

Peter Strickland's film sound tracks

A world of dreams, nostalgia and fear.

By Jean Martin, April 2015

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Peter Strickland has emerged as an unusual film director, partly because of the topics of his films, but more so because of his imaginative use of sound and music.

Strickland is what some critics call a sound-sensitive film director. Before becoming successful as a director Strickland pursued a career as a sound improviser and record producer with a taste for the exotic, theatrical or nostalgic at the fringes of musical culture.

Strickland had the breakthrough with his debut film *Katalin Varga* (2009), a story about a woman's dream of freedom and liberation from the trauma of rape and her journey of revenge. The film belongs to what Jay Beck calls "slow cinema". The unusual soundtrack eschews traditional film music and relies instead on evocative location sound and soundscape compositions to create mood. Strickland lets his main characters express themselves through these composed sounds. Dialogue remains minimal. In a truly filmic manner the protagonist's psychological drama becomes a sensuous experience through sound and images.

Berberian Sound Studio (2012) stands out in the oeuvre as a more experimental film focusing explicitly on sound in moving images.

In his latest film *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014) Strickland continues exploring this sensuous audio-visual aesthetic, although music regains a much more prominent role.

Why are Strickland's soundtracks innovative?

Strickland's audio-visual aesthetic emerges from his choice of topics and the way he tells stories in his films. He deals with complex ideas and the emotional effects on the protagonists, for example injustice, revenge, freedom, power, love and fear, or the nature of repetition.

Strickland is not interested in action. Instead he creates audio-visual tableaux, where a situation and protagonist's mood is shown almost out of time. He creates space and time for these situations, using strong images, for example mysterious forest borders in dim light, accompanied by long, complex musical drones or ambient music. Strickland is not interested in realism: his characters are not shown earning money or pursuing a career. Instead he explores their inner way of being: "I am not into plot. I put emphasis on the experiential nature of cinema – films that have a sensory charge to them... There is no [narrative] ark here." (Q&A, Cine-City Festival, Brighton, 29 Nov 2014).

After *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012), his second, more experimental film about Foley sound, with *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014) Strickland has returned to the aesthetics of *Katalin Varga*, his first film.

***Katalin Varga* (2009)**

Strickland's taste for musical outsiders and fringe culture expresses itself in different ways in his films. In his debut film *Katalin Varga* (2009) Strickland focused on the basic human emotion of wrath (anger), which culminates in a tragic act of revenge. When Katalin's husband realises, that his son is in fact the result of a rape, he beats her up and throws her out. Katalin leaves her house on a horse cart with her young son, who watches without understanding, and embarks on a journey to take revenge on her rapists. At its core the film is a road movie with the theme of revenge and its tragic consequences.

The normal location sound, which is consistently in mono, is contrasted by scenes in which Katalin remembers and drifts off into an inner world of dreams. These scenes are all emphasised by surround sound. In one scene we can see Katalin traveling with her son on the horse cart.

A close-up shows the trotting horse with a section of the cart. The sound is in mono. When the camera pans towards the sky, we can see a bird of prey circling. The acoustic space opens up without transition into a large musical drone in surround, as if this sound is a metaphor for Katalin's liberation from her dark past. Frequently during the traveling scenes the location sound is replaced by slowly moving sound clouds in a vast acoustic space.

The composers Geoffrey Cox and Steven Stapleton succeed in evoking Katalin's inner world of thoughts and emotions through electroacoustic soundscapes. Often these scenes are saturated by strongly manipulated voice drones. The large, but slightly dark, sonic space is a symbol for Katalin's mental state, which has been darkened through the traumatic experience of her rape as a young woman. The positive aspect of this sonic symbolism lies in Katalin's effort to recreate a mental space for herself, that had been taken away by men. This is expressed through the images of wide landscapes and large sound textures while she is travelling on the horse cart. This sonic space is occasionally inhabited by Katalin's voice: she whispers fragments of an inner monologue. This enormous soundscape in surround sound, a metaphor for Katalin's dreams and hopes, collapses abruptly into mono, when Katalin is catapulted back into the film reality.

As Katalin arrives at the scene of her rape on the edge of a forest, we can hear mysterious, reverberant sounds of voices. Whenever Katalin drifts off into the world of her haunted memories, these spherical sounds can be heard.

Strickland avoids sound effects for their own sake or prescriptive music, which dictates how the viewer should feel. In the dramatic final scene of the film *Antal* (Tibor Pálffy), Katalin's rapist, who in the meantime transformed himself into a loving husband, awakes and notices that his wife Etelka (Melinda Kántor) is not in bed anymore. He nervously leaves the house to search for her. When he rushes across a meadow towards the edge of the forest, the sound expands into surround: clatter of storks, which sound ominous in their electroacoustic

stylisation and crickets, which tear the nerves of the ears, are mixed with abstract electronic sounds. This composed soundscape is much more effective than any music in expressing Antal's desperate panic to find his wife. The storks are never shown in the image frame, and the nervous noise transforms in its acousmatic detachment from the visual and through its insistent volume into a threatening sound. It is a sound, which could occur plausibly in the off. At the same time through its emphasis it represents the inner tension and somber expectation of the rapist. Shortly before he discovers his wife hanged on a tree, high cries of a bird of prey are added to the soundtrack. They sound like the violin stabs accompanying the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

The Duke of Burgundy: sound as a state of being

The Duke of Burgundy (2014) has been shown on the festival circuit to critical acclaim and will be on general release in February 2015. In it, Strickland continues investigating this audio-visual aesthetic. The difference to *Berberian Sound Studio* is that all audio-visual experiments have become expressive tools to create an overall mood for the characters in the film's meditation about power and love. Strickland has created a philosophical film about the meaning of repetition, stylised in the human domain through S&M rituals, in the technical world through the repeatability of recorded sound, and in nature through the life cycles of larvae and hibernation of moths. As Nietzsche observed, the last man is condemned to endless repetition. Zarathustra speaks: Lust wants itself, wants eternity, wants repetition, wants always-the-sameness. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, No. 9).

The film is a dreamlike, sensuous exploration of the power struggle between two women. One is the master, Cynthia (Sidse Babett Knudsen), the owner of a grand house and academic specialist in the study of moths and butterflies, the other is the servant, Evelyn (Chiara D'Anna, already encountered in *Berberian Sound Studio*), who is newly employed as a cleaner and housekeeper. Strickland created a quiet film with much space in which a surprising love between the two protagonists emerges. On the surface a sado-masochistic relationship develops but over time the relation between domina and slave shifts. This gives the impression of a plot from a cheap, kinky Italian sexploitation B-movie, a genre which Strickland actually admires. In fact, the essence of the film couldn't be further from that. Strickland:

It is a tender film, even though it is about sado-masochism. I tried to normalise the whole thing. They have the same negotiations to follow. What would not have been interesting is to have both into it. I wanted one person to go along with it. [Evelyn] gets precarious joy. Cynthia gets burnt out by it.

Sound as music – music as sound

The soundtrack takes on an important role in locating the drama in an inner world of desire and creates the all-pervading, dreamlike quality of the film. The music was created by the duo *Cat's Eyes*, which brings together the classically trained soprano, multi-instrumentalist and composer Rachel Zeffira with Faris Badwan, lead singer of the heavy metal band *The Horrors*. Strickland is re-introducing music into his films, although in new ways. In *Katalin Varga* there

was no music in the traditional sense, just soundscape compositions and drones, ambiguously fluctuating between pure sound and pre-musical textures.

Strickland commissioned Cat's Eyes to compose the music before the shooting of the film began. This shows how essential he considers music and sound design already at the script writing stage. Sound and music are not appendices or adjectives, added to the more substantial narrative. Strickland adopts a genuine audio-visual approach. Every part of the film - images, sound, music, dialogue and colour - is highly integrated. Even non-diegetic music, i.e. music that the actors in the film cannot hear, doesn't remain something external:

I try as hard as I can to unglue myself from the music I love. That gives them (the band) more freedom. It takes time to do that. The danger is when you do the edit and you don't have the soundtrack ready, you put in temporary music and everyone becomes attached to that music. It kind of makes the scene. So it is even harder for the musicians. So the key is to get the music in advance. Alan Rudolph and Peter Greenaway do this (Brighton 29 Nov 2014).

Strickland is well versed in listening and musical references. He has a preference for experimental sound works, electro-acoustic improvisation, underground or fringe music. Rachel Zeffira's first album in 2011 impressed him. Strickland sent *Cat's Eyes* the script and pointed them to musical references he could imagine in the film.

Once you write to something it is very hard to divorce yourself from that. Then it takes time for the band to do the soundtrack. *Cat's Eyes* are really good. They pushed me out of this pastiche zone. Left to my own devices, I would play John Barry or Basil Kirchin. ... I put Mozart's Requiem for the mole cricket going into hibernation and Rachel just went off and created a requiem. I didn't have any musical input. They would send me demos and I would give my thoughts. Sometimes they would listen, sometimes they would ignore me. I am happy with how it is.

Cat's Eyes composed music that is never emotionally prescriptive. Instead they created mood music which doesn't relate to specific sentiments, actions or locations. Like ambient music, it creates atmosphere and space for the viewer to reflect and experience.

The film is constructed around encounters between the two protagonists, which are repeated with variations. Repetition is an important musical tool, but music cues themselves mark the repetition of an episode.

The only time music evokes a specific emotional dimension of a character is towards the end of *The Duke* when Cynthia gives a lecture about the hibernation of moths. A requiem-inspired piece of orchestral music expresses her sadness. The film is essentially about suffering and redemption through love. At 1:17:15 Cynthia says: "Pinastri, pinastri (the release code word during SM practices) - Oh, if we all could say Pinastri to end our torments...".

The moth scene, an abstract audio-visual composition with close-up sounds and images of hundreds of moths signifies Evelyn's fear and sense of claustrophobia. Strickland:

In my last film [Berberian Sound Studio] sound was the subject. There was a licence to be a little overdramatic sometimes with the sound. With this one we tried to be sensual with the sound. We didn't want to be gratuitous or draw attention to ourselves. Occasionally, with the moths, sound can be more emphatic perhaps. A lot of it is subconscious.

Strickland doesn't put dialogue at the centre of his film. This creates space for other audio-visual events: the characters are shown in their way of being. They look, they act, they wait. Music frequently draws the viewer into an inner world – not necessarily that of the characters. Strickland and *Cat's Eyes* have a preference for large artificial reverberation and place the instruments - e.g. the oboe - deep in these virtual spaces. Long reverberating sounds are associated with dreaming. By contrast, dialogue is a daytime event, it occurs in transactions between people during waking time.

The Duke of Burgundy shows an inner drama of emerging love in the setting of a sado-masochistic relationship. The film is structured by repetition. The cool Cynthia, the moth scholar, gradually shows her real emotions during the identical cycles of the S&M rituals: 'You are late; clean the house; who said you can sit down? You didn't clean these pants; you have to be punished now'. Strickland uses music as a tool to highlight and transcend these ritualistic cycles of interaction, which on the surface look perverted and distorted, but turn out to be the vehicle for the two women to get closer (the first sado-masochistic act is only heard and marks the beginning of their love affair, a good 15 minutes into the film).

The music of *Cat's Eyes* uses conventional, almost simplistic tonal harmonic progressions. The essence lies in the instrumentation and the recording and mixing techniques. Rachel Zeffira uses the oboe, flute, her own voice, string quartet, clarinet, bass clarinet and cembalo – all moving at a moderate tempo with large reverberation. Frequently, delay is added towards the end of a music cue, creating a drone-like static sound texture.

Strickland takes his time. There is no rush. For example during Cynthia's lecture the cricket moth's sound is played for an excruciatingly long time, as if Strickland wants us to be drawn into another world through this sound.

Strickland doesn't explicitly reveal the meaning of moths in the film. They remain these mysterious entities, beautiful even when they are pinned down with a needle in a display box. Moths are often considered a pest. In fact, they are an important indicator for the health of eco-systems, e.g. as food for birds, frogs and other wildlife.

From one hour onwards, Strickland uses increasingly experimental audio-visual techniques, not for their own sake, but playfully related to the inner world of the two women, to their dreams and nightmares, as in the scene with the moths (1'26'16):

One of the most powerful images for me ... was the moths invading the space when Evelyn is blindfolded. These images capture the energy of anxiety or

frustration. I don't see that as a metaphor but as something that has a very visceral, physical impact.

The disembodied voices of Cynthia and Evelyn speak lines from former scenes of S&M activity. A wind-like noise in the background creates a cold atmosphere. Recording technology is a tool for repetition: once a sound is recorded it can be repeated and studied. For Cynthia the endless repetition of the stylised S&M-rituals, initially desired, eventually becomes burdensome. The electronic drone sound expresses darkness, the irrational, the vagina (the camera slowly zooms in between Cynthia's legs), the moths, the trunk where Evelyn is enclosed over night, death, the forest. Strickland freely associates complex images as in a dream. These tableaux vivants occasionally slide into complete darkness, shifting the focus to the sound. The electronic drone creates unity in this visual flow of consciousness.

***Berberian Sound Studio* (2012)**

Berberian Sound Studio is an exception in Strickland's output. In this film he uses the script to justify experiments with sound, i.e. creating a soundtrack for a horror film that is never shown. In his other films sound and music are tools to support the script (and drama).

The main character Gilderoy (Toby Jones) is an eccentric, socially inept Foley artist and sound engineer, who is invited by an Italian film studio to supervise the Foley recording and dialogue for a film. After starting the work he quickly realises that he is working on a sadistic horror film in the Giallo genre, which we, the viewers are never allowed to see, apart from its trailer. In effect, what we are shown is Gilderoy being shocked and increasingly horrified. There is an uncanny reference to the bewildered character Henry in David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977).

We never see the film *The Equestrian Vortex*, apart from the opening trailer drenched in red. The rest of the film in production is present only as light reflections on Gilderoy's face during his Foley work. We hear the soundtrack and see the recording of new sounds. Stalks of sellery are twisted for the sound of cracking bones, melons are smashed to represent the cracking of a human skull, cabbage is stabbed. These acts of aggression are symbolic for the torture scenes on screen: the viewer sees fruit and vegetables, created by nature brutally destroyed. Equally, the natural human voice, spoken by female actresses, is tortured. The actresses are forced to repeat endlessly the screaming, which never satisfies the sadistic technical director.

Strickland's main sentiment is nostalgia, a longing for the a previous state of affairs, untouched by relentless progress. Equally when it comes to technology, he prefers the analogue world of sound recording and manipulation: the Nagra tape recorder is fetishized; long tape loops across the recording studio, carefully set up by Gilderoy create a sense of mystique. The ephemeral world of sounds suddenly becomes tangible.

Strickland likes to mystify ordinary phenomena. In *Berberian Sound Studio* the film apparatus itself is fetishized: magnified close-ups of the celluloid rattling through the sprockets bathed in a mysterious blue colour. Strickland applies techniques from the electroacoustic music tradition, for example magnifying details of a sound or cross-fading a female scream into the sound of a kitchen mixer, which itself is manipulated into a chain saw sound. Incidentally, all the Foley work of Gilderoy seen in the film is carefully sound designed by Joakim Sundström thus rendering the artificial Foley work more real.

Screaming is rare in normal human life. A scream is an expression of extreme pain of a suffering body. To generate a genuine scream in the sterile environment of a recording studio is nearly impossible, so Coraggio, the director and, reluctantly Gilderoy have to take extreme measures to make the female actress genuinely scream: they have to torture her by forcing her to endlessly repeat the scream, by bullying, or through technical means: at some point Gilderoy feeds a distorted, unpleasant sound into her headphones and relentlessly increases the volume until it reaches the pain level. The horror leaves the fake world of the moving images and invades the real world of the actresses.

Berberian Sound Studio (2012) explores the horror of acousmatic sound, i.e. sound where its cause is invisible or not explained at all. Strickland associates the aesthetics of 'reduced listening' with the horror genre. Reduced listening is a concept introduced by Pierre Schaeffer (1967). Michel Chion uses the concept in film soundtrack analysis and defines it:

According to the author of the *Traité des objets musicaux*, this is listening in a mode that intentionally and artificially ignores causes and meaning (and, I would add, effects) in order to concentrate on the sound in itself, in terms of its sensory properties including pitch, rhythm, texture, form, mass, and volume. ... (Glossary, <http://michelchion.com/texts> viewed Dec 2014).

This leaves ample space for the imagination. But remaining at the level of reduced listening in electroacoustic music has its problems. The public doesn't seem to be much interested in the exclusive focus on sounds themselves.

With my first film, there was never this intention: let's make that really intense sound track. I was genuinely surprised when we had recognition for it. I was doing the same stuff on record. Nobody listened to it, nobody bought it. But as soon as you put that with images somehow people connect to it. I always try to plug my records for my films. (Interview 29 Nov 2014).

Towards the end of the film Strickland, rather self-indulgently uses more and more bizarre audio-visual experimentation. At 1:08:40 we are exposed to an experimental film sequence with Gilderoy watching himself on screen speaking Italian. This scene is clearly inspired by the Austrian experimental film maker Peter Tscherkassky: the film jumps out of the sprockets, sound is distorted, the celluloid gets burnt by the heat of the light beam.

Strickland's use of music in his films is based on the mood technique.

The British band *Broadcast* supports this surreal world perfectly. Their music is accessible, yet experimental. The sad voice of Trish Keenan, who died of pneumonia during the production of the film, is placed in a distant, large space with long reverberation and delay effects (26:12). The tone of most music cues is melancholic and slow moving, with a retro-feel to it. Some of the spacious drones in *Katalin Varga* seem to have been recycled in this film (20:45).

The soundtrack was assembled with great care – and a certain indulgence involving some of his friends: the improvisers The Bohman Brothers (published on Strickland's *Peripheral* label), the keyboard player Roj Stevens from *Broadcast*, the sound consultant and organiser of the School of Sound, Larry Sider and Joakim Sundström, who was the supervising sound editor.

Music beyond film: sounds of the surreal, the haunted, the nostalgic

Strickland sympathises with the current sentiment among many musicians, that the past, in particular the period of the 1960s to 1980s seems more modern – and more meaningful – than the future.

Strickland is a keen listener to unusual sounds, whether environmental soundscapes or improvised and uncategorisable music at the fringes of British pop culture. He is part of The Sonic Catering Band, founded in 1996 in England. The idea of the band is to derive all sound materials from the kitchen: chopping, frying, scraping, boiling, steaming, bashing etc. Originally the band wanted to perform in restaurants, but this was thwarted by health and safety regulations. Strickland releases the improvised soundscapes on beautifully designed records on his own label, *Peripheral Conserve*.

In all of his sonic activities Strickland goes beyond the purely musical. There is always a theatrical or surreal aspect to them. Strickland treats music as a transdisciplinary activity exploring the culinary, the visceral, the duration of time, memory and nostalgia. An important feature of his musical activities is his preference for the analogue sound.

Since 1996 Strickland has been a great admirer of the British cult band *Broadcast*, whom he commissioned to create the music for *Berberian Sound Studio*. The soundtrack was published by Warp Records in 2013. Strickland was attracted to *Broadcast's* retro-futurism, which has long anticipated what is now somewhat mystifyingly called hauntology, expressed in the music of *Burial*, *Joy Division* and others. Hauntology, a term inspired by Derrida, imagines the future as lost and therefore searches for the ghosts of the future in the past, in particular in the 1970s. Hauntologists tend to be sad, melancholic with a sense for romanticism, darkness, ghosts and irrational mystery.

Strickland is attracted to seemingly timeless musical drones. Both in *Katalin Varga* and in *The Duke of Burgundy*, he adopted a slow pace leaving ample space for music and extended soundscapes. He is inspired by the guitar drones of Glen Branca, as well as the complex sound textures of György Ligeti. But he equally has a taste for melody and tunes. He is a great admirer of Italian film music composers: Ennio Morricone, Bruno Nicolai, Nino Rota and many others. He

admires the British composer John Barry and the Czech Luboš Fišer. The hauntological side of Strickland's musical preferences is reflected in his choice of musicians: *Broadcast* in Berberian Sound Studio, and *Cat's Eyes* in The Duke of Burgundy.

Strickland also developed an interest for documentary films about musicians. In 2014 he released a documentary, together with Nick Fenton, about Björk's world tour in 2011-13: *Björk: Biophilia Live*.

The Wasp Boutique is a portrait film of the collaboration between experimental musicians Art-Errorist (Jean-Herve Peron) and Zsolt Sörös together with Douglas Hart, published by Strickland's label *Peripheral Conserve* in 2014.

Strickland has a subversive taste for sub-culture, both in music and film. He is keen to discover underground currents of desire and to link them to his own filmic explorations. He likes to play with film genre, e.g. the Italian horror Giallo, and subvert it. There is a link between his musical and filmic tastes: he aims to go beyond the rational, the purely functional, towards the realm of dreams, phantasy, but also surreal irony.

Strickland has the traits of a cult director. Trying to define cult status of a film is difficult. There is an element of opposition against the mainstream. Cult film transgresses social norms and conventions. But Strickland goes further: he integrates experimental audio-visual aesthetics into narrative structures. These unusual artistic sound/image compositions serve to express subtle psychological states of the protagonists and highly abstract ideas in visceral, sensuous ways.

Another characteristic is being excessive. This applies mainly to *Berberian Sound Studio* with its indulgent focus on sound, comparable to the Polish director Konrad Niewolskiego in his psychological thriller *Palimsest* (2006), whose composer, Bartłomiej Gliniak, created an electronic soundtrack using extreme ranges of frequencies, in particular sub-bass frequencies, which are only audible through a 5.1 surround sound system with a subwoofer. These deep frequencies create a visceral experience of the psychological state of the increasingly deranged police investigator Marek.

New tools for filmic expression

Soundscape composition for film can be seen as an alternative to conventional film music. Digital recording and studio technology are used to organise, manipulate, generate and mix environmental and electronic sounds in relation to images. This has turned sound into a truly universal, transcultural communication tool: everybody instantly recognises the sound of rain, water, thunder, wind, crickets and bird song.

Environmental soundscape compositions are flexible and multifunctional: they provide a sense of place and space and they can evoke emotions. Soundscapes are not burdened by musical traditions or cultural context. In modern film soundtracks, environmental soundscapes and (electronic) musical textures blend seamlessly into each other. In film, techniques of electro-acoustic music

have found a new field of application with a much broader audience. The film director and the sound designer have become composing listeners.

But Strickland goes further. In *The Duke of Burgundy*, Strickland manages to bring back more conventional musical approaches through *Cat's Eyes* but also to combine these with the aesthetics of soundscape composition. The music is rarely used to underscore or spell out emotions. Music is used like a visual camera sweep over a landscape, or a tint of colour in a scene. *Cat's Eyes'* timbral music creates immediate mood experiences which seem to pour out directly from the scene. Equally the pure soundscape compositions emerge from the location sound. This highly integrated audio-visual aesthetic is Strickland's film art.

The film-sound scholar Jay Beck observes that many directors of transnational art cinema (i.e. films produced locally in various countries and financed and distributed globally) use sound in new, creative ways. One characteristic of these directors is that they eschew empathetic score music: "There is a strong tendency among directors outside the commercial mainstream to dispense with nondiegetic orchestral scores in favor of constructing carefully detailed soundscapes" (Beck 733).

Beck lists many directors, historic and contemporary, practising this new audio-visual aesthetic: Tarkovsky (*Stalker* 1979), Godard (*Bande à Part*, 1964), Lars von Trier (*Dogme 95* movement), Lynne Ramsay (*Morvern Callar*, 2002), Argentinian directors, e.g. Lucrecia Martel; Abbas Kiarostami (Iran) or Tsai Ming-Liang (China), to name just a few. He also considers David Lynch and Terence Malick as sound-focused directors and as rare exceptions in American cinema.

Beck identifies some emerging sound practices in global cinema, for example subjective sound, i.e. sound which represents the listening perspective of a protagonist. We can observe it in *Katalin Varga's* dream scenes, during Gilderoy's nightmares in *Berberian Sound Studio* or in the moth scene in *The Duke of Burgundy*.

Michel Chion's concepts of synchresis and rendering are at the core of this new cinema. Synchresis is a neologism, combining synchronicity (seeing and hearing something simultaneously) and synthesis (making sense in the act of perception). Rendering sound is related to this. Chion distinguishes rendering from reproduction. Rendering goes further: rendered sound "conveys and expresses the feelings associated with the situation" (Chion, Glossary), or in Beck's words: "This notion of rendering allows for the objective perception of a sound—even if that sound is a construction—to merge with an affective function. In this way, sounds can take on more meaning than just signification and lead to what sound editor Walter Murch calls a 'conceptual resonance' between the sounds of the film and the emotions of the story being told" (Beck 2013: 738).

The use of silence, or rather quietness, creates space for small background sounds like the ticking of a clock, the gurgling of a small stream, footsteps on a

wooden floor in the *The Duke*. This quietness reveals the architectural acoustics of the spaces.

Strickland puts Chion's aesthetic into filmic practice. Strickland frequently questions the dominance of the image and tries to re-balance image and soundtrack. In *The Duke*, he lets us listen to a sexual act instead of showing it. And he never gives dialogue a dominant role as in mainstream film. In *The Duke*, the verbal exchanges between Cynthia and Evelyn are formal, apparently emotionless and sparse, partly defined by the S&M relationship. But the main purpose is to leave space for other filmic tools of expression telling the true story: sound (on and off-screen), music, abstract colour and textural audio-visual compositions. The close-up and zooming into detail, both visually and sonically, is a regular tool in Strickland's films. This framing is also a main characteristic of the horror genre, where the whole picture of the monster is never shown, but expressed only sonically. Doing so would expose the scene to rational analysis and thus render it powerless. Sound enriches the off-screen field and leaves much more to the imagination of the viewer.

Contrary to Beck's analysis of acoustic auteurs in transnational cinema as eschewing music, Strickland does use music, but not in an emphatic or emotionally prescriptive way. Strickland uses music to structure film time. It has an explicit place when it sounds. It is no coincidence that Strickland uses musicians from experimental pop music like *Broadcast* or *Cat's Eyes*. Both groups evoke instant mood in their music, like evocative environmental sound by putting great emphasis on timbre.

Strickland's aesthetic is informed by his familiarity with environmental sound and soundscape composition, electroacoustic techniques of sampling and the expanded idea of the musical work inspired by Cage: any sound or noise can become music. His listening sensibilities were developed in playful, surreal and theatrical improvisation using microphones and loudspeakers. Recording and sampling technology made it possible to musicalise environmental sounds. In digital post-production, location sound, sound design, soundscape composition and music have moved much closer together in an integrated soundtrack. Kevin Donnelly argues that "in recent years an increasingly aesthetic rather than representational concept of sound in cinema has emerged" (Donnelly 2013: 359). In Strickland's films, sound and music evoke the inner world of the protagonists: desire is invisible, but can be expressed through sound. The visual aesthetics of slow cinema inform Strickland's musical and sonic thinking: with his *Sonic Catering Band* he likes to question the natural relationship between objects and their sounds and playfully create new meanings. Sampling culture not only defines contemporary sound and music practices but is also expressed in the sampling of images to create complex, artistic audio-visual compositions. A new audio-visual aesthetic is emerging here and Strickland's film art is a fine example of this.

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