) and this one. Another droning noise containing a greater level of bass fills the soundtrack. As the tracking shot continues, the terrain of the planet gives way to a pure black screen—whether this black connotes a dark crevice within the
terrain or outer space is difficult to determine. A new shot soon appears: a tracking shot
toward a large circular opening along the edge of what appears to be a rectangular box
jutting out from the side of a rocky wall or floor. (The box may actually be the damaged
roof of a house, since an emerging small cylinder can easily be construed as a
chimney.) At this point the soundtrack quickly dissolves into another drone that
possesses an even murkier and “darker” bass sound, resembling the type of aural
perception that occurs when one submerges in deep water.

The techniques and stylistic strategies in these first three shots accord with Anne
Jerslev’s observation that Lynch typically begins his films by confronting spectators with
the ambiguous yet sensual materiality of objects rather than providing spectators with a
conventional orientation of objects as recognizable entities in space and time (“Beyond
Boundaries” 151). Lynch possesses a propensity to use what she calls “visual noise,” or
visual distortions created through blurring, superimposition, opacity (via low-key
lighting), and an emphasis on dense and tactile textures (via invasive tracking shots and
extreme close-ups) (“Visual ‘Noise’ in David Lynch’s Lady Blue Shanghai [2010]”). Such
strategies arrive at what Jerslev deems a “minimally signifying” aesthetic that
emphasizes the textural materiality of objects over the recognizable entirety of these
objects as well as their clear orientation in space (“Beyond Boundaries” 154). She
discusses Lynch’s attempt
to produce . . . a sensuous feeling of the physical materiality of the
surfaces of the depicted objects and thus to deprive the objects of their
precise referentiality and their codification in the world of objects. What is
signified is still there but transformed into a “something,” a beautiful,
uncanny, almost obscene thing, and at the same time as a disturbing
imprint of a sensation of “the real thing.” (“Beyond Boundaries” 153)
According to Jerslev, Lynch’s cinema captures traces of physical reality while also transforming that reality into something abstract and unmistakably mediated via technology. This dialectic would seem to include self-reflexive, distancing properties as well as absorbing, immersive properties:

American art historian Craig Owens has described photography and film as *transparent media*, “based as they are on a single point perspective.” . . . But this is precisely not the case with Lynch’s films, which seem to switch easily and without further warning between two different constructions of vision—on one hand, this intimate and tactile occupation with surfaces, on the other hand a more traditional cinematic vision of space. . . . it seems as if Lynch wants in an almost physical manner to emphasize the two-dimensional film surface, but at the same time to transform the represented texture into a sort of three-dimensional relief . . . . (154)

However, Jerslev concludes that Lynch’s strategies for creating visual noise are more immersive than distancing, and more visceral than critical. Yet Lynch employs noise to invoke and encourage a self-reflexive mode of spectatorship in addition to an “absorbed” mode of spectatorship. Repeatedly in *Eraserhead* Lynch encourages such a two-pronged spectatorial experience by evoking Henry’s immersion in aural and visual noise while simultaneously absorbing and distancing the spectator from the same elements. The prologue’s first superimposed shot confuses the spatial dimensions of and relationships between multiple objects, while the subsequent tracking shots emphasize textures rather than identifying and specifically locating the objects to which these textures belong. Dense layers of ambient noise accompany these shots. Occasionally, conventional synchronous sound-image matches mark specific noises as having been emitted by an object (or caused by an interaction among objects), as with the descent of sperm-like creatures into a pool and the cranking of levers by the Man in the Planet (Jack Fisk). Nonetheless, the prologue’s sounds complement to a substantial
degree the visual noise created by ambiguous images, with a permutation of noises that are harsh, atonal, loud, and unrecognizable as having been produced by discernible objects or people. They are therefore immersive in their ability to envelope the spectator in pure auditory sensation.

The prologue’s encouragement of overwhelming immersion through sonic and visual noise appears to suggest metaphorically either Henry’s role in the reproductive process or else his own journey through the birth canal. The sperm-like creatures that emerge from Henry’s mouth more strongly suggest the former, while the character’s floating movement through amorphous space suggests the latter. The prologue thus implies a link between a character’s ego-less state of sensation (sexual intercourse or uterine existence) and audio-visual noise. Some critics have suggested that Lynch invokes similar states in the film spectator. For instance, Allister Mactaggart sees sound in the director’s films as affecting the spectator below the threshold of conscious awareness.

Sound “works” throughout Lynch’s films [by] providing a continual “performative twisting” with which to produce an eerie effect and affect for the spectator. . . . Unlike most films where soundtracks are added to the images later, Lynch’s films incorporate sounds throughout and within the images, and are not separated out for post-production. This provides a strong sense of how sounds can bypass rational, cognitive “understanding” of the narrative. Sounds travel and affect indirectly, working on the body and psyche in ways which disrupt the narrative flow. (128)

Mactaggart argues that sound in Lynch’s films operates on an unconscious level. He thus implies that sound immerses the spectator in Lynch’s fictional worlds to the point where she cannot escape its machinations. Yet Mactaggart also states that in Lynch’s
films sound “disrupts the narrative flow.” He thus hints at the distanciation effects generated by Lynch’s anti-realistic sound and noise.

Lynch’s subversion of the immersive properties and effects of noise can best be seen in the differences between his work and those of the post-WWII American avant-garde. Filmmakers in this movement (e.g., Jordan Belson) frequently associated cinematic noise (both of aural and visual) with immersive, “expanded” states of consciousness (Youngblood 92-93). But where many American avant-garde filmmakers create immersive cinematic effects to promote a liberated perceptual experience, Lynch associates immersion with a nightmarish sense of confusion, disorientation, and bodily disintegration. Lynch accomplishes this in the prologue by portraying Henry’s body as out of control. As noise dominates the soundtrack, Henry’s body floats in space without any sense of intentional or physically explainable suspension—if anyone controls Henry’s body it is the Man in the Planet, whose levers appear to activate the sperm-like creatures expelled from Henry’s mouth. Such associations between noise and corporeal dislocation question the “freedom” of a purely immersive mode of spectatorship.

To distance the spectator from Henry’s disoriented state, Lynch employs various cinematic techniques and strategies that call attention to the audio-visual experience as conspicuously artificial. For instance, by producing simultaneous, conflicting perspectival planes, the prologue’s superimpositions destroy what would in a conventional film appear as three-dimensional space. The spectator thus becomes aware of the constructed nature of cinema’s visual field from materials such as transparent celluloid and projected light. Likewise, the prologue’s abruptly alternating drones fail to create a seamless sound design that might collapse the distance between
the viewer and the viewed world of the film. Just as the prologue creates connections between seemingly unrelated actions (the pulling of a lever by a man in a planet causes another man to excrete sperm-like creatures from his mouth), so do the techniques and strategies of the prologue foreground the cinematic materiality and constructedness, rather than the illusory reality, of its individual audio and visual elements.

The scene following the prologue, in which Henry walks from a desolate post-industrial landscape to his apartment, exacerbates the rift between the spectator’s and the protagonist’s perceptions. The scene begins with a forward tracking shot that moves toward a hole (presumably located in the planet featured in the prologue), out of which streams a blinding white light.\(^3^4\) The hole acts as the viewer’s entrance to Henry’s everyday world of factories, broken machines, and muddy streets. Lynch conveys Henry’s “real world” without any of the immersive devices of the prologue. Wide-angle and static shots orient the spectator toward understanding the relationship between Henry and his surroundings, but they also remain at a significant remove from the character and thus discourage the spectator from immersing herself in Henry’s psychological headspace.

The first post-prologue sequence also contains noise in the form of loud and persistent clatter from industrial machinery. Initially this noise appears to emerge from elements situated within the diegesis: the enormous factories that dwarf Henry as he walks to his apartment are most certainly the collective source of these ungodly sounds. And yet the sequence refuses to naturalize this noise, concealing from sight the industrial machines and/or functions that could be the specific sources of the noise.

\(^3^4\) Later, blinding white light will be directly associated with the Lady in the Radiator [Laurel Near], the film’s symbol for the deceptive allure of absorption and self-annihilation.
Lynch thus produces a general sound-image match between noise and its source(s) while withholding specific matches that might explain the persistent and overwhelming quality of this noise. Furthermore, the discord between the sheer volume and ceaselessness of the noise and the cinematic conventions that dictate realistic sound volume exacerbates the sequence's estranging qualities. Todd McGowan explains the effect of this strategy: “As he often does, Lynch creates desire through a disjunction between the visual and audio tracks. By leaving the central action outside the frame, Lynch places the spectator in the place of the desiring subject and encourages us to recognize ourselves as lacking. Absence becomes present in our experience of the film” (181). Using the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis, McGowan claims that Lynch evokes in viewers the states of “desire” and “lacking” by revealing and concealing particular visual and auditory information. Such terms also apply to Lynch’s project of disillusioning the spectator of the inherent seamlessness of classical cinematic realism and the inherent, immersive effects of cinematic sound—the spectator desires conventional sound realism, only to be placed in a position in which she lacks its perceptual comfort and familiarity.

Like McGowan, Michel Chion emphasizes sound editing when discussing Lynch’s disruptive, anti-immersive techniques:

[I]n Lynch’s work, the pulsation of sound environments does not give rise to a flow which overrides the cuts. The pulsation is perpetually stopped and started by scissors which at once separate and join, often in synch with the visual cuts. The author controls the pulsation like a flow, which he interrupts to distribute and regulate in spurts. . . . The result is a paradoxical style of sound editing which, from Eraserhead to his most recent films, reaffirms continuity through interruption. (44-45)
Chion’s description of the challenge Lynch poses to conventional cinematic realism by way of abrupt (even if still synchronized) sound editing conflates Lynch’s anti-continuity methods with those of other filmmakers like Godard who emphasize noise. Sensing the similarities between Lynch and Godard in their cinematic sound strategies, Chion also differentiates them:

Unlike Godard, for example, who cuts sound in the same way as he cuts image and text, prising it out of its temporal specificity, Lynch uses abrupt, often bold interruptions in sound to the opposite effect: his sound cuts are designed to achieve an inscription into time, amounting to a creation of time by the director, like a demiurge. . . . Synchronizing the sound cuts with the visual cuts settles us inside the shot as if in a nest. (45)

It appears that Chion sees Godard’s unconventional sound editing as subverting the documentary quality of sound recordings (especially in relation to their “temporal specificity”), while he sees Lynch’s sound editing as entrenching noise within the diegesis of his films (“Synchronizing the sound cuts with the visual cuts settles us inside the shot as if in a nest”). I suggest that even though Godard’s cinematic style tends more toward montage than Lynch’s style, the manner in which both directors use abrupt sound cuts makes their work similar in refusing to integrate sound “realistically” into the mix or else conventionally match sound to the image. However, in their use of noise Godard and Lynch’s projects differ. Both filmmakers use noise to emphasize abrupt sound edits, but whereas Godard uses noise from real-world sound sources to focus attention on neglected and marginalized aspects of industrial society, Lynch primarily uses synthesized noises to focus attention on the artificiality of conventional sound realism in relation to his characters’ perceptual experiences.

Henry’s perceptual experience cannot account for noise as something in which he can or should immerse himself. In order to evoke Henry’s perceptual distance,
Lynch’s subsequent sound-image matching offsets aural envelopment with visual distance. Todd McGowan sees this aesthetic strategy as representing the manner in which Henry’s “[e]njoyment has been relegated to the margins, outside human subjectivity—even the film’s audio track hosts a constant din of factory noises during all of the exterior and many of the interior shots” (35). For McGowan “[t]he sounds indicate activity and vitality, but it is the vitality of machines” (35). Indeed, the unrecognizable noise of the prologue has become in the main body of the film less enveloping and more inhuman. Yet in conjunction with Lynch’s camerawork, noise produces an alienating spectatorial experience.

Conventional camerawork and compositions properly situate Henry within the spatial dimensions of the sequence—especially in comparison with the “abstract” prologue—but the geographic location in which Henry walks to his apartment remains unspecified. This is in part due to the fact that the post-prologue sequence begins in media res. Where the prologue forsakes conventional narrative and spatio-temporal logic along with conventional sound realism, the first post-prologue sequence creates a coherent spatio-temporal logic while withholding narrative information that might properly orient the spectator as to Henry’s geographic location.35 Thus sonic noise maintains its associations with the abstract, unformed, and uncomfortable even as it also becomes increasingly associated with critical self-reflexivity. Thus visual strategies and sound-image matches that invoke spectatorial distanciation undermine the enveloping sonic atmosphere that carries over from the prologue into Henry’s world.

35 Subsequently, the film never addresses where or when its action takes place, nor does it ever provide logical explanations for the fantastic and impossible events that occur within the narrative. For instance, the film provides few clues as to whether Henry lives on an earth drastically affected by a global catastrophe or on a planet possessing different physical and societal laws from our own.
Noise continues to pervade the world of *Eraserhead*, which constructs a post-industrial (and possibly post-apocalyptic) landscape from which Henry cannot escape: dirt, mud, debris, scrap metal, broken windows, rusted machines, flickering lights, torn photographs, rumbling and unconcealed infrastructure. The only place in which nature seems to exist, if not thrive, is Henry’s apartment, where he grows plants and nurtures small worm-like creatures. This confusion of interior and exterior spaces reinforces one of the film’s major motifs: the mechanization of organic life and the organic processes of machines (Rodley 56-57). Humans mimic machines in their tendency to become faulty and outworn, and as human and machine functions in the film become increasingly out of control, unpredictable, and illogical, both kinds of bodies produce visual and sonic noise. The noisy human machine is embodied most famously, and disturbingly, in Henry’s baby. Resembling waste, generating noise, and exacerbating the confusion between interior/exterior and human/nonhuman, the baby becomes the *Eraserhead*’s central symbol of the useless and unwanted (Schneider 12-13).

But the camera and sound recorder are much more taken with the baby than Henry, who is repulsed by it and rejects it. Throughout *Eraserhead* Lynch provides close-ups and extreme close-ups of the baby that do not correspond to the positions from which Henry views it. Indeed, often Henry does not view the baby at all or else intentionally avoids the act of looking upon it. Yet similar mismatches do not occur between Henry’s spatial relationship to the baby and the volume and timbre of the baby’s horrific wails. This is perhaps because Lynch realized that such mismatches would be normalized by the expectations forged by conventional sound realism, which would encourage the spectator to interpret the unrealistic volume and timbre of the
baby’s noise as psychologically motivated. For example, according to a psychological reading of the scene the low volume of the baby’s cries in relation to Henry’s proximate acoustic position could be accounted for by his repression of the baby’s existence. In such a scenario Henry hears only what he wishes to hear, and thus the baby’s cries are much quieter compared to what their volume should be.

Instead, Lynch expresses Henry’s denial of noise through this character’s visual actions and the baby’s aural retaliations. As Henry braces for (a possibly imagined) seduction by the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall (Judith Anna Roberts) he places his hand upon the baby’s mouth as it attempts to cry and interrupt the encounter. However, after the successful seduction, and during what might be an extended dream sequence, Henry finds himself on stage with the Lady in the Radiator. The Lady briefly transforms into the Man in the Planet and then disappears. Henry makes his way to a balcony beside the stage, where his head is displaced by a phallic appendage that paves way for the head of the baby to emerge from a hole in Henry’s neck. The baby starts crying for what seems like an interminable length of time—the effect is the film’s eeriest and most uncomfortable noise. In addition to the wailing, wind and mechanical whirring create a dense cacophony of harsh and unpleasant sounds. Noise thus might impart to the scene the immersive effect that Jerslev reads as the defining signature of Lynch’s style. What makes *Eraserhead*'s dream sequence remarkable, however, is how the illogic of its mise-en-scène contrasts with the distanced quality imparted by its camerawork and compositions. Visual distance offsets immersive noise by way of this disparity. Excepting a few shots that provide the spectator with Henry’s points-of-view, the majority of the dream sequence features long and static non-POV shots. The absurd
and impossible occurrences are also presented on or near a stage where unreality is demarcated and emphasized as having been arranged for spectatorial consumption. Lynch distances the spectator from these odd, conspicuously theatrical events, and so associates their artificiality with the accompanying noise.

By the end of *Eraserhead* Lynch encourages the spectator to understand that potentially immersive noise can be foregrounded as material through its association and linkage with conspicuously constructed images. In writing about *Eraserhead*, Chion concentrates extensively on the director’s innovative use of sound, including noise, primarily focuses on Lynch’s creation of an immersive fictive world:

Lynch can be said to have renewed the cinema by way of sound. If his visual continuity is classic and transparent . . . his sound continuity is idiosyncratic from the outset. Sound has a precise function, propelling us through the film [*Eraserhead*], giving us the sense of being inside it, wrapped within its timespan. The sound is animated from the inside by a perpetual pulsation. The noise of the machine, its micro-activity of particles, places us in a secure inner space like some bodily machinery . . . (44)

The words and phrases Chion uses to describe sound in *Eraserhead* evoke spectatorial absorption: “propelling us through,” “giving us the sense of being inside,” “wrapped within,” “animated from the inside,” “places us in a secure inner space.” Yet in conjunction with distancing cinematographic strategies, Lynch uses noise to encourage a critical perceptual mode in engaging with *Eraserhead*’s fictional world.

*Eraserhead* thus encourages a self-reflexive distance from intensely absorbing audio-visual components. Henry never achieves such a distance and appreciation. With the baby as its most powerful representative, the world of *Eraserhead* poses to Henry a monstrous machine generating disgusting sounds and visions that threaten his own corporeal integrity. Fearing immersion in, and therefore colonization by, such a world,
Henry chooses infanticide and suicide at the conclusion of the film rather than embrace the existence of his baby and his noisy environment. As Steven Jay Schneider puts it in comparing Henry to the protagonist of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*, “neither has anything to fear, physically-speaking, from his eventual victim; both are spurred to violence by characteristics and qualities that challenge their traditional way of looking at, and so understanding, the worlds in which they live . . .” (13). For Henry the world can either completely subsume him or else he can stand completely outside it—there is no place for a subjectivity that would acknowledge the necessary interrelation of self and world.

The final dark joke of *Eraserhead* has Henry entering an afterlife comprised entirely of visual and aural noise: blinding white light surrounds him as a deafening whirring drone fills the soundtrack. Henry embraces the Lady in the Radiator—the ambiguously angelic figure (glowing white yet physically deformed) that appears to Henry throughout the film as a vision of salvation—but the look on his face as he does so is one of disappointment and sadness, not ecstasy or bliss. Wishing for control over his environment rather than a dialectical experience of self-awareness and immersion, Henry experiences stimuli that engulfs and overwhelms him beyond anything in the film’s “real world.” Meanwhile, the spectator of *Eraserhead* remains visually removed from its final events—no superimpositions, tracking shots, or even point-of-view shots embed the spectator in the mise-en-scène—even as Lynch creates a sound design that encourages maximum immersion. To the very end *Eraserhead* balances perceptual distance and absorption, even if Henry cannot: the film’s noise becomes as much of an
alienation effect as an immersive element, encouraging the spectator to maintain a critical distance from the fantasy world that entices its protagonist toward oblivion.

**Noise, Trash, and the Female Image in *Inland Empire***

Where *Eraserhead* expresses Lynch’s general or universal concerns regarding perception, *Inland Empire* addresses specific concerns regarding the ideological consequences of Hollywood aesthetics, especially in relation to the polished, manufactured female star. Not coincidentally, in *Inland Empire* Lynch complements aural noise with images of detritus, debris, and waste in a manner similar to *Eraserhead*’s audio-visual associations. The title of the film refers to a heavily industrial section east of Los Angeles that produces vast amounts of pollution. Even though the words “Inland Empire” are used just once in the film’s narrative, and even though the film never explicitly demarcates which scenes take place in Inland Empire, Lynch uses the phrase to evoke interiority and intense subjectivity as well as to link his film to environmental noise in the form of garbage and decay. By consistently associating this garbage and decay with auditory noise, *Inland Empire* creates a dual cinematic metaphor: auditory noise is likened to junk, while junk is likened to the excesses of cinema’s sonic dimension. More importantly, by creating this association Lynch opposes conventional cinematic strategies in which noisy sensorial phenomena are excised, normalized, or moved to the margins of representation, and especially in relation to the image of the female star.

Lynch literalizes the noise-garbage metaphor in *Inland Empire* by using standard definition digital video to produce as much grain as possible in the film’s images. Not coincidentally, *Inland Empire* marked Lynch’s return to the independent, do-it-yourself principles of *Eraserhead*. After the surprise success of *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Lynch
made the conscious decision to retreat from conventional Hollywood production methods by working with minimal equipment and a *sui generis* narrative structure. Freedom from financial and technical constraints thus liberated *Inland Empire* from the demands of conventional Hollywood realism and allowed Lynch to pursue his most visually and aurally noisy film since *Eraserhead* (Rowin). The former film depicts perceptual encounters with noise as a form of simultaneous awareness and immersion rather than entrapment and self-deception as in the latter film. As I will demonstrate, this evolution is also made clear in the way *Inland Empire* encourages the spectator to arrive at the same kind of noise-receptive yet self-reflexive perception as the one arrived at by the film’s protagonist.

In *Inland Empire* Laura Dern plays Nikki Grace, a Hollywood star who lands the coveted role of Susie Blue in a Southern gothic melodrama entitled *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. In the middle of production Nikki engages in an affair with her co-star, Devon Berk (Justin Theroux). Perhaps due to the threat of discovery by her Polish husband (Peter J. Lucas), Nikki appears to suffer a mental breakdown that makes her believe she is Susie Blue, as well as a host of other characters (a poor Southern housewife living in a trailer, a prostitute working the intersection of Hollywood and Vine). But these hallucinations or delusions might be real: *Inland Empire* also implies that Nikki’s alternate identities and subjectivities are caused by supernatural occurrences that allow her to perceive events previously concealed by a spurious life of self-deceptive privilege. Whatever the case, Nikki’s journey from insulated Hollywood actress to haggard prostitute allows her to experience the noise suppressed by the entertainment industry that has mediated her perceptual experience of the world as well
as her own appearance. *Inland Empire*’s spectators engage in a new perceptual experience *of*/*in* the cinema by way of the protagonist’s sensorial adventures, but more importantly Nikki herself becomes noise—the film progressively distorts her image and the sounds she encounters in order to criticize her representation as a digitally reproduced product.

The first half-hour to forty-five minutes of *Inland Empire* center on Nikki before her identity split or transformation. This section of the film takes place largely behind the scenes of the film industry, especially on Hollywood sound stages, meeting rooms, and talk shows. These scenes are classical in style and contain three-point lighting, continuity editing, camerawork and compositions that sustain spatial orientation, as well as “wallpaper” soundtrack music in which extra-diegetic cues underline action and dialogue. Nikki’s world is constructed in order to appear and sound seamless, realistic, and “natural”—it is a virtual reality of seemingly concrete substance.

A pivotal sequence in the film occurs shortly after its narrative has fractured into multiple storylines and Nikki has fractured into multiple characters. As a poor Southern housewife, Nikki receives instructions from the disembodied voice of a young woman who seems to be communicating through a radio or transmitter. The young woman’s voice is rendered barely intelligible due to the transmitter’s static hum. Meanwhile, over a ghostly image of the young woman’s body, a superimposition of the arm, stylus, and vinyl disc of a record player creates a visual association between this otherworldly character and the potential for material noise to be generated by technological recording
The young woman instructs Nikki to wear a watch and then burn a cigarette through a piece of fabric so she can peer into it and perceive a secret world. As Nikki does so Lynch cuts to a shot from her point-of-view. What the spectator sees is an extreme close-up of the texture of the fabric slowly coming into focus as the soundtrack swells with dense layers of synthesized noise. Here Lynch conflates Nikki’s experience of entering into a tactile mode of perception with the spectator’s own haptic perceptual experience. He also conflates this perceptual shift with Nikki’s assumption of a new identity—Nikki and the spectator experience the film’s sights and sounds through the eyes and ears of a manufactured screen persona. Nikki’s existence as a manufactured character qualifies her haptic perception as inherently constructed, a result of a specific arrangement of specific audio-visual materials through particular technological devices and usages.

Later a similar transformation, or transition, occurs that extends *Inland Empire*’s self-reflexive critique of technological mediation into the realm of Hollywood filmmaking aesthetics and ideology. Nikki (or else one of her alternate identities) sits on a chair within a room, her back toward a suburban lawn that can be briefly glimpsed through an open doorway. The lawn can only be seen because flashes of lightning illuminate the setting as the camera slowly tracks toward Nikki—otherwise the shot is almost completely dark. Here Lynch works with the basic building blocks of visual noise: a lack of light that renders the image almost totally opaque as well as a surfeit of light that creates a similar effect. Thunder and rain supply the only sounds. In the middle of the

---

36 The film opens with the image of a film projector, followed by the image of the record player just described—from the outset *Inland Empire* announces itself as a material product of technological mediation and transmission.
shot appears a brief insert in which Nikki sits in a chair in a strange room where she earlier encountered a group of young prostitutes. Lightning briefly illuminates Nikki in this setting as well.

The camera approaches Nikki’s face at the end of the shot in which she sits with her back turned to the suburban lawn. Superimposed upon Nikki are moving, out of focus lights of various color (red, white, yellow, purple). This superimposition continues as the other shot cuts to Nikki sitting in the prostitutes’ room. Here a high-angle close-up frames Nikki’s face, but subsequent handheld shots track quickly toward Nikki or else move rapidly through space so that she is rendered a blur. Also blurred are the prostitutes, who have mysteriously reappeared in this setting. Meanwhile, the moving and out of focus lights become blurred to the point of appearing as dazzling, dizzying streaks. Beginning with the first appearance of these lights, the soundtrack becomes increasingly noisy: high- and low-pitched synthesized sounds swell and eventually merge with the sounds of thunder as well as the buzzing and crackling of a dying or flickering light fixture.37 Finally, on top of all the other sounds, Nikki lets forth a shrill, wrenching scream. The scream carries over into the next shot, in which Nikki finds herself at the famous Hollywood and Vine intersection of Los Angeles. In this location the prostitutes mock Nikki with laughter and a collective, sarcastic “Hello.” Now dressed in tatters and covered in dirt, Nikki at first responds by genuinely stating, “I’m a whore.” But then her voice becomes just as mocking as the prostitutes’ as she asks, “Where am I?” and then chants, in an almost childish sing-song, “I’m afraaaaaid.”

37 This last noise is a trademark of Lynch’s sound design, and usually designates the imminent or proximate presence of a malevolent force (Rodley 73).
Once again, a sequence such as this seems to correspond to Jerslev’s reading of visual noise in Lynch, which can be expanded to the director’s use of auditory noise. Opaque images, blurrings, superimpositions, and invasive close-ups encourage a haptic relationship to the image at the expense of conventional spatial orientation; meanwhile, loud, abrasive, and densely mixed sounds perform the same function in *Inland Empire*’s aural register. The overall effect would appear to be one of intense immersion, especially considering how frenetic and fast-paced is this sequence in comparison to much of the last third of the film, which frequently slows to a crawl and distances the spectator from the film’s bizarre occurrences. Immersion would make sense at this critical juncture of the film in order to convey the violence and disorientation of Nikki’s transformation into her final and most destitute incarnation—that of a Hollywood streetwalker.

Yet several aspects of the scene make it just as self-reflexive and distancing as it is immersive. In the first place, the elements in the scene that constitute visual and aural noise are not situated naturalistically in the film’s diegesis. The out of focus and then streaking lights do not appear anywhere in Nikki’s vicinity—they are simply overlaid via superimposition upon shots that present the “real” diegetic world of the film. Even the thunder and lightning are dislocated from any realistic function since they seem to be occurring simultaneously in two different locations containing Nikki—an absolute impossibility according to conventional narrative structure and spatio-temporal realism. While one can argue that the synthesized sounds function in the tradition of conventional extra-diegetic film music—however harsh their timbre—the crackling and buzzing noises possess no corresponding diegetic source that might make realistic
sense of their aural presence (often in his films Lynch matches the latter type of sound to its faulty electric source—here he does not). And beyond their artificial placement, the overwhelmingly dense, loud, and dissonant mixing of these sounds further dislocates the spectator from any possible comfortable viewing position to one of estrangement and distance.

Throughout his films Lynch uses unrecognizable sound effects and unconventional musical cues to fashion a tactile relationship between the spectator and sounds and images. Many scholars have defined such sounds as exclusively immersive. For example, in his monograph on *Blue Velvet* Charles Drazin defines the aesthetic function of Lynch’s tactile sound design in the following terms:

> At the heart of Lynch’s filmmaking is the articulation of the intangible. It’s mood and feeling that he seeks to capture rather than objective reality. Sound is a key tool in achieving this, whether music or sound effects. Indeed there’s no logical distinction between the two, and they merge imperceptibly into each other. . . . Whether . . . we hear music or sound effects is really immaterial. It’s certainly not something that you’re meant to analyze or even be conscious of. It’s there without you realizing. It sets a tone but defies explanation, just like a mood. (148)

Drazin implies that Lynch’s work with cinematic sound registers with the spectator on an unconscious level, thus affecting a non-critical viewing experience—the spectator has become so immersed in the film’s dazzling if unconventional audio-visual material that she loses all analytical or reflective cognition. Elsewhere Drazin uses specific language when describing Lynch’s technological mediation of existing sounds—scurrying roaches, smashed pumpkins—and their unconventional matches with images (149). But he follows Chion in supposing that Lynch’s anti-realistic use of sound is solely in the service of a heightened perceptual immersion in the filmic fiction. According to Drazin, Lynch intends sound to work on the spectator in an almost subliminal, subconscious
manner, the vaguely atmospheric properties of sound bearing the measure of their efficaciousness (149).

Yet Lynch uses noise to making the spectator actively aware of conventional sound realism and the constructed nature of cinema. For instance, the blatant anti-realism of the scene’s sound and noise effects extends even to its dialogue. Just like the baby in Eraserhead, Nikki’s cry is pure noise, evidence of the human voice forsaking language for the viscerally expressive. Language in Inland Empire is often employed for devious purposes (e.g., Devon’s smarmy flirtations, which are so obvious in intent that at one point Nikki predicts them word for word), or else it devolves into nonsense (the sitcom rabbits’ non sequiturs). In contrast, during the film’s moments of unrestrained emotion only music or noise is used as a medium for expression. These are also the moments in which the glitz and glamor of illusionistic filmmaking violently dissolve into chaotic fragments of sound and image. Appropriately, at the symbolically resonant intersection of Hollywood and Vine both Nikki and the prostitutes’ words become more sonic than verbal. The prostitutes’ collective “Hello” blends in with the rest of the noisy soundtrack so that the word becomes virtually indecipherable38, while Nikki’s three lines of dialogue evolve from the sonically neutral to the sonically musical—there’s too much “noise” in her delivery of “I’m afraid” to make the line readable in terms of character psychology or narrative information (is Nikki mocking herself, the whores, the viewing audience, or all three?).

As with previous scenes from Inland Empire, Nikki’s encounter with the prostitutes features both visual and auditory noise to depict a transformation in

38 I only learned what they were saying by using DVD subtitles.
perception. In her final descent from Hollywood starlet to prostitute, Nikki loses her orientation but gains the ability to perceive noise. More significantly, with her new perception Nikki learns of the ideological underpinnings of Hollywood’s eradication of noise. In a visceral manner she learns that such a process of eradication is hypocritical: it fails to account for a large spectrum of existing phenomena while also pretending not to participate in the violence of concealment. This realization extends from aesthetic and technological realms into the social realm, and this is why Nikki’s transformation into a prostitute inverts her previous transformation into fictional Southern belle Susie Blue. By becoming a prostitute Nikki recognizes that the system of sexual exploitation in which women sell their bodies for sexual purposes differs little from Hollywood’s insistence that female stars sell their bodies as imagistic commodities, as Nikki does both as a movie star and in her movie role. Even as degrading screen clichés concerning women, romance, and adultery fuel On High in Blue Tomorrows’s “trashy” melodrama, the filmmaking industry conceals the real-life tales of domestic abuse and violence that informed the production of the script.

Thus sanitized Nikki must descend the social as well as aesthetic hierarchy, becoming literal and figurative trash in the eyes of her former privileged self, and doing so in order to experience and understand how real-life violence and exploitation involves getting one’s hands—or more particularly, face—dirty. Gradually de-prettifying Nikki, Lynch combines visual and aural noise with representations of the sordid, violent, and seedy underside of patriarchy. At the conclusion of Inland Empire he morphs Nikki into a digital Frankenstein, an audio-visual paradox of noise distorting the female star image through technological mediation. This warped, photoshopped image of Laura
Dern and its attendant aural noise—a distorted cry—conveys Nikki’s ontological existence as a malleable, manipulable cinematic commodity. A passage from Chion written long before the release of *Inland Empire* evokes the mutual effect of both visual and aural noise:

> Besides, why should the force of an acoustic impression not be able to modify what one sees, rather like the way sound interference can deform a picture on a television monitor. Are not certain visual deformations and convulsions in Lynch’s work of this type? It is amazing how a voice issuing from a throat can change so much. The face conjured up by the voice is constantly changing, much more than the one we actually see. Imagine that faces were as flexible, deformable, and unpredictable as the voices which issue from them. (170)

In this image, Dern’s wide-eyed and wide-mouthed grimace has been stretched and exaggerated in the same manner as her cry—it has also been conspicuously superimposed upon a different image of Dern’s body in the same manner as the vocal noise falls outside the parameters of conventional sound realism. The fragmentation and distortion of the image evokes the violence rendered on the female body by the culture industry at the same time as it foregrounds Lynch’s revelation of the material operations of this process. As with *Eraserhead*, an immersion in cinematic noise is coupled with self-reflexive distanciation in perceiving and experiencing excessive audio-visual materials. But in *Inland Empire* character and spectator alike share this dialectical perceptual experience as conjoined with a political—and not merely aesthetic—critique of cinematic representation.

**Toward an Immersion/Distanciation Dialectic**

Comparing *Inland* to a Lynch painting titled *This Man Was Shot 0.9502 Seconds Ago* (2004), Jerslev claims that “despite the very different media involved, the viewing situation is similar. In the same virtual manner, the audience is (inter)actively immersed
in a time without extension and a space with no clear demarcation. As in the painting, there is no clear boundary between audience space and diegetic space” (“The Post-Perspectival”). However, cinematic (inter)activity includes distanced and alienated modes of spectatorship as well as immersed modes of spectatorship. *Eraserhead* and *Inland Empire* encourage both modes. Rather than nesting the spectator deeply inside his films, Lynch uses aural noise in conjunction with visual noise to affect a critical perceptual distance from cinematic material and encourage a political understanding of the ideological implications of Hollywood filmmaking. While he may not explicitly engage with real world politics on the same documentary level as Vertov, Godard, and Fassbinder, Lynch uses noise as a subversive element in relation to conventional filmmaking aesthetics, and especially conventional sound realism, to engage with politics on the level of audio-visual representation. Such representations should not be taken lightly, as they both form and reinforce attitudes concerning what is worthy of visual and auditory reproduction and of being communicated through media. In his films Lynch not only critiques Hollywood’s perceptual bias toward maximum immersion and lack of critical distance, but also critiques the instruments and industries of media that promote such a perceptual bias. His work is thus as politically motivated, if not as politically explicit, as Vertov, Godard, and Fassbinder. He is also just as significant as those filmmakers in situating noise and the perceptual experience of noise as necessarily representable for a realignment of the ideological, as well as the audio-visual, priorities of cinema.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how four directors have challenged the aesthetic principles and ideological ramifications of conventional sound realism through their use of noise. Moreover, I show how the challenges to conventional sound realism posed by these directors through their use of sonic noise also form critical depictions of industrial labor and capitalist media that are typically absent from traditional cinematic representation. And beyond that, I reveal how such critical depictions of industrial labor and capitalist media through noise reflect the directors’ concerns with cinema’s role as a device of technological mediation and manipulation.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to undertake a multi-dimensional analysis of cinematic noise: instead of investigating noise as a mere violation of conventional sound realism, I hope to have shed light on the ways Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and David Lynch use noise to address specific political and social phenomena (the conditions of industrial labor, the ideological distortions of capitalist uses of media, Hollywood’s constriction of cinematic perception and exploitative manipulation of the female image) as well as specific aesthetic functions and institutional limitations of the cinematic apparatus as they relate to these represented phenomena. Uniting these filmmakers and their stylistic and thematic concerns is the radical potential for noise to force cinema from its pedestrian role as an instrument of entertainment in which sound simply buttresses imagistic storytelling through conventional synchronized matching and extra-diegetic cues. In a sense Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch all use noise to broaden cinema’s representational, associational, and ideological parameters: it might even be argued
that these directors’ radical noise experiments constitute instances of “expanded cinema” in a similar vein as multiple projector/multiple screen films and cinematic works embedded in larger multimedia “happenings” and environments. Gene Youngblood generally defines “expanded cinema” as enlarging the spectator's perceptual faculties, and therefore her consciousness; as I have demonstrated, Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch extend and amplify the conventional sound palette through noise, in the process encouraging spectators to more viscerally feel and better reflect upon the material construction of their cinematic soundtracks (41). More than that, these directors’ use of noise—as created through overlapping dialogue, sonic distortion, directly recorded industrial and technological sound, and dense layers of drone-based instrumentation—combine and juxtapose with images in order to expand the representational, associational, and ideological parameters of visual language. Through noise sound does not just accompany the image but instead challenges its perceptual supremacy and ontological naturalism—sound is not present to support the illusion of a fully transparent and veracious ocularcentrism, but rather sound contends with the image in representing phenomena, disseminating information, and orienting the viewer as to the political and social consequences of mediated technology.

The reason this study focuses on Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch is because of the commonalities of their cinematic methods, aims, and uses of noise. All of these directors use noise to encourage a mode of spectatorship that is as critically distanced as it is sensorally immersed, and all of these directors encourage this dual mode of spectatorship to foster a politics of perception. That the films of Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch possesses, to varying degrees, political content is less important
than the self-reflexivity generated by their use of noise as a challenge to the transparency and illusionism of conventional sound realism. In effect, the works by Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Godard that I investigate in this study form a corpus of cinematic works primarily concerned with and structured around noise. The key point is that with noise Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch expand the parameters of filmmaking and the perceptual engagement of their viewers not just by the addition to the soundtrack of unconventional sonic elements, but also by the critical distance and self-reflexivity encouraged by the addition of those sonic elements. My readings of noise in the work of Vertov, Godard, Fassbinder, and Lynch contend with other interpretations that seek to position noise as a tool for primarily immersive and absorptive purposes. Like the work of these directors in relation to cinematic language, my study has sought to enrich the scholarship on cinematic noise by demonstrating how noise's expansion of cinematic representation and perception need not exclusively involve losing oneself in material sensuality. In the same way, noise as a tool of critical self-reflexivity need not be exclusively tied to political and ideological didacticism. Instead, my study demonstrates the fecund interrelations among noise, cinematic representation, political and social phenomena, and spectatorial perception and engagement, where each amplifies the radical potential of the others.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael Joshua Rowin received his bachelor’s degree in Film Studies from the University of Rochester in 2002 and his master’s degree in Cinema Studies from New York University in 2004. From 2004 to 2011 he taught film courses as an adjunct instructor at Hunter College and Westchester Community College and wrote as a freelance critic for several arts and film journals. In the spring of 2016 he graduated from the Department of English at University of Florida with a doctoral degree in English with a focus in film and media studies.