

The Noises of Spectators,
or the Spectator as Additive
to the Spectacle
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Published in: Richard Abel & Rick Altman (eds.): *The Sounds of Early Cinema*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2001.

The type of space institutional narrative cinema creates between spectator and screen is, as a general rule, a decidedly private space, an intimate space of contemplation in which the screen addresses itself not to the multitude, but to a singular, individual, and personal spectator isolated in the intimate obscurity of the movie theater. “Addresses” is in this case rather strong insofar as the screen of the institutional cinema, as well as its sound additives, generally pretend to address no one in particular. By contrast, if we except specific exhibition practices of moving images,¹ early cinema commonly involved a resolutely public space between screen and spectator. It is not, then, an individualized spectator but an audience, a collective entity, that is implicated in the viewing situation specific to this period. Indeed, at the time, spectators were often invited to participate collectively in the spectacle of moving images. This participation by necessity implied sound occurrences (for instance, applause as certain actors like Méliès come back to bow to the audience at the end of some films, sing-along to song slides, etc.) and accordingly turned individuals into members of an audience, that is, a community.

Our objective here will be, first, to identify the different logics of representation practiced in early cinema. To this end, we will draw up a basic inventory of various “spectatorial noises,” which leads to the question of the pertinence of these noises. Secondly, we will attempt to isolate a few of the factors that contributed to what we will refer to as the structuration of the sound space.²

About Periodization

The long period referred to as *early cinema*, which customarily ends around 1913, should obviously not be thought of as undifferentiated muddle. For the purpose of our demonstration, we will consequently borrow from Eric de Kuyper’s distinction between *first period cinema* and *second period cinema* (1908 being a turning point).³ *First period cinema* is notably characterized, as far as exhibition conditions are concerned, by the primacy of a public space allowing for the free participation of spectators in the sound environment of the moving images. This public space stands in sharp contrast to the private space of institutional

cinema (after 1913), where silence in the audience is generally valued. Between these two dates (1908–1913), consequently, there is an intermediary, buffer period, neither fish nor fowl, that of *second period cinema*, during which the sound space of the screening is being organized. In the course of this time span, the various “spectators’ noises” begin to be subject to the constraints forced upon them by different mechanisms structuring the sound space—that is, the space of the screening, which will foster the emergence of an institutional mode of representation.

During each of these periods, a number of systems of representation of moving images are in favor, depending on, among other things, the site and type of exhibition. Our breakdown relies on the system of representation privileged during each period, as some of them clearly prevail at given moments. *Second period cinema* thus contrasts with *first period cinema*, though not as a set of exclusive practices, with the beginning of a period by necessity implying the disappearance of practices characteristic of the previous one. Rather, it qualifies as a period in terms of screening conditions, because it witnessed the gradual consolidation of practices that resulted in the organization of the sound space of the theater. These practices appeared in the course of the time span known as first period cinema but were not the result of a concerted effort until the second period. Similarly, screenings of moving images in a non-organized sound space did not disappear with the end of the first period, but the practice became marginal during the second period, at a time when the sound space of screenings tended to be organized.

Although the proposed distinction between *first period cinema* and *second period cinema* rests on the modes of reception of moving images and the context in which these are presented, it nevertheless has as its counterpart the “texts” themselves (*images* and *films*) or at least the analyses of these texts. Thus the distinction put forward here matches the one that was once advanced by Tom Gunning and one of the authors of this essay and that contrasted the *system of monstrative attractions* (typical of *first period cinema*) and the *system of narrative integration* (which dominated *second period cinema*).⁴ The distinction *first period/second period* does not constitute, accordingly, a revision of the periodizations established on the basis of textual analyses, but partakes of a desire to support textual analyses with contextual ones.

Structured Sound Space vs. Non-structured Sound Space

First period cinema, the “first cinema” if you will, was characterized by the primacy of a system of representation in which the various kinds of sound accompaniment retained a relative level of autonomy in relation to the images featured in moving pictures. Not only were these sounds only loosely tied to the visual spectacle of the image track, but in addition, those producing these accompanying sounds did not have clear instructions to follow, nor did they answer to a clearly pre-established norm. The sound space of the theater, which then was not governed by any precise rules, was not structured. Such rules were progressively put into place with the process of institutionalization marking the second period.

As far as film exhibition is concerned, *second period cinema*, the “second cinema” if you will, essentially revolves around the gradual institution (we will later see how) of a *structured sound space*. We should nevertheless bear in mind that the dominant system of representation during *first period cinema* continued, throughout this second period, to claim its share in some exhibition venues (fairgrounds, neighborhood theaters, etc.). What characterizes *second cinema* (1908–1913), then, is among other things this co-existence, in various ratios (depending on the year and the country in question), of two systems of representation that suppose quite divergent types of reception:

- a first type, coming from *first period cinema* (yet enduring after 1908 in the form of increasingly marginal practices), which initiated a public, *spectacular* space between spectator and screen, the corollary of what has been called an exhibitionist confrontation (on this topic, see the article mentioned in endnote 4);

and

- a second type, typical of *second period cinema*, in which are set into place mechanisms structuring the sound space, some of which will have as a consequence the deployment of conditions of representation necessary to the emergence of institutional cinema.

It seems to us a reasonable assumption that the second portion of what is commonly called “early cinema,” a portion corresponding to the period known as *second period cinema*, is an era of transformations that witnessed the shift from *early cinema* to *institutional cinema*. It is a time during which the agents typical of the sound space of *first period cinema* were diverted from their original function as additives to the spectacle of moving pictures into instruments in the structuration of the sound space. Besides the fact that just their presence in the theater implies a public space at the opposite pole from the intimate space later required by the institution, these agents contributed to the establishment of rules and customs surrounding film screenings. Spectators were invited to remain silent during the lecturer’s speech, to sing along as song slides were projected, to applaud at the end of the film, and so on.

There would thus be, at one end of the spectrum, a public space fostered by the presence of the lecturer, a common, “spectacular” space, so to speak. It is, indeed, not to an individual spectator but to an audience (that is, a community of listeners and/or spectators) that the voice addresses itself, in the form of the lecturer’s sound “close-ups,” which in some way make up for the visual distance of long shots so characteristic of the image track of *first period cinema*.

At the other end of the spectrum, we would find *institutional cinema* (from 1913 on), whose main system of representation is founded on a cinema of silent films without lecture, interspersed with titles and accompanied by tailor-made music. This system no longer addresses itself to the multitude but to a singular, individual, and personal spectator isolated in the intimate obscurity of the movie theater. This individualized spectator thus consumes images and sounds from the private space of his/her seat, a decidedly intimate space of undisturbed contemplation whose correlate is the space induced by the close-up—a figure that is already present in *second period cinema* and that will become characteristic of *institutional cinema*. Indeed, it comes as no coincidence, in our opinion, that the close-up begins to play a crucial role in cinematographic expression at the time the lecturer declines in importance.

The Spectators’ Applause

Within the context of the *spectacular representation*, a given spectator would thus have felt more easily licensed to manifest him-/herself through various noisy gestures, if only to answer the direct, constant, and systematic interpellation of the audience by the lecturer, who always already acted to some extent as an interlocutor. This probably explains why, as evidence bears out, collective sound expressions were very frequent in early cinema, especially during *first period cinema*. Our own collection of the journalistic commentaries provoked by the first years of film exhibition in a city such as Montréal is in this respect quite telling. Indeed, it is frequently reported that spontaneous behavior on the part of spectators often led them to applaud *jointly*. This contrasts with the spectator of institutional cinema, who was to applaud only under exceptional circumstances, for example when individuals participating in the production of the film were present in the space of the representation.

Thus we noticed, on the basis of a summary sample of daily newspapers published between 1899 and 1907, that most “sound expressions” on the part of spectators reported by journalists involved applause,⁵ probably the best sign of satisfaction at the end of a picture or filmed attraction. It could be read, for instance, that “moving pictures raised applause many times”⁶ or that “each picture raised hearty applause from the audience.”⁷

It is generally presumed that during the first period, spectators were not only allowed, but also encouraged, to applaud to express their contentment. Within their paradigm, spectators of early cinema could feel the exhibition system in all its thickness, and the presence of the lecturer notably made them aware of how the spectacle they were attending was a *unique event* that would never be exactly replicated anywhere else—it was happening here, in this very theater, *hic et nunc*. Everything converged to remind them of this specificity—obvious copresence of other spectators due to the slight obscurity, *in situ* presence of the additives to the exhibition, musicians, master of ceremony, lecturer, sound effects engineers, and the like.

It is then patent that the spectator of early cinema differed at least in this respect from the spectator of its institutional counterpart, who, notwithstanding some exceptions, did not deem it necessary to communicate his/her satisfaction at the sight of shadows and spots moving on the screen. It is then quite true that the *institutional screen* is a “fantasy screen,” and that what is projected on it is perceived by the *institutional spectator* as a story whose enunciative and representational mechanisms s/he will readily forget.

Other Sound Interventions by Spectators

The spectators of *first period cinema* had more than applause at their disposal to express themselves through sounds. They could just as well burst out laughing, cry out, sing, or whisper. As to the occasional uncouth spectator speaking out loud and making untimely comments throughout the screening, it evidently was the common lot in the reception process during *first period cinema*. One may nevertheless imagine that such occurrences dramatically decreased during *second period cinema* and were to be later considered a breach of the code of conduct of the institutional spectator.

Laughter and cries (as well as whispering—unfortunately, some would have it) have as a particularity the fact they endured in the range of spontaneous reactions on the part of the film spectator after the shift to the paradigm of institutional cinema. Singing, applause, and speaking out have completely disappeared from usual screening conditions at this point. They nevertheless remain in certain cases, such as in neighborhood theaters or during the screenings of cult films, for example, when the film is the object of a collective appropriation. Thus, during screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *Hair*, spectators sing or shout in unison. Another instance is some *psychotronic* festivals dedicated to third-rate science-fiction or horror films, where screenings are generally punctuated with shouts and commentary. This shows how celebratory rituals inviting collective participation still occasionally take place at the margins of the mainstream consumption of films, where discretion and silence are the rule.

We should not believe, however, that codes of good conduct managed to establish uncontested domination during *second period cinema*. All audiences did not become subdued from the moment different strategies of sound structuring and silencing were put into place. In Great Britain, for example, spectators of popular theaters may have remained quite raucous until very late into the 1910s.⁸

The additives to the exhibition changed roles during *second period cinema*, as we have seen, by making room for, or at least by contributing to impose, within the space of the projection, moments during which the spectator had to (or could) sing and others during

which s/he had to observe silence. Sound occurrences in the theater then came to be a part not so much of the spectator's relationship to the spectacle of moving pictures as of the integration of all elements taking part in film screenings. It could indeed be assumed that the shift from a *non-structured* to a *structured* sound space had as a consequence, in the course of *second period cinema*, the gradual imposition of silence for a spectator accustomed to the *spectacle of moving pictures* yet more and more frequently invited to attend *a representation of narrative films*, which were to become the bread and butter of institutional cinema. It would indeed appear quite inappropriate for the individualized spectator, merged in the darkness of the intimate space for contemplation created by institutional cinema, to license him/herself to intervene loudly through speech or noises during the screening, thereby somewhat intruding in the intimate space of his/her co-spectators.

The Factors in the Structuring of the Sound Space

From *second period cinema* on, the sound environment of the theater was structured on the basis of at least six factors, which are relatively easy to identify:

- (1) The lecturer could now and then occupy the sound space in its entirety through speaking, which also enabled him to drown out possible untimely speech by spectators. Yet, as a figure of interlocution, he also called for and encouraged an (inter-)active participation on the spectators' part, a participation that could then translate into various forms of sound expressions just when needed.
- (2) Slides and intertitles also participated in the structuring of the sound space insofar as they could bear explicit or implicit directions that led spectators to manifest themselves through sound (invitation to sing in chorus, to applaud, etc.).
- (3) Music often served to discipline spectators—at the very beginning it was there only to fill the sound space of the representation, but later prescriptive texts regularly published in corporate newspapers advocated certain types of music based on the emotion or the genre in question. During *first period cinema*, music had imposed a first form of structuring by occupying the whole sound space of the theater; during *second period cinema*, it contributed to force silence in the space of the theater, especially in relation to drama as a genre.
- (4) The sound space was also structured by the nature of the very site of the screening—the fairgrounds tent did not lend itself as easily to diegetic absorption as did the movie palace.
- (5) The film's topic summoned up habits and behaviors linked to theatrical or spectacular genres (or even to cultural or religious referents) inside the movie theater. The screening of a *Passion* thus probably was attended to with a much more discreet participation on the part of the audience than was, say, a comedy.
- (6) Finally, an analysis of the film corpus of early cinema brings out the existence, from the first years, of actual strategies of filmic *mise-en-scène* that serve as incentives for the spectators to participate through sound. Conceived in the very space of the direction, they may be read as authentic invitations to the spectators to laugh, applaud, even sing at a given time of the film and might have contributed to the structuring of the sound space characteristic of *second period cinema*.

Filmic Strategies That Call for Sound Participation

A first strategy to incite sound participation on the part of the spectators is employed in the shots where characters greet the audience watching them. A good instance of this is

provided by the curtain-call shots that conclude many films and convey the impression that actors bow to listeners who are in all likelihood applauding their performance. Such invitations are also found in the Gaumont Chronophones, at whose end the artist comes back “on stage” for a virtual applause. Such applause is thus limited to the margins of the film text, at the very end of the “act,” and represents the opportunity for the spectators to sanction the film.

Another, more subtle strategy may reside in those moments when, at the end of a particularly “theatrical” performance or an eminently spectacular gesture, an actor moves forward to *strike a pose* in front of the camera. Such greetings are found in a more discreet form in all trick films where conjuring acts end with a movement toward the camera or even a look toward it. This is the case with Méliès, when for instance he invites the newly appeared queen in *Les Cartes vivantes* (1905) to move to the fore and strike a pose just long enough for the applause to take place. Such applause crowns the success of the attraction captured by the camera, an attraction that is not *profilmic* but *filmed*. It isolates and sanctions the attractional surprise as a strong, successful moment of the picture.

Among these attractional surprises were pictorial quotations, that is, filmed tableaux whose mise-en-scène and duration pointed to the quotation of a famous painting in the moving image. This, according to Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, enabled cinema to establish its pedigree by offering its spectators the live expression of famous paintings.² Thus in *Julius Caesar* (Vitagraph), the duration of the tableaux, in which actors evidently stop acting to strike a pose, functions to allow spectators to identify the painting but also, we believe, to give them the time and opportunity to express through applause their appreciation of the performance. Cinema then shared certain similarities with histrionic theater, where it was common for the actor to interrupt the action to get the audience to applaud.

A third strategy, the cinematographic adaptation of songs, relied on previous knowledge of the adapted song but also on vocal participation on the part of spectators. A forerunner to these adaptations, the illustrated song slides of the magic lantern had set the tone for the spectators of the *first period cinema*.

Noiseless Communication

With the hindsight of our first analyses, it appears that the famous opposition between spectatorial noises/screen noises, which today we take for granted, was inherited from the institutional mode of representation, with its emphasis on individual consumption and its requirement that the surrounding presence of other spectators be forgotten (or at least consigned to the background). In this type of moving pictures characteristic of *first period cinema*, in which the lecturer harangued the crowd of spectators, the latter took part in the sound environment of a representation played out in a collective fashion. Sounds made by spectators thus did not constitute, noisy as they were, *noises* in the communication process. They even were, in a spectacular regime, the sign of an active participation. They belong in the very definition of the said spectacle, a spectacle that is addressed to a group, a collective entity. This is the group the lecturer addresses himself to, this is the mass of spectators to which actors direct their first look when they turn to the camera. Through their inscription in the space-being-structured of *second period cinema*, which tended to discriminate between appropriate and inopportune sounds and noises, these expressions eventually found their purpose and coherence. At the end of *second period cinema*, spectators as a whole were in theory supposed to remain silent during the screening and could sing or applaud only when cued to do so.

The structuration of the sound space may have, in our opinion, increasingly circumscribed spectators' participation to the point where it imposed the silence necessary for diegetic absorption to happen. And with silence, the regime of film consumption may have let the spectator move imperceptibly from a *solidary* to a *solitary* mode of consumption!

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Notes

This text was written within the framework of GRAFICS (Groupe de Recherche sur l'Avènement et la Formation des Institutions Cinématographique et Scénique; Research Group on the Creation and Formation of Cinematographic and Theatrical Institutions) at the *Université de Montréal*, supported by the *Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada* (Canadian Council on Research in Human Sciences) and the FCAR fund (Quebec). GRAFICS and both authors of the present piece are part of the *Centre de recherche sur l'intermédialité* (CRI) at the *Université de Montréal*. We want to thank all those who, through their interventions and comments, have enabled us to improve our text and make it more precise; particular thanks to Donald Crafton, Ben Brewster, and Tom Gunning.

1. We will not deal here with particular exhibition contexts (private screenings, for example) that may have occurred at the time, or even, in some cases, have been documented (through contemporary testimony), except to emphasize that they probably involved spectatorial practices that differ from the ones we describe here.

2. Our research follows from Noël Burch's remark that music and lecturer contributed to organizing the sound space of the theater. See *La Lucarne de l'infini: naissance du langage cinématographique* (Paris: Nathan, 1991), 223–231.

3. We are thus keeping some distance from the breakdown proposed by de Kuyper, which includes the whole 1910s in the second period. See Éric de Kuyper, "Le cinéma de la seconde époque. Le muet des années dix," *Cinémathèque* 1 (May 1992), 28–35.

4. See André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Le cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'histoire du cinéma?" in *Histoire du cinéma. Nouvelles approches*, ed. Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault, and Michel Marie (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1989), 49–63.

5. This summary press sample from the two most important Francophone Montréal daily newspapers was put together by Karine Martinez and Églantine Monsaingeon, research assistants at the GRAFICS, whom the authors want to thank for their precious collaboration. It enabled us to identify twenty references (traced in the newspapers *La Presse*, from 1902 and 1907, and *La Patrie*, from 1899 and 1905), sixteen of which relate applause on the part of spectators attending a screening of moving pictures. It is worth noting that during the period under scrutiny, these daily newspapers regularly published accounts of cinematographic representations and that the representations mentioned in our examples are by no means exceptional.

6. *La Presse* 11 (November 1902), 7.

7. *La Patrie* 11 (May 1905), 14.

8. This is the argument defended by Nicolas Hiley in "The British Cinema Auditorium," in *Film and the First World War*, ed. Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 160–170; as well as in "Fifteen Questions about the Early Film Audience," in *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, ed. Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (Amsterdam: Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997), 105–118.

9. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The two authors describe the effects of pictorial quotations as many "realizations": "literal recreation and translation" of the images "into a more real ... vivid, visual, physically present medium" (86). On this topic, see also Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).