NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN.

DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART PRINTMAKING.

"SONIC FRAGMENTATION IN ROBERT ALTMAN'S CINEMA".

BY

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS 1995.

I EXPRESS SINCERE GRATITUDE TO TONY FITZMAURICE

FOR HIS HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT.

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

INTRODUCTION

I intend for this work to analyse 'unconventional' use of sound in films, progressing through a history of the evolution of a standard film sound language and finding innovation in the films of Robert Altman. It has been argued that for cinema to communicate to a broad range of audience it must utilise a low common denominator, or meanings as understood by everyone. Unfortunately this manifests itself in a string of 'clichés' in both aural and visual cinema. I seek to exemplify how Altman uses the audience's conditioned knowledge and expectations of sound to arrive at a new stage for the presentation of sound information.

To offer theoretical possibilities for a 'new' sound, it is necessary to examine the evolution of sound cinema, noting the various reasons why a certain style developed, and making reference to theorists and to film-makers themselves. There is a link between Orson Welles and Altman, not only in their use of sound but also in the fact that they appeared to be anomalies in the film industry, and yet for all their innovative work in the field of sound their films remain supremely accessible.

Theoretical discussions arise more often upon the introduction of new technologies, and seek to analyse the implications this technology may have on existing techniques. A complacency with the language of sound existed prior to its marriage to cinema. When this union occured sound theory was a step behind, still tied to its non-visual evolution. This accounts for the jarring of the two media and the subsequent forcing of them together. I will examine a specific language development in film sound, and exemplify Altman's deviation from this

standardised form of representation, noting that despite historical precedents, little has changed in the image-biased hierarchical structure of cinema. The pre-eminence of sound is recognised, not only for its most basic role as a means of communication but also because of its inherent abstract qualities, its spiritual connotations. **"The ear goes more towards within, the eye toward the outer"**[1] I am of this opinion and believe that sound should not sacrifice this most important attribute in its partnership with the image.

Before I offer a theoretical criticism of the evolution of film sound, I shall first try to communicate why I believe conventional film sound to lack this key expressive element, which I believe was generally absent in its evolution. As with any language, film sound is composed of all the elements present in its cycle of evolution. Therefore a specific history of film sound should be examined, Which I must point out is not representative of visual cinema. The most important thing to understand when examining sound with images is how sound justifies its presence alongside a visual. The reasons why sound was introduced into cinema.

It is widely accepted that some form of chosen sound played alongside moving pictures from the beginning in 1895. More often this took the form of a piano accompaniment. The reasons for this were firstly to lull the audience into a receptive mood and secondly and most importantly to mask the sound of the projector, which was deemed not conducive to viewing pleasure. This role solidified the treatment of sound as 'sonic wallpaper', a smoke-screen device with a most menial of roles. The music could generally be described as vaudevillian, lightly entertaining, containing crude emotional motifs, which had evolved as an accompaniment to the

music-hall stage-play, previously the most popular form of entertainment. This musical trend continued alongside the development of silent cinema, which quickly attained a highly stylised mode of visual representation. Unfortunately the musical appendage did not develop at the same rate. Film music of the 1920's generally conveyed far less emotion or expression than a contemporary symphony. Mood music was pigeon-holing sound in an endless cycle of repetitive, vulgar aural motifs. Upon the introduction of dialogue recording, film directors conformed to a broad traditional treatment of sound, somewhere between radio drama and sound for the stage, both of which emphasised the hierarchical placement of sounds, the voice of the leading actor being at the apex. This was so because dialogue had replaced the images as the main vehicle for narrative progression, a supremacy which has remained relatively unchallenged.

CHAPTER ONE.

There was never a silent period, for virtually all movies prior to 1927 were accompanied by some kind of music. [2]

This notion of sound, as not being exclusively dialogue based is crucial to the understanding of the evolution of a sound language in cinema. In exemplifing that an expressive medium must not be limited by the constraints of verbal communication. A distinctive style had emerged in the accompaniment of 'silent' films : In its simplest form, mood music subtly directed the audiences emotions in keeping with the images on the screen. Music may have been seen to lack in communication when compared to the spoken word, because music is a highly abstract form and thus open to individual interpretation. Nonetheless the audience grew to understand the musical cues, ominous music conveying impending doom, or revealing internal emotions, exemplified by Bernard Herrmann's scores for Hitchcock's **Psycho** and Welles' **Citizen Kane**. One can imagine why there was such a split in the film industry when pre-recorded synchronous sound became available. Far from mimicing the stylistic expression of film music in its communicative role, the spoken word performed the most menial of roles, that of providing audio equivalents of caption cards. This was the obvious route for sound to take, providing an easily digestable narrative which would not compete with the images, for words require assimilation, music worked subliminally. By performing such a role sound films failed to inspire many of silent films greatest directors, such as Charlie Chaplin who, nonethe less succumbed to the inevitable and produced talkies.

The cultural hierarchy existed wherein radio drama and the common stage play were viewed as being inferior to silent films, which possessed a more sophisticated and stylised mode of representation. Thus sound films were seen as not possessing the pure expression of silent films. The early talkies reinforced this perception, not only in their predictable use of sound, but also because of technical reasons (the bulkiness of sound equipment) which made the films more 'stagey' and visually dull.

Sergei Eisenstein, particularly, was wary of dialogue in films and the inherent possibility that cinema would revert back to its primitive theatrical beginnings as stage play. Eisenstein's views on sound were amazingly innovative, given the use of music in his films (Prokoviev's score for **Alexander Nevesky** 1938), Eisensteins background was firmly within the use of sound in a classical narrative. In his manifesto on sound, written with Pudovkin, he placed his faith in the expressionistic use of sound, non-synchronous and not necessarily in parallel with the image. The principle factor is the innovative use of sound, for if one is to experiment with sound then one must disregard the historical precedents, and endeavour to treat sound as a physical phenomena capable of infinite variations and not simply language based.

Vsevolod Pudovkin argued that sound is not capitalised upon if it is used as a naturalistic accompaniment to an image. He encouraged the development of the image and the sound strip along a separate rhythmic course.

> **They must not be tied to one another by naturalistic imitation but connected as a result of the interplay of action...unity of sound and image is realized by an interplay**

of meanings which results...in a more exact rendering of nature than its superficial copying. [3]

EARLY CRITICAL RESPONSES TO SOUND FILM.

Prior to the introduction of pre-recorded sound in 1927, there existed few critical writings on sound in the cinema. Essentially sound opened up new possibilities for communication which were in opposition to the belief that language in cinema should exist solely within the discourse between images. Sound, paradoxically being more 'real', yet still ambiguous, was viewed as being crude in its form of communication, at least in comparison with the seamless style of purely visual cinema. Ardent supporters of the silent cinema believed that sound would taint the perfection that had been attained in the 1920's. Rudolf Arnheim[4] expressed that sound added nothing to the **'complete and perfected expressivity of the moving image'.** Arnheims view is single-minded in its obsession with the image, in his assumption that sound renders all visual images mute. Of course there is an element of truth in his viewpoint, in that if the balance of sound and vision is not correct then the expression will be lost. Indeed it is often the case that even in contemporary films the soundtrack fades out when an important image is on the screen. But the majority of directors from the silent era were not wholly against the introduction of sound in itself. It seems that the greatest fear was that sound would be grafted onto the image for greater economic viability- as a crowd-puller. This proved to be correct for the first few years as the terribily staged films of the late 1920's testify to

the awkwardness with which sound merged the image.

Bela Balazs[5] believed that sound film had the potential to rediscover 'lost' sensations, space as described by sound, or silence which can only be expressed in the presence of sound. If one is to be pureist in terms of sound then one must accept that silence does not exist in the world in which we live- it exists only in a vacuum. Spatial colouration, which Balazs discusses, is an important facet of film sound and will be discucced later in relation to Orson Welles' film work, and finally more specifically in regard to films by Robert Altman.

Jean Epstein[6] believes in common with Balazs, in the ability of sound to convey a rich texture, almost to the point of saturation, whilst maintaining the possibility of communicating the subtlest of aural gestures which could be the most important element. This is somewhat akin to how a lead violin can maintain its status, while the accompanying orchestra is at full volume. Because the audience understands visual information so well, it prefers an orderly presentation of images which is not confusing. Images because they are still tied to a formalised 'reality', tend to lose their clarity on a busy screen. Because 'seeing is believing', the eye is more easily confused than the ear. To exemplify this : Visual cinema is based upon one 'percieved' reality, a highly stylised verisimilitude. Conveying emotion visually, as shown in many silent films, relies on exaggeration of gesture and spectacle. As sound is of abstract origin, it can only communicate in an oblique manner, thus avoiding the necessity to conform to convention by providing a gaudy parallel to the expression of sadness for example. A brief sigh cannot be expressed in purely visual

terms. Having said this, because of sound's evolution within cinema it has developed garish audio equivalents of predictable visual representations, kitschy mood music etc. But these aural motifs were cultured artifically to make symbiosis possible.

It is ironic that sceptics of sound cinema believed that sound, united with visuals would be vulgar and obvious because sound may be uniquely capable of expressing pure emotion, much more than visual means, which have always had, in cinema, to conform to a formalised reality. It seems that their wariness of sound stemmed from an anxiety that it would upstage visual cinema (which proves the point that cinema is supremely hierarchical and biased towards images). Ideally sound cinema should use whatever means possible to communicate, and if the aural occasionally upstages the visual then so be it. A visually biased approach is ultimately non-constructive.

Orson Welles was viewed as a maverick director by some, and it is certain that his sound techniques did not become mainstream practice in Hollywood cinema. It was not until the french new wave that sound drew attention to itself in films. Surprisingly this owed more to production facilities than to the purist philosophy of tradition. Earlier revolutionary theorists such as Rene Clair and Pudovkin believed that asynchronous sound could work in opposition to the image whilst still maintaining a subservient position. Subsequent French directors Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard gave the sound track an independant status which was equal to that of the visual track.

Godard allowed the sound track to challenge the image, as in **Vivre sa Vie** [1962] - In one scene, two girls, working in a

record shop are swooning over a romance novel. The camera pans slowly away from the two, while maintaining their conversation on the sound track, to the street outside and settles on the various passers-by, including an old woman hobbling by. What one has are two totally disjointed fragments which together provide something more than the sum of their parts. They produce an ironic counter-point, which would not be present if they were separate. This is an existance of a total reversal of the classical role of sound. In the previous example the image would have remained constant and the sound track would have to perform the menial role of conveying the off-screen information. In **Vivre sa Vie** the sound track is of equal importance and provides information which is just as relevant as the visual information.

This new French tradition relied upon a new constructed 'reality' as opposed to the traditional cinematic reality. This constituted the simultaneous recording of both sound and image, with no sound post-production. Re-recording and sound post-production was a fixed part of Italian and American cinema, which attempted to 'doctor' sound to make it more 'real'. Practitioners of 'cinema vérité' viewed this as creating an inherently false sound scape. 'Direct' sound grew out of a tradition of documentary cinema and the availibility of portable (magnetic tape) sound equipment. The intention of 'direct' sound was to revert sound back to its simplicity (purity) before sound editing and post-production techniques became available and, in their minds, abused. It is not surprising that sound in many French films of the '50s and '60s bore more resemblance to early sound films than to their non-french contemporaries.

Direct sound respects not only the integrity of real space but

the freedom of the viewer to construct it in a nonillusionistic way. [7]

ORSON WELLES: POPULARISING A NEW APPROACH TO FILM SOUND.

One could view Orson Welles as one of the first important figures in experimentation in film sound. Admittedly his sound team James G. Stewart and Bailey Fesler must take credit for technical innovation on Welles' first two films. However Welles' experiance in the field of sound is obvious. His previous work had been in the field of drama, especially that for broadcasting on radio. Consequently his training for and understanding of sound and its projection gave him a different perspestive for the use of sound in his films. As radio plays could not be seen, sound had to create a spatial depth and atmosphere, therefore it had to be dramatic and stylised, or contrived to mimic the action of real sound. This manner of 'stylised realism' was unknown in film sound of the time. This is exemplified in his treatment of H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds, broadcast on C.B.S. radio in the manner of a real radio news broadcast. Welles' obsession with the documentary realism of radio news made itself apparent in the sound quality of the broadcast, which was faked to sound like an outside broadcast.

In **Citizen Kane** [RKO 1941], Welles' directorial debut, one can see the fruition of such early experimentation in sound. An example is Welles' treatment of the voice in space. In **Citizen Kane** there is a scene in which Charles Kane, sitting in his

cavernous residence 'Xanadu', is visually dwarfed by the over-sized architecture. If Welles were to have conveyed this to a radio audience he would have processed the vocal to sound echoed and reverberant- which is exactly how he treats it for the film, where Kane's voice has a massive presence and, like the architecture, dwarfs Kane physically while exaggerating his presence. In this manner sound is contributing to the essence of the film, not simply repeating what the visuals tell us.

Before citing more examples of innovation in Welles' work, I shall briefly examine the general use of sound in **King Kong** [Merian C. Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack 1933 RKO]. **King Kong** is a very early RKO sound production, consequently its use of sound is more naîve and less stylised; however it is notable that its use of sound is tied more to the silent tradition than attempting to define new possibilities. Max Steiners' score (which is typical mood music) is always in 'synch' with the image and the dialogue simply reaffirms what the visual is telling us. For example when the female character, Fay Wray is in the clutches of Kong we can clearly see her screaming hysterically; in these instances the soundtrack is performing the most menial of roles, simply repeating what we already know. The audience is given an overkill of screaming. All of **King Kong**'s soundtrack is given to slavish repetition of the obvious. The subservience of sound, this was a position which Welles, working within the same system, managed to overcome.

One important facet of Welles' work in film sound is his manipulation of sound's ability to convey spatial characteristics accurately. The sound quality is always indicative of the space

in which it was recorded. I shall choose two examples from **The Magnificent Ambersons** [RKO 1942].

Firstly, the farewell scene at the train station between Georgie Amberson and his uncle : Visibly the shot could not be more two-dimensional; a mist shrouds most of the background which contains no cues for the perception of depth. Welles uses sound singularly to create depth in the shot; footsteps can be heard along with bells, train noises and other sounds emerging from the background. This technique is concise and expressive, it negates the need to construct a large set or a matte painting and arguably produced better results in terms of perceived realism, than the aforementioned visual means. A modern approach to this manner of sound treatment can be found in Robert Altman's films, which I will examine in a later chapter.

The second scene from **The Magnificent Ambersons** which I wish to examine in terms of its treatment of sound is the scene in which Georgie is having a conversation with his uncle in the bathroom. The soundtrack accompanying the scene is highly processed . The reverberation added to the voice of Georgie makes it almost unrecognisable, but contributes to the overall effect of the scene.

This corresponds with the idea that sound becomes 'unreal' in a quest for reality. The ambiguous and ineffable qualities of sound lead to a situation where it is impossible for one sound to communicate emotion universally. For an image to work, the viewer must understand the image as a truthful representation of reality, a tangible reality. No such reality exists in the soundscape. Therefore it must be invented, portrayed with auditory motifs. These moods or atmospheres exist to guarentee intelligib-

ility. For each sound can be heard in an infinite number of different ways, depending upon the ears listening, the location of the listener and numerous other variables. This is the empiricism of sound : It cannot be reproduced - it can only be represented from a single point of view at one time. For sound to be interactive it must provide options allowing the listener to enter into the soundscape and choose the information he deems relevant to the image. If only a single nugget of sound information is provided then sound is fulfilling its most basic role as a supplement to the visual, conveying the same information in a different form, this situation is non-productive as the two elements, sound and image , by providing the same information , cancel eachother by working in opposition. At its most sophisticated, the cinematic experiance requires an interplay between the two forces.

CHAPTER TWO.

ALTMAN'S MANIPULATION OF FILM SOUND.

Prior to his career in narrative cinema, Robert Altman worked in the field of documentary. He spent time in the 1950s making industrial shorts, utilising lightweight cinema equipment and semi-professional sound equipment. It is not hard to imagine that this mode of working had some effect on his future film career. For example, his use of sound owes much to the French 'cinema vérité' tradition, which in turn was inspired by the availibility of portable sound equipment and the desire for sound 'realism'. The simplicity of the sound, and its harshness, was in opposition to the evolved film sound of the 1950s, which by today's standards is undynamic and unprocessed. The distinction between the high culture of classical cinema and its low brow relative, documentary cinema, is apparent in the technical differences and the stylistic devices utilised.

It might seem that Altman was reluctant to ditch the creative possibilities of a 'vérité' approach to sound, the conventional realism of traditional Hollywood sound seems dull in comparison. If he was to create within the structure of Hollywood then he would be expected to conform to the aural expectations that the audience supposedly requires. In opposition to this Altman had the lead characters in both **McCabe and Mrs.Miller** [Warner Bros. 1970] and **The Long Goodbye** [United Artists 1973] speak untelligibily, thus undermining the hierarchical placement of sounds in the traditional Hollywood structure. Muffled incomprehensible speech is frequently encountered by people, yet this phenomenon assumes a greater significance when it is displayed in a film.

This is so because the audience has taken for granted (through years of conditioning) that the leading actors in a film should be able to articulate themselves coherently, as the conventional role of sound since its merging with cinema has been directed to facilitating the comprehension of dialogue. Technical developments have improved the clarity and fidelity of sound (most of the early developments in sound technology concentrated on improving the 'mid-band', the frequency range covered by the human voice).

In this regard the leading actor's voice was at all costs to be the clearest sound on the track. Altman's break with tradition reached the extent that he deliberately mufflrd the voice of the leading actor in **McCabe and Mrs. Miller**, Warren Beatty, whose opening words in the film are incomprehensible ramblings. McCabe's lack of expressivity is his most important characteristic. His words, in themselves are in expressive, not least because of his inarticulateness. His manner of delivery weakens his words into mere distractions. This treatment exists in both **McCabe** and **The Long Goodbye** - The most detestable characters in both films have the clearest enunciation, for example Doctor Verringer in **The Long Goodbye** and the non-sensical lawyer Samuel Clements in **McCabe**. Both have a polished delivery but their words ring hollow and their personalities empty. Altman's justification for the mumbled speech is in the ritualistic act of speech :

> **What I am after is the subtext... I want to get the quality of whats happening between people, not just the words. The words often don't matter, it's what they're really saying to each other without the words.**[8]

In regard to **McCabe and Mrs. Miller** as a whole, one of the most notable sound techniques utilised by Altman and sound mixer Barry Jones is the layering of the sound track. At the time that **McCabe** was made in 1970, most films made use of multi-track sound recording, allowing incidental sound effects and environmental sound to emerge on the final mix. However these sounds would always play second fiddle to scripted lines for the actors. The only time that a sound effect would have the sound track completely to itself would be for an explosion or some similiar aural spectacle.

In **McCabe** and practically all of Altman's films since 1970, the layers of sound are equally spread, there is little of the bias normally associated towards the leading actors voice. The 'background' sounds in **McCabe** compete with the 'important' sounds and are not used exclusively as mood reinforcement or to create atmosphere. These sounds are multi-functional in that they invite audience participation and interaction. The effect is a saturation of aural stimuli, a carefully orchestrated din. The opening scene in **McCabe** is a sonic 'tour de force'. Ones field of hearing is not limited to the voice alone. The sound has the unequalised feel of an 'on the spot' recording, spatial colouration deadens the tone, all of the conversations merge into a disjointed impression of John McCabe as he enters the bar. Talk of his 'Swedish gun' etc. helps to invent a reputation for him. In place of a specific aural close-up, providing one unit of information and thus one option, there is a tapestry of densely woven aural material from which one is free to draw one's own conclusions.

One could view the layering of sound as an audio equivalent of depth of field, a deep focus shot. One reason why deep focus photography was used in cinema was that it could combine two or more shots into one. Deep focus possessed the ability to portray foreground information but also to lead the eye into the depths of the shot and discover more information with the shot. Similiarily a multi-layered sound track provides the listener with a choice of what to listen to and gauge the relevance of the separate pieces of sound information. To facilitate the comprehension of the track each fragment must be recorded at a different volume level, just as there must be depth cues in a deep focus shot so that one can relate to the illusion of a three-dimensional space. The important point is that this approach offers to the viewer a degree of interaction which can simultaneously make the expressive intentions of the director more accessible as well as more sophisticated.

I shall now offer examples of how Altman put this theory into action in **McCabe**. One scene in which the over-lapping dialogue reacts with the images is in the newly constructed whorehouse, where McCabe is conversing with Jeremy Berg, his head of construction, about the prices for materials. Their voices are prominent on the sound track but background noise is present. There is a cut in the image to the door as two men enter, McCabe's conversation is dipped slightly in level so that when the men are enquiring about the prices of whores one can still keep track of McCabe's conversation. The point of overlapping them is obvious, one of the men soliciting asks for Mrs. Miller and when told her price repeats loudly 'Five dollars' and 'Mrs. Miller', to which McCabe

reacts by turning around to see them. Likewise the viewer can grasp only fragments from each conversation and interprets it in his own way. One has the choice of which conversation to follow, even if the camera is with the other. In a simple way the sound is subjugating the authority and directivity of the camera.

For the majority of the sound track a cold and desolate atmosphere exists. Wind and rain are almost always present on the soundtrack, even when the scene is indoors. This combined with the muted colours and the unadorned music of Leonard Cohen, ever distant and ethereal as the film progresses which fortifies the sense of doom that waits for McCabe. Constance Miller dreams of escape, constructing her secret world behind closed doors, that of opium smoking and her musical box. McCabe's fate is expressed eloquently and without dialogue when after his last night spent with Mrs. Miller, she arises in the early hours to wander around the empty town in the drifting snow. The accompanying Cohen lyric about a travelling lady (Winter Lady1968) confirm that McCabe will never hold on to Constance: "I'm just a station on your way I know I'm not your lover". This song is infused with the cold winter soundscape, its recording quality is as sparse as the landscape of the frontier town of 'Presbyterian Church'. Thus while McCabe never fully verbalizes his feelings to Constance or himself the soundtrack offers a representation of his romantic notions, which he was unable to articulate himself.

The narrative climax to **McCabe and Mrs. Miller**, if there is one, is when McCabe has to fight for his life (threatened by the hired killer, Butler, a well spoken Englishman). Unlike the central character in most westerns McCabe is more than reluctant

to a standoff. During the prolonged fight sequence Altman uses an aural sense of dislocation, similiar to the disjointed fragments in **The Long Goodbye**. During the period of aggression the unfinished church has caught fire and though it is early morning the townspeople rush to save it, motivated by an obscure protectivness, which they seemingly do not share for McCabe. Although these two events take place in close proximity the sound field in each remains untouched by the other. The townspeople appear not to have heard the gunshots, and the din caused by the fire fighters does not register with the gunfighters. Despite their proximity these two events occur in different worlds, and the inhabitants of each are unconcerned about the other. Only after McCabe has killed all three of his adversaries do sounds outside of his immediate surroundings appear on the soundtrack. As he is dying from the wounds inflicted upon him, the cheering and euphoric celebrations of the people who saved the church can be heard, as if to mock him. The soundtrack then cuts to the howling of the wind and the camera settles on the dying McCabe and from this wind emerges the Travelling Lady song, becoming his epitaph as the film fades out with the drugged-out face of Mrs. Miller.

FRAGMENTARY APPROPRIATION IN THE LONG GOODBYE.

Thematically **The Long Goodbye** bears no obvious resemblance to **McCabe** other than that they are both genre studies. However in technique they have much in common. The cinematographer in both films was Vilmos Zsigmond and they both share distinctive auditory styles. Altman's basic preoccupations remain, a construction of visual and aural fragments.

The possibilities for aural experimentation are greater than those in **McCabe** as there is a wider variety of locations utilised. The sonic potentials of such places are utilised to their maximum, and the sound qualities are often used along with the visual to describe the scene in three dimensions. There is a strong sense of self-awareness in the sound style of **The Long Goodbye**. The sound style in **McCabe** did not specifically refer to anything outside of itself, whereas in **The Long Goodbye** there is not only strong reference to a classical Hollywood sound style, but an active re-interpretation of such styles. The opening and closing song of the film, 'Hooray for Hollywood' presented like an archive recording, implies an irreverant treatment of Hollywood production values. This treatment is explicitly obvious in the use of the title song, 'The Long Goodbye' by John T. Williams and Johnny Mercer, which appears with almost absurd frequency, in as many forms as one could imagine. While this choice is not purely accidental, I am dubious of the notion that it is entirely parody[9]. Instead I suggest that this reoccuring tune is a representation of the essence of Classical Hollywood, out of context and placed in different environments, just as Philip Marlowe is a type-

cast 'noir' detective and is out of synch with his world, Los Angeles in the 1970s.

The 'Hooray for Hollywood' from the beginning of the fiim is a relic of a past film industry, Hollywood's musical era. Marlowe is also an obselete relic, unable to function in a world where honesty and principles no longer exist. His self-protective wit and cynicism, akin to Bogarts in **The Big Sleep** [Howard Hawks 1947] are now dysfunctional. The treatment of music and the Marlowe character offer a historical perspective on the representational values of American cinema. Other sound techniques used in the film, the sound layering and disorientation, compound Marlowe's confusion and misunderstanding of his surroundings. In this case sonic fragmentation implies ethical chaos.

The film uses the language and quality of sound concisely. They provide a large proportion of information relevant to the theme. Such usage of sound can only be possible when working outside of the conventional treatment of sound. Other films have made use of old Hollywood traditions but these are either nostalgic or reverential. Altman's appropriation of a musical tradition accompanying noir films is subliminal and subersive. The characters in the film are unaware of the continual presence of 'The Long Goodbye' tune and yet Marlowe, Terry Lennox, Marty Augustine and many others absent-mindedly hum or sing the piece. This kind of interaction between music and the actors was previously non-existent in films. Far from being tongue-in-cheek, this technique further focusses the film in that the music is not simply an appendage to dramatic action. It is an additional sub-text that threads its way through practially every scene in

the film and is used as a means of describing the space in which every shot is taking place. In the first few moments of the film Marlowe is driving to the 'Thrifty Mart' to buy some cat food. On the soundtrack Clydie King is singing 'The Long Goodbye' accompanied by a single piano, when Marlowe enters the supermarket there is a sound cut to a 'muzak' instrumental version of the song wafting out of a shrill, cheap P.A.. While continuing the musical motif this cut manages to create an auditory image of the location and also describe the acoustic environment, the dead emptiness of a supermarket.

This is using sound as a means of communication, and there are at least two pieces of information conveyed with every sound. There is the 'content', the sound itself, a voice for example, and the form which this sound takes, its quality. A word spoken in a bathroom will have a different quality from the same word spoken by the same person in a cathedral. The sound quality always describes the space which it occupies. Altman utilises these notions of sound communication to create a fuller perception of the visual space and sometimes to distort it.

In musical terms **The Long Goodbye** is all repetition, the same song is sung and the same notes are played. The treatment of the song changes to suit the visual, or rather to reinforce and comment upon the impression of the visual. For example the Sinatra-like singing of Jack Sheldon accompaning Terry Lennox as he drives his open-top sports car out of 'The Malibu Colony' is skin-deep glitzy and suave, echoing Lennox who in reality is a hood named Lenny Potts. Altman is using the audience's conditioned perceptions of film music to create a mood which would other-

wise not have been percieved.

This is an aural patchwork and requires a great deal of judgement if the final product is not to smother itself in satirical humour. The appropriation of fragments portraying the evolution of sound cinema to generic re-interpretation is a form of pastiche. Many scenes in the film manage to use very obvious and in some ways tacky representations of the song without sliding into slapstick comedy, (for example the completely over-the-top Mexican funeral band, played by the Tapoztlan Municipal Band). This motif, appearing once or twice in the film, could be interpreted as a traditional use of connotative music, however the frequency of its appearance leads one to the conclusion that it may be denotative of previous musical traditions, a comment on the low-culture tradition of musical motif. Although I detect no malice in Altmans appropriation of these styles, I believe that they should be viewed as more than empty mimicry. In such a way that it cannot fit neatly into Fredric Jameson's explanation of pastiche.

> **Pastiche is...the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practise of such mimicry: without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse... 10**

If such a style were used for purely humourous effect, then the film would simply be a humourous story of a man living his life as though he were a film noir detective, instead of a multi-layered sandwich of styles presenting a genre study and a critique of the Hollywood film industry, in particular the tradition of sound in Hollywood films.

Another aspect of sound treatment in **The Long Goodbye** is the over-lapping dialogue. I have discussed this previously in relation to **McCabe and Mrs. Miller**, but as this technique is also quite prevalent in **The Long Goodbye** it warrents further examination in relation to this film. This technique does not work in opposition to the other auditory styles in the film. In fact, far from complicating the soundtrack, this addition further develops the soundscape.

Marlowe is a misunderstood mumbler, just as McCabe was, he is locked into his own world and is out of contact with his surroundings, his 'hard-boiled' wit is lost on his contemporaries who view him as being a 'smart-ass'. Altman has exaggerated Marlowe's inarticulateness to emphasise his alienation in 1970s America. Just like his treatment of film music, Altman subverts the authority of the leading character's words, another previously unquestioned Hollywood assumption. To emphasise how unimportant Marlowe's words are, he is often heard mumbling incomprehensibly as he exits the frame. His inability to understand his hippie neighbours manifests itself in his repetition of 'those crazy ladies'. Every woman is a lady to Altman's Marlowe, he is related to a type-cast Hollywood creation and is handicapped by the myopia inherent in his character.

Marlowe's interrogation by the police is a perfect example of how sound can be used more effectively to describe space than its visual counterpart. In this short scene the voices of the policemen and of Marlowe are treated in three different ways, all of which denote the space in which they are spoken. Firstly there is the reverberant room in which Marlowe is being

interrogated. Secondly there is the sound of the intercom which conveys the interview into the 'secret' observation room, a shrill, compressed and sterile sound, and finally the voices of the men in the observation room, claustrophobic and intimate. The sound cuts in this sequence follow the visual cuts, but the difference in sound quality is so much more pronounced than the difference in visual space, that the sound becomes the immediate communicative device and Altman permits the visual to assume a secondary role, displacing the hierarchy of the image. The shifts in volume emphasise the distancing effect of the camera.

> **The shifting volumes...are simultaneously altering our impressions of spatial depth and physical separations...**[11]

This spatial confusion could not be achieved by visual means alone, and so Altman relies on this spatial quality of sound which was explored previously by Orson Welles.

In the latter part of the interrogation the camera remains in the oservation room, the smeared glass window acting as a distancing device, separating the viewer physically from the events. Intially the sound plays a similiar role, the speech emanating from a small loudspeaker, physically disembodying the voices. But as the camera zooms in on Marlowe through the glass the framing boundaries become lost and the sound reverts back to that recorded in the interrogation room itself. The effect of this is to continually alter one's grasp of the events taking place and requires the audience to improvise their own impression of events in the film.

This method of sound production can be uniquely expressive,

and while Altman has often been reproached for this type of 'incoherent rambling', **Rosenbaum** considers this reading akin to censuring a jazz musican because his improvisations lack the polished form and execution of a classical musican performing a written piece.

> **While it is certainly true that the former is less likely to achieve a finished form, there is a different kind of excitement in the way he tries to achieve it.** [12]

The total dissociation between aural and visual space which Altman presents is analogous to Orson Welles' treatment of sound in his films. Definition of space, a role at which sound excels, is virtually ignored in mainstream cinema.

> **Distancing is the one aural space-defining factor of which all film-makers are aware. That's not to say that they use it properly. Amplitude increases as the source of the sound moves towards us, but because there are so many variables in sound production, and because or our poor aural storage and/or retrieval systems, we aren't able to make more than a crude approximation of absolute distance. That's why movies, which all have their dialogue varying from close-up to medium shot, do not expend much effort modulating the volume as the camera or characters move.** [13]

It sems obvious that one cannot merely 'tack-on' innovative sound, it must work with the images towards a complete vision. In the films of Robert Altman, sound is indeed contributing to the essence of the film.

CONCLUSION

In this work, I have attempted to use a historical perspective on film sound to work towards an examination of the manipulation of sound in films of Robert Altman. Uncovering the evolution of his sound styles and how he adapts this historical perspective to further focus his generic re-interpretations. I believe that this is justification for my examination of previous sound films, for it is Altman's appropriation of disparate elements that fuse together to form his individual style. Such traditions as mood music, the unquestioned supremacy of intelligible speech, and the shallow spatial environment which film sound traditionally occupies, are either subverted or re-interpreted in Altman's cinema.

Looking superfically one may view Altman's work in film sound as being different for the sake of stylistic individuality. Yet viewing his oeuvre one can see its purpose. It is not merely an appendage, used to draw attention to itself. The soundtrack in Altman's films educate the ear to a new form of perception, one which is as relevant to the history of film sound as it is to the film narrative itself. In every sound film there is manipulation of the sound track, however in the majority of films this manipulation extends only to the construction of a 'soundtrack', a mandatory accompaniment to the visual, re-affirming its potency. Altman's soundtrack interacts with both the visual and the audience resulting in a more palpable sense of what the film is about.

Altman's films have often been analysed in terms of generic re-interpretation: The re-invention of the western in **McCabe and Mrs. Miller**, as a 'dog-eat-dog' world of business enterprise

or the critique of the classic 'noir' detective, Marlowe in **The Long Goodbye**. Both films use a traditional Hollywood story and subvert the classical generic intentions, mainly by deconstructing the fabricated potency that the lead characters possessed in their earlier manifestations. McCabe is no mean gunfighter and Philip Marlowe is a Hollywood creation, but in the 'real world', devoid of any authority. In an analogous manner Altman manipulates the soundtrack: Just as he dispells the audience's preconception of a smooth talking Hollywood detective, he also disjoints one's expectations of the sound, on some occasions using out-moded Hollywood motifs such as repetitive mood music, and in others re-interpreting the foundations of contemporary film sound by destroying the supremacy of intelligible speech and dialogue and replacing them with their opposites, discontinuous mumblings interrupted by fragments of the incomprehensible.

It seems clear that Altman's intentions are not those of his stablemates. Thematically his films are disparate. His examination of genre however is consistent, and his re-interpretation of generic sound styles is consistent with the films, utilising out-moded techniques and constructing a new form of sound realism. This, it could be argued, is no more 'real' than conventional film sound. However it is serving a specific purpose: It is a central and not peripheral element in an unipotent aspect of Altman's project, which is to offer a varied and sustained critique of American cinema.

FOOTNOTES

1 Robert Bresson - Sight and Hearing, p.149 *

2 Louis Gianetti - Understanding Movies 3rd ed. p.165

3 V.I. Pudovkin - Asynchronism as a principle p.86 *

4 Rudolf Arnheim - A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the talking film. *

5 Bela Balazs - Theory of film: Sound. 1945 *

6 Jean Epstein - Slow-motion Sound. *

7 Weis/Belton - Modern Sound Theory. *

8 Louis Gianetti - Quote- Robert Altman. Masters Of American Cinema. p.433

9 R.P. Kolker - as suggested by. A cinema of Loneliness. p.349

10 Fredric Jameson - Postmodernism and consumer society.

11 Jonathan Rosenbaum - p.95 Sight and Sound, spring 1975.

12 Jonathan Rosenbaum - p.95 Sight and Sound, spring 1975.

13 Penny Mintz - Orson Welles use of sound. p.291 *

* cited in Film Sound- Theory and Practice. Weis/Belton.

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18 Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Improvisations And Innovations In Altmanville". (Sight and Sound- London, Spring 1975)

19 Weis, Elisabeth and John Belton (ed.) "Film Sound- Theory and Practice". (Columbia University Press 1985).