Engaged Soundscapes: The Emotionalized Sound of Rainer Werner Fassbinder
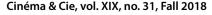
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Abstract

The case study for my paper will be the late work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which dates from a time when the author's concern to provoke and explore new languages was reconfigured in a more mainstream and international manner, shaping a new way of imagining popular film (*Despair*, *Despair. Eine Reise ins Licht*, 1978; *The Marriage of Maria Braun, Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979) and television production (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, WDR, 1980). In his work with a stable team of technicians (with regard to the soundtrack, musician Peer Raben, editor Juliane Lorenz, and sound engineer Milan Bor), it may reasonably be claimed that he transformed the passionate explosion of the "long 1960s" into a mature mode of production ready to enter the 1980s and beyond and to reach into our times. In this paper I will explore the experiential dimensions of the soundscapes and the music, arguing that the advent and practice of sound-mixing in the 1970s, the way in which this was used to intensify the whole audiovisual experience in film and television fiction, played an important role in reconfiguring our reflexive consciousness of social relations and political issues as individualized and emotionalized.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the broad movement towards individual participation and physical involvement in political issues led media discourses to embrace experimental languages.[1] A number of filmmakers in Europe and in the USA began exploring the limits of classical film style, developing what David Bordwell labeled as intensified continuity.[2] Thenceforth, intensified cinematic conventions making use of a wide range of perceptual triggers to activate strong, emotionally driven responses were increasingly to become an ever more central trope in quality film and television production. Not by chance, in the late 1990s — following a

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[1] Christopher B. Strain, *The Long Sixties. America, 1955–1973* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).
[2] Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002); David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

wider trend, or "sensuous turn", in the humanities[3] — film scholars, too, began investigating emotions in film experience, gradually incorporating into their work tools from the psychology of emotions and the affective neurosciences.[4] My contribution will delve into this discussion, highlighting a still partially neglected area of interest in this context, the auditive dimension of our emotional involvement in film and the media.[5]

The case study for my paper will be the late work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which dates from a time when the author's concern to provoke and explore new languages was reconfigured in a more mainstream and international manner, shaping a new way of imagining popular film (*Despair*, *Despair. Eine Reise ins Licht*, 1978; *The Marriage of Maria Braun, Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979) and television production (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, WDR, 1980). In his work with a stable team of technicians (with regard to the soundtrack, musician Peer Raben, editor Juliane Lorenz, and sound engineer Milan Bor), it may reasonably be claimed that he transformed the passionate explosion of the 'long 1960s' into a mature mode of production ready to enter the 1980s and beyond and to reach into our times. In this paper I will explore the experiential dimensions of the soundscapes and the music,[6] arguing that the advent and practice of sound-mixing in the 1970s, the way in which this was used to intensify the whole audiovisual experience in film and television fiction, played an important role in reconfiguring our reflexive consciousness of social relations and political issues as individualized and emotionalized.[7]

The Sensuous is Political

German film productions had a notable impact on modern film narratives, contemporary matters of style and the very notion of authoring,[8] and it was a center of creative involvement in the "personal is political" debate in the

[3] Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul and Simon Gottschalk, *The Senses in Self, Society, and Culture: A Sociology of the Senses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).
[4] Cfr. Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture. A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[5] Core readings in recent literature: Annabel J. Cohen, 'Film Music from the Perspective of Cognitive Science', in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. by David Neumeyer (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 96–130; Lars Kuchinke, Hermann Kappellhoff and Stefan Koelsch, 'Emotion and Music in Narrative Films: A Neuroscientific Perspective', in *The Psychology of Music in Multimedia*, ed. by Siu-Lan Tan, Annabel J. Cohen, Scott D. Lipscomb and Roger A. Kendall (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 118–38.
[6] *E.g.* Alf Gabrielsson, John Whaley and John Sloboda, 'Peak Experiences in Music', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, ed. by Suan Hallam, Ian Cross and Michael Thaut (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 745–58.
[7] Julie Brownlie, *Ordinary Relationships: A Sociological Study of Emotions, Reflexivity and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[8] Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

1970s. The more "global" in today's film studies has tended to emphasize the cultural dynamics of the international and transnational relations of German film, pointing to its exemplariness in a changing European mediascape,[9] and a number of recent studies have reconsidered the classical works of the New German Cinema movement in this frame. Emotionalizing tactics have also been underlined by authors reinterpreting the whole modernist project and the role German film authors like Alexander Kluge assumed in it,[10] and in this context the centrality of operatic conventions and/or film music has been the subject of a substantial reassessment.[11]

In fact, within what used to be considered a fundamental new wave in European cinema —and taking for granted an interest in authors still working such as Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders — a central place in the debate around emotion and the cinema has also been given to Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose work is currently the subject of an almost nostalgic process of recovery and reverence. In March 2018, one of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's early productions, a five-part TV miniseries called *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* (*Acht Stunden sind kein Tag*, 1972-73), was given its U.S. premiere, introducing a new generation of American audiences to the prolific German director and actor, prompting an academic site like the Daily Jstor to ask 'Why do Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films still resonate?'[12] The concept of "resonance" will be central to our discussion, and several scholars have also been struck recently by the same question, stressing the different emotional aspects of his work: Stephanie Bird underscored the comic moments of the melodramatic, quasi masochistic narrative trajectories of Fassbinder's films;[13] Hermann Kappellhoff stressed the political value of the 'group choreography' of his early work;[14] Patrik Sjöberg delved into the more personal, autobiographical moments of his production, *e.g. Germany in Autumn*

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[9] Randall Halle, *German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Sabine Hake, 'German Cinema as European Cinema: Learning from Film History', *Film History*, 25.1–2 (2013), 110–17.

[10] *Alexander Kluge: Raw Materials for the Imagination*, ed. by Forrest Tara (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

[11] Caryl Flinn, *The New German Cinema*: *Music, History, and the Matter of Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Caryl Flinn, 'Undoing Act 5: History, Bodies and Operatic Remains in The Power of Emotion', in *Alexander Kluge*, pp. 211–40; Larson Powell, *The Differentiation of Modernism: Postwar German Media Arts* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2013).

[12] Matthew Wills, 'Why Do Rainer Werner Fassbinder's Films Still Resonate?' <https://daily.jstor.org/why-do-rainer-werner-fassbinders-films-still-resonate> [accessed 30 June 2018]. Cfr. also Tony Pipolo, 'Straight from the Heart: Re-viewing the Films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder', *Cinéaste*, 29.4 (2004), 18–25.

[13] Stephanie Bird, 'The Funny Side of Fassbinder: From Melodramatic Vicious Circles to Comic Double Vision, *The Modern Language Review*, 105.4 (2010), 1087–104.

[14] 'In Fassbinder's early films, the staging of gestures causes the represented social behavior to appear like elements of a ceremonial liturgy, which leads all social forms of expression back to the desire and suffering of the individual'. Hermann Kappellhoff, 'The Distribution of Emotions: Fassbinder and the Politics of Aesthetics', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 86.3 (2011), 201–20 (p. 219).

(*Deutschland im Herbst*, 1978), with particular attention to the body of the author as an emotional marker — or, I would dare to say, 'sounding body';[15] Thomas Elsaesser, in his 2013 monograph, in which he re-evaluates the meaning of the Holocaust for postwar German films and culture, in offering a reconsideration of trauma theory today significantly cites a Fassbinder work, *The Third Generation* (*Die Dritte Generation*, 1979), as a central case study;[16] Heide Schlipphacke, too, explicitly interpreted Fassbinder's work as a conscious expression of the disquietude and fear of the post-war era, the 'age of anxiety'.[17] Trauma, pathos, melodrama, melancholia: Fassbinder, who still serves as a reference point for every queer biography of more contemporary filmmakers and/or for any more or less provocative critical discourse of resistance,[18] fosters research into the emotional side of experience, without prejudices or preconceptions. Thomas Elsaesser's thesis that, by positing the very bodily and scandalous presence of the director at its center — and regardless of exclusively gender-based readings —, Fassbinder's cinema blocked and opposed a capitalistic value system based on mere economic exchange (a theory put forward following the tenth anniversary of the director's death) is still both compelling and legitimate.[19]

The Intensified Body

As a consequence of the above considerations, critics and researchers generally link the perceptually challenging visual style of Rainer Werner Fassbinder to a political vision, understanding his complex camera work as a means of escaping, or at least revealing, social constraint and monotony. Thomas Elsaesser, in the same 1994 volume mentioned above, described this issue canonically, as follows:

> The emphasis given to the looks lingering in the frames, the exchange of glances, the restless camera and the many close-ups of characters intently looking straight ahead out of the frame are clearly marked as excess, if only because so often, no narrative knowledge passes along the lines of sight thus traversing the space. Excess also, because of all the images with mirrors, windows, partitions, or the frequent compositions dominated by obstructions to vision, and because there is a virtual

[15] Patrik Sjöberg, '"Ich Bin's, Fassbinder," or The Timing of the Self', in *The Autobiographical Turn in Germanophone Documentary and Experimental Film*, ed. by Robin Curtis and Angelica Fenner (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014), pp. 277–96.
[16] Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema – Terror And Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 189–214.
[17] Heidi Schlipphacke, 'The Future of Melancholia: Freud, Fassbinder, and Anxiety after War', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 52. 1 (2017), 6–21. Cfr. also Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (New York: Random House, 1947).
[18] Dennis Ioffe, *Border Crossing. Russian Literature into Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 20–22.
[19] Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany. History Identity Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), p. 257.

absence of any direct view of any of the characters. The frame appears always cluttered, divided and usually open only towards the spectator inscribing him/herself as a presence, though often "across" an object partially blocking the view: the hand printing press or the gramophone are so prominently stationed in Biberkopf's room that they almost become silent witnesses.[20]

In this way film language embodied the abolition of a high-low distinction in culture, expressed by the interplay of modernist aesthetics with genre production and exploitation. As Susan Sontag famously put it, 'Sensations, feelings, the abstract forms and styles of sensibility count'.[21] At the same time, filmmakers confronted the classical past, reprocessing its style markers through technological advance: 'Four strategies of camerawork and editing — argued David Bordwell — seem central to the new style: rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide-ranging camera movements'.[22]

During the second half of the 1970s Fassbinder himself moved from the edgy avant-garde cinema of his early years, where the emotional involvement of both the character and the viewer were immobilized in the emptiness of the frame (the cold love of *Love is Colder Than Death*, *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod*, 1970), to his films on the history of Germany, a major project based on the emotional power of classical Hollywood language, with particular attention to the woman's films of the 1950s and to Douglas Sirk.[23] In doing so, his aim of creating emotional overexposure, and thus undermining social and cultural equilibrium, met also the "intensification" practices described by Bordwell in relation to contemporary camerawork and editing strategies. But the notion of "intensification" in Fassbinder's case should be widened towards, on the one side, a more self-reflexive use of visual codes, and, on the other side, towards a renovated sound design.

Traveling back in terms of historical backgrounds and costume films, in fact, this type of intensified continuity finds a predecessor in Weimar modernism, as, for example, in the free floating camera work of operators like Karl Freund, so that Fassbinder was able to reinforce the expressive potential of the legacy of a beloved auteur theory, citationism. At the beginning of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, for instance, the main character, Franz Biberkopf (Günther Lamprecht), leaves the prison, and his turmoil is expressed by a dizzy, circular moving look into the sky: the editing overlaps the long shot of Biberkopf entering a quadrilateral Berlin courtyard, stumbling to the ground and looking up above himself, and a vertical, subjective contreplongée rotating along the walls of the high buildings surrounding him, which appear to be moving. The open reference to Murnau

[20] *Ivi*, p. 234.

[21] Susan Sontag, 'One culture and a new sensibility' (1965), in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1966).

[22] Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, p. 121.

[23] Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Filme befreien den Kopf*, ed. by Michael Töteberg (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984), pp. 11–24.

and to Karl Grune's *The Street* (*Die Strasse*, 1923) here is not an innocent game but a conscious attack on aesthetic stability.

The "intensifying" development of the technological and stylistic codes in film and television has played a far from secondary role in a wider cultural and social change towards experiential and emotional readings of our individual and collective life, which careful observers of the artistic and literary scene, such as Sontag, identified in the mid-1960s as a 'new sensibility'.[24] More recently, the rediscovery of emotion and the senses has emerged powerfully, causing a real 'sensuous turn' in academic debate, which goes as far as to influence the way in which historical and critical research is carried out.[25] Many key concepts in the humanities, especially in the cultural history of the 20th century, have also been reconsidered in the light of their "sensous", emotional impact. In a recent contribution on Alfred Döblin's modernism, Mario Slugan needed to go back to Fassbinder in order to demonstrate the strengths of a definition of montage built solely on perceptual, stylistic, and narratological criteria. He posited one subset of a broadly conceived hyperstimulation — the perceptual experience of disruption — as the essential intermedial trait of montage, and then proceeded to tease out its specificities in different media. In the case of film, he articulated both visual and sound montage in terms of their spatiotemporal dislocation and their divergence from editing norms,[26] thus testifying to the inextricable connection between a perceiving gaze and its "resonating" auditory experience. What many Fassbinder studies have failed to observe, in fact, is the aural dimension of his stylistic innovation, which goes beyond the mere experience of dislocation.

The Sounding Body

The "dislocative" affordance posed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder's filmscapes is without doubt a central question: its origin has been identified in the considerable dilemma around the narrator's voice (who is speaking in his narratives?)[27] as well as in the open intermedial exchanges he plays with, especially in the case of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.[28] What is undoubtedly true is that Fassbinder consciously has recourse not only to multiple semiotic agencies and points of view (the identification of his persona with Döblin's Franz Biberkopf allowed any and

[24] Sontag, 'One culture and a new sensibility'.

[25] Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk, *The Senses in Self, Society, and Culture*, p. 25.

[26] Mario Slugan, *Montage as Perceptual Experience: Berlin Alexanderplatz from Döblin to Fassbinder* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2017).

[27] *E.g.* Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

[28] Though apparently not attentive to the authentic urban landscape: cfr. Andreas Fickers, Jasper Aalbers, Annelies Jacobs and Karin Bijsterveld, 'Sounds Familiar. Intermediality and Remediation in the Written, Sonic and Audiovisual Narratives of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*', in *Soundscapes of the Urban Past. Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*, ed. by Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), pp. 77–115.

every sort of narrative shift throughout the filmmaker's career) and to different, usually contradictory sources of discourse (film, radio, television, literature, and even Döblin's mathematical formulas are embedded in his narrative texture), but also to wider and often-cited sound-related allegories, such as the one that opens *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and the even more famous one that ends *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. In the first case, Franz Biberkopf walks quietly with a jailer in the silent prison courtyard and is directed to the exit gate, where a warder greets him and opens the metal door. Until this point we have only heard the faint voice of an opera singer from a distant radio (the aria, with its old-fashioned lo-fi sound texture, begins as extra-diegetic with the title boards and becomes a possible intra-diegetic music when the street outside the prison is shown, for a brief moment, with its urban soundscape, cars roaring, and so on). But now, as Franz looks out of the gate and takes a step forward to reach the threshold, the camera cuts to a frontal close up of the man stopping terrified and staring into the unknown, while the unpleasant clangor of the city rises rapidly and forces him to cover his ears with his hands. Here Fassbinder freezes the frame and the scene, adding the metaphorical value of the stillness, and finally superimposes on this close up the title of the first section: 'I. Die Strafe beginnt — The punishment begins'. We can refuse to look at the real world, but its sound will inevitably reach and overwhelm us.

The final sequence of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* has a similar, even more tragic tone. The main character, a World War II widow, played by Hanna Schigulla, discovers during the reading of her second husband's will that all her lifelong efforts to be independent have been wiped out by a simple contract between the two men in her life: Hermann (Klaus Löwitsch), who was supposed to have died in 1945, and Karl (Ivan Desny), just departed. The long scene is accompanied by the running commentary of the football world cup final of 1954, the so-called "Miracle of Bern", a match that 'has been built up as a mythical place of remembrance in the history of German sport'.[29] We hear the radio throughout the sequence in a fragmentary way, the volume varying according to the different rooms in which the action takes place (higher volume when Hermann sits in the living room listening to the game, lower volume in the other rooms of the ground floor, even lower or not at all when Maria needs to rest and calm down upstairs); then, after the abrupt explosion that ends the lives of both Maria and Hermann — whether intentionally or not is unclear, for Maria leaves the gas oven open and lights a cigarette —, nothing else remains but the voice of the radio commentary and the burning villa.

The intermedial, narrative and discursive dimensions of Fassbinder's multi-layered soundscape construction have been widely recognized and researched,

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[29] The central role played by *The Marriage of Maria Braun* in the construction and political exploitation of this match has been underscored by Diethelm Blecking, 'Das "Wunder von Bern" 1954 – Zur politischen Instrumentalisierung eines Mythos', *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 40.4 (2015), 197–208 (p. 197).

but these examples should lead us to a further consideration about its role in the shaping of a modern soundscape. The early 1970s witnessed the introduction of multi-track recording, a technological device that allowed young American filmmakers, the "movie brats", to adapt the soundscape of their films to the new style and language they were creating at a visual level.[30] While experimenting with more sensitive color print, brighter lenses and zoom lenses, multi-track recording fostered the creation of a multi-layered perceptual space, where the different sound tracks (dialogue, music, noises) exceeded the rules of continuity and overlapped each other, overriding or "dislocating" the usual sense of spatial unity. The textbook case in this sense is James Webb's sound design for Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975); a reading of Leigh Brackett's screenplay for Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) testifies how the director's technique had evolved in such a direction, as 'there are entire pages of parenthetical cues, clearly stating how overlapping is to occur'.[31] The improvement in Dolby systems and in sound reproduction devices in movie theaters caused the role of sound engineering to expand and assume a paramount importance in film production. Although the technological change was introduced in film production by previous developments in the music industry, the decade testified the birth of a new audibility in the world of audiovision, made of multiple sound layers enhancing immersive space perception. Considering also the arrival of graphical intervention and trans-media design, Laurent Jullier referred to post-1977 film productions, when all these practices were finally spreading, as the immersive *film-concert*.[32] According to Frances Dyson's approach to contemporary new media as accumulation of auditive technologies of the past, we could say that the 1970s transformed film sounds into 'almost palpable envelopments' ready to be embraced by later, immersive and virtual, technological experiences.[33]

[30] Jeff Smith, 'Film Sound in the Hollywood Renaissance, 1968–1980', in *Sound: Dialogue, Music, and Effects (Behind the Silver Screen Series)*, ed. by Kathryn Kalinak (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2015), pp. 83–106. A central figure in this was sound recordist Chris Newman, who, on *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) 'created multi-tracks by running two tape recorders simultaneously [...] driving back and forth to the Nagra factory so they could keep making adjustments to our new four-track recorders', Chris Newman in CAS, online forum, JwSound, <http://jwsoundgroup.net/index.php?/topic/17292-chris-newman-in-cas/&> [accessed 28 June 2018]. For an overview of the impact of music recording and mixing technologies on film, cfr. Julie Hubbert, 'The Compilation Soundtrack from the 1960s to the Present', in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, pp. 291–318 (p. 299). Michel Chion, introducing his notion of *superchamp* (superfield), traces back this history to musicals like *Woodstock* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970) and *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975): Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 155-156.
[31] Online exhibit by the University of Michigan Library <https://www.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/altman/altmanesque-sound---music/the-altman-sound> [accessed 28 June 2018]. Cfr. also Smith, 'Film Sound in the Hollywood Renaissance, 1968-1980', pp. 91–3.
[32] Laurent Jullier, *L'écran postmoderne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), p. 140.
[33] Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 2009), p. 3.

Although there are no similar witnesses to the mode of production of Fassbinder's sound or to the recording technologies he used, we should note how he also integrated these improvements into his bigger productions of the late 1970s. While trusting in the intensified continuity of perpetually moving and zooming cameras, fast editing and intensive close-ups, he was able to organize a complementary soundscape made up of multiple levels of narration and, accordingly, of sound sources, with the overlapping of different tracks, continuous variations in the high-low volume range, contradictory matching of visual, verbal, written and musical information. Think, for instance, of the powerful sequence of Franz Biberkopf's first visit to his wife's twin sister. Both her rape and the subsequent flashback to him killing his wife begin with a dialogue and the noises of everyday home life (a door opening and closing, footsteps on an old wooden floor) in the foreground. But in both scenes the volume of the dialogue and of the diegetic noises is deliberately turned down, reducing them to an auditive background, and Döblin's estranging original text enters with its false, anguished, scientific objectivity (in the second case in the form of a judicial news report, and quoting Newton's laws of physical force), describing the crime scenes as a resonating place ('At a first blow she said "ouch" and no longer called him "you dirty bum", but "oh, man", instead'),[34] while the diegetic sound is partially deadened in the frozen background. During the rape scene, some violin music enters after a little while, at a very low volume, almost as a third level of environmental sound, melancholic and suave, while in the murder scene the music comes right at the end, after the noises have risen again violently (Franz exits banging the door hard), with a full orchestral score full of pathos that opposes, as an emotional commentary, the coolness of the last title board presenting the mathematical formula of acceleration, 'the degree of the disturbance effected by the force'.[35]

Rather than playing with modernist, Brechtian distanciation effects, the title sequence of *The Marriage of Maria Braun* exploits these improvements in sound technology even more widely in their full, immersive efficacy. Maria marries Wehrmacht officer Hermann during a violent bombing raid, the day before he leaves, apparently never to come back. When the bombs have almost reached the small ceremony, everybody flees, including the celebrating city official. Hermann and Maria chase him down the street and force him to sign the marriage contract. Then the title boards start, introducing a melancholy Maria searching for her missing husband at the train station. The whole initial sequence is characterized not only by impressive close-ups, rapid editing, fast camera movements and zooms, but also by the frantic juxtaposition of explosions, the hissing of bombs, shouting, and snarling threats, which are gradually replaced first by the incipient film music and then by the obsessive noise of the trains. This auditory immersion

[34] Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 74.
[35] *Ivi*, p. 75.

in a war context anticipates the role played throughout the whole film by the environmental sounds of the factory: thematic connotation, narrative framing, emotional reinforcement, a marker of perceptual intensification.[36]
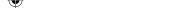

The Senses in Context

Film in Germany had a longstanding tradition of experimenting in sound and music. Following Brecht's and Weill's legacy, authors like Kluge and Straub and Huillet challenged the rhetorical conventions of German speaking, and tried even to translate musicological questions and urges, from Bach's counterpoint to Schönberg's serialism, into an abstract, visual concept.[37] A red line of contrapuntal use of the soundtrack against the image could be traced back from comedian Karl Valentin's shorts and Georg Wilhelm Pabst's version of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (*Die 3 Groschen-Oper*, 1931), to the first distancing and thrilling use of electronic music in the soundtrack of *Rosemary* (*Das Mädchen Rosemarie*, Rolf Thiele, 1958). As we could show, Rainer Werner Fassbinder got started in this tradition, and made wide use of spatiotemporal dislocation techniques; but he enhanced it in his late work by embedding the novel sound design of this decade and thus constructing a more complex, immersive experience of emotional plenitude. Here he excelled: making modernism visible and audible for the masses. Bringing hopelessness to the mainstream. The political instance of the sound/image counterpoint became a personal cry of despair, the lack of meaning of the serialized sound-image caused the destruction of the sounding body of his heroines, and finally of the living body of the author himself.

This kind of enhanced, multi-layered spatiality was a novelty in German film, and its appearance on German television was even more unprecedented. Thomas Elsaesser acknowledged Fassbinder's importance in reconciling the romantic ideal of authorship with the commercial needs of the film industry, and his brilliant tactic was being part of it while at the same time remaining on its margins. The same is true of his relationship with the German public television broadcaster.[38] Jane Shattuc has studied this relationship in depth, underlining the difficulty experienced by the wider TV audience with the complexity and literariness of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, although some of the viewers' commentaries she quoted need to be more properly understood. When the series appeared

[36] Cfr. Amedeo D'Adamo, *Empathetic Space on Screen: Constructing Powerful Place and Setting* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 119.
[37] 'As in twelve-tone musical technique, then, the importance of the camera in *Moses and Aron* (Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, 1974) thus equalizes its elements, flattens them out in visual space, and emphasizes their abstract interrelatedness', Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1995), p. 149.
[38] Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, p. 110.

them to be 'badly lit' and incomprehensible,[39] they were rejecting precisely those stylistic properties that Fassbinder was transferring from art cinema to popular television, properties which would inevitably become the norm in the following decades: low key photography as the color gradience of intensified continuity, sound-mixing as its sounding board — that is to say, the audiovisual design of the future, "emotionalized" and multi-layered mediascapes.

The aim of this contribution is, indeed, not to establish an individual primacy or reconsider critical evaluations. Irrespective of its importance in the history of film aesthetics, Fassbinder's work shows us, as a relevant case study, how a wider trend towards a "sensuous turn" in cultural production could be rooted in film production practices, in the social sharing of audio-visual technologies, and particularly in the birth of modern sound engineering.

The age of the intensification of audiovisual languages has indeed corresponded to a new conception of our listening experience. Since the 1950s, French musicology considered the production of sounds as the way to a technologically mediated relationship with the reality of things, as in the research of Schaeffer on concrete musical objects. Subsequently, the translation of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* in 1968 also opened up to the English-speaking world a phenomenology that imagined sound as a physical event, an almost organic process of positioning the subjective body in the world: the matrix of any embodied relation in Don Ihde's philosophical trajectory.[40] Vibration and movement, the time-line which gives life to film images, in Michel Chion's view.[41] At the same time, perception psychology could re-discover situatedness and object-relation, paving the way in Gibson's work for a subsequent ecological psychology of hearing.[42] Everyday sounds are complex and rich in redundant and complementary information, and from the 1970s on film sound engineers would have reproduced their whole resonating capability.

As a fact, together with stereophonic sound reproduction, multi-track recording and the introduction of a multi-layered spatiality in film destroyed a notable tradition of skepticism about audition's spatiality and objectivity, which had its highest point in 1959 with Strawson's famous discussion of sounds as pure experiences.[43] Modern film sound involves, on the contrary, experiencing or perceptually representing such spatial characteristics as direction and distance,

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[39] Jane Shattuc, *Television, Tabloids, and Tears: Fassbinder and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 163–91.
[40] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).
[41] Cfr. Chion.
[42] James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); Id., *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); William W. Gaver, 'What in the World Do We Hear? An Ecological Approach to Auditory Source Perception', *Ecological Psychology*, 5 (1993), 1–29.
[43] Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London and New York: Routledge, 1959).

and is phenomenologically linked to relational intelligence: through its spacial affordances, the soundscapes of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's late work showed to a wider audience how audition and the senses are concretely grounded in life experience and perception. And, finally, even more clearly than in other, contemporary examples, by placing the body at the very heart of his visual and auditory representation strategies, the German author influentially helped to move popular film and television into the age of emotional reflexivity. The present time.