

Sound Design in Children's Film

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– Presentation paper. Not for publication, not to be quoted! Published articles on the topic can be found in the bibliography –

Film music: The bare necessities of children's film

As you are well aware, sound in film, and film music in particular, can be an important factor for promoting a film. For instance, every cinéphile associates the STAR WARS theme with the films themselves, and indeed it has such a high recognition value that it has consistently been used for marketing the films and other products of the STAR WARS franchise. New title songs play a major role in marketing and promoting blockbuster films such as the *James Bond* franchise.

In the terms coined by film musicologist Claudia Bullerjahn, film music can assume metafunctions, i.e. functions which do not apply to the specific role of music and sound within a given film but rather to its general role for the (preparation of) the film experience as such (cf. Bullerjahn 2001, 65).

And this is so in children's film as well: everyone (at least in Germany) knows the *Pippi Longstocking* title song, and just recently the Original Sound Track for the film *Bibi & Tina* climbed to the top of the German Amazon download charts. Alluding to one of the best-known children's film songs: film music merely constitutes the bare necessities of children's film.

In our presentation today, we will *not* talk about this obvious metafunction of film music or sound. Instead, we want to offer you some thoughts on the peculiarly indispensable

role that sound elements can assume in films which are specifically targeted at young audiences. The cognitive effects of films on their audience are never the result of their moving images alone. It rather results from the complex spatial and temporal interplay between image and sound track (cf. Borstnar/Pabst/Wulff 2008, S. 138 and Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013, 125).

Relying on selected film examples and on the concept of „aurality,“ we will focus on the guiding role of sound and other film elements which are directly or indirectly aimed at the sense of hearing for children's films spectatorship. The focus will be on the entanglement between the visual and aural elements of a film, and particularly on ways in which the latter assumes a guiding role for a child spectator's film experience (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013, 124f). Thereby, we will provide a theoretical, systematic framework for understanding the ways in which sound can figure in children's film.

Aurality

From our analytical perspective, it is not possible to properly understand contemporary children's cinema without paying attention to the manifold possibilities of tying image and sound together (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2014, ch. 3.1). Contrary to what many accounts in film studies still implicitly assume, the stuff recipients see is often co-determined by what they hear. More explicitly: Sound in film can assume a guiding role for film perception – and in the case of the way in which children perceive children's film, it *does* assume a guiding role for film perception (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013, 124f.).

Our concept of aurality is supposed to incorporate this insight, and it does put to the foreground such auditive elements of a film which assume such a guiding function in their interplay with the visual elements (cf. *ibid.*). In our usage, this concept incorporates straightforwardly auditive elements of a film, such as film music, sounds, or dialogues, and other film elements which are *indirectly* aimed at the spectator's sense of hearing, such as rhythmic entanglements of image and sound track, synchronised camera and character movements, or heavily rhythmicised montage sequences (cf. *ibid.*, 8f). The concept of aurality is supposed to help identifying films or film elements whose effect on a spectator is predominantly guided by their sound track.

Four assumptions

For the purposes of this presentation, we will rely on four assumptions:

- (1) **The film experience of children is emotion- and experience-based:** Children (and young adults) tend to experience films in a more emotional, less analytic way as compared to adult film spectators (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013; 85, Schäfer 2006, 104-10 and Gangloff 2005, 2). They tend toward immersing into the film text. Because of that, it is safe to assume that films are experienced as a wholesome product and not only as the sum of their visual, auditive, and narrative elements.
- (2) **The film experience of children until the age of approximately 10 years is dominated by the sense of hearing, not by the sense of seeing:** Current research in developmental psychology suggest that children of that age heavily rely on their sense of hearing for making sense of the world (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013, 94 ff.). Therefore, they are also likely to be attracted by aural elements in film. Consequently, this special trait of children's experience of the world calls for an explicit focus on aural elements in film production – not only on music but the interplay and image and sound track as well.
- (3) **There is a likely correlation between cognitive disposition and actual film production:** A quick survey of older and contemporary children's films as well as commercials for children's toys shows that they actually conform to the cognitive disposition of their targeted audience to a certain degree (cf. Barth 1995). Simply remember all the Disney films you saw as a kid. Such films exploit the correlation of music, camera movements, or movements within the film frame.
- (4) **Non-originary children's films often do correspond to the cognitive disposition of children as well:** This is evident in the popularity of blockbuster action films which, as family entertainment, are not exclusively aimed at a young audience (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013, 135).

The emotional focus of children's film experience

The claim that children as well as young adults experience a film in a highly experience- and emotion-oriented way is our starting premise. Young spectators do not tend to analyse single elements of a film; they rather experience – and live through – a film with all their senses: For instance, you are likely to see children hiding in their parent's living room sofa, eyes wide open, when Karl (Jonas Holdenrieder), one of the main characters in the 2013 adaptation of Otfried Preußler's *DAS KLEINE GESPENST* (Gspöner 2013) is clinging to the clock hand of the civil hall tower clock, or they start jumping and dancing around in their cinema seats while Bibi and Tina, in the German film of the same name, go horse-riding, accompanied by the tunes of the main theme so well-known from the audio book series.

The close correlation between film perception and movement is not merely a result of a child's natural need for movement (cf. Weineck 2004, 334), but it is also grounded in the fact that the perception of auditive structures triggers a velocity impulse in the brain, an impulse which children have not yet learned to suppress (cf. Furgber 2002, 101).

This also means: Children perceive music, dialogue and sounds in a less distant way than visual stimuli. Listening puts the focus on emotions, it pulls the listener into the events on screen; while vision rather conveys an overview of phenomena, putting clarity and rationality to the foreground (cf. Soentgen 2012, 43). Media educationalist Jan-Uwe Rogge puts it like this:

For instance, when confronted with threatening film scenes, many children do not only close their eyes but also press their hands against their ears, or they answer the question concerning the amount of suspense in the film like this: „There was some dangerous music in it!“ (Rogge 1994, 24; our translation)

Now, listening is not exclusively a matter of what we hear with our ears – we also feel sonic waves through the tactile nerves of our skin. In other words: Both the outer sense of hearing as well as the inner sense of tactile perception contributes to the perception of

acoustic stimuli, as the developmental psychologist Michael Furgber puts it (cf. Furgber 2002, 97).

The specific perceptive dispositions of children and young adults sketched above are a prerequisite for the focus which children's film have on aural means of expression. Let's take a closer look at the character and role of sound in film:

Film sound: a definition

One can describe sound in film as an organised form of sound events (cf. Finscher 1997). As you are well-aware, film sound is a mix of acoustic noise, mono- or dialogues, and music, both diegetic and non-diegetic. Their synthesis constitutes the „soundscape“ (Schafer 1977) of the film. Analogously, one can understand the visual stimuli of a film's image track as the organised representation of movement. The kind of stuff organised here is the movement of the (actual or implied) camera through film space, the movement of characters and things within this camera-represented film space, the proper movement of that space, and, at last, the distribution of edits between single shots. The coordinated sequence or co-existence of these elements results in the montage of the film which organises its aurality.

Dominance relations between image and sound

This also results in different dominance relations between visual and auditive means of filmic expression. One can describe these schematically as follows:

Firstly: The moving images guide sound design (the most poignant example for this: silent film screenings with accompanying live piano).

Secondly: Image and sound track are correlated with each other (hierarchically equal).

Thirdly: Sound design (or elements of it) guides the design of the visual track (the most evident example: music videos, professional concert videos or film scenes containing diegetic music ([musicals])). (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013)

Weak aurality, strong aurality

Following up on the dominance relations sketched above, it is possible to identify degrees of intensity of aurality, ranging from so-called weak aurality to strong aurality (cf. Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013, 282). When the sound track (or elements of it) are synchronised with one of the „movement categories“ of the image track, as sketched above, then we are referring to this as **weak aurality**. When the sound track (or elements of it) is correlated with more than one of the movement categories, then we are referring to this as **strong aurality**.

Let us explain these two concepts. Let us start with a clip from a classical example: the intro to the first episode of the PIPPI LANGSTRUMPF (PIPPY LONGSTOCKING) TV series. The opening credits sequence of this episode, directed by Olle Hellbom in 1968, is an example for weak aurality.



fig. 1: screenshot Pippi Longstocking (Olle Hellbom 1968)

In these six shots the movement of the characters within the screen is at least in part synchronised with the rhythm of the title song; the camera follows Pippi Longstocking and her horse by using a horizontal pan and parallel camera movement, but the camera movement and the editing does not correlate to the sound. From an aural perspective, this is *not* a best practice example. (We are aware that the style of the film is also due to the technological standards of late-60s filmmaking.)

In contrast, the next example – a scene from *DAS KLEINE GESPENST* directed by Alain Gsponer in 2013 – is exemplary of strong aurality; and of best practice.

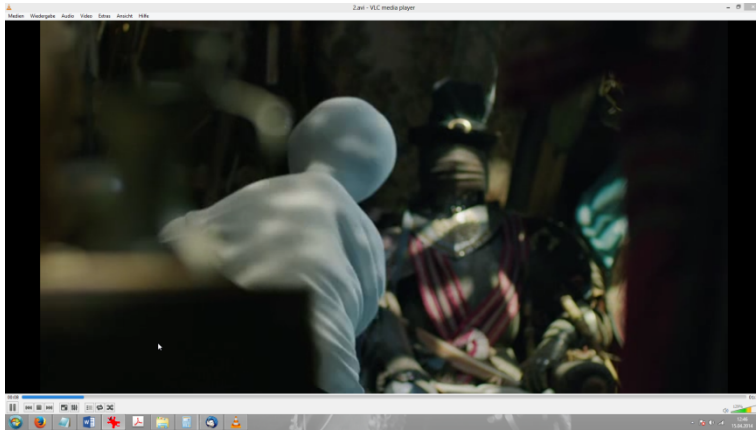


fig. 2: screenshot *Das Kleine Gespenst* (Alain Gsponer 2013)

This short sequence does not only show a high amount of character movement which corresponds to the rhythm of the song and with the movement of the manifold set pieces such as the knight's armors and lids of the pianos in the room; the latter also are used as percussive elements of the musical design of the scene. Other aspects worth mentioning: camera movements, edits and framing are synchronised with movements within the frame.

Functions of aurality

The aural crossover between image and sound exemplified by this short clip from *DAS KLEINE GESPENST* is not merely a form of „cinematic excess“ (Thompson 1977, 54-61) without properly significant functions for the film as such. On the contrary, aurality can assume several specific functions in ways similar to the traditional use of film music or specific camera strategies (cf. Bullerjahn 2001, 16).

Four such possible functions are **narrative**, **dramaturgical**, **structural**, or **immersive** (cf. *ibid.*). It is possible to analyze these functions separately even though they usually appear together. In the remainder of the paper, we will focus on the narrative and dramaturgic function of aurality, giving only short explanations of the other two.

Structural function

The temporally structured interplay between image and sound can be considered independently, without being tied to specific narrative or dramaturgic functions. In such a case we are faced with structural correlations between image and sound – correlations which can but need not be used for narrative or dramaturgic purposes. For instance, film music can assume structural functions if it provides a kind of „formal skeleton“ (Schneider 1990, 95) for the film as a whole via title music or end title music (cf. Bullerjahn 2001, 72). Also, it is possible to use music pieces in order to mark disparate shots as belonging together, or for masking cuts between shots (cf. *ibid.*). Structural functions are a sign that the mere interplay between sound and image in a film generates specific structures and patterns which can be described systematically. If the sound track assumes a dominant role here, then one can talk of structural functions of aurality.

Immersive function

If the interplay between visual and auditive elements is predominantly used for achieving specific effects on spectators, for drawing them into the action of the film – then this is the immersive function of the film text (cf. Bullerjahn 2001, 73). Immersive functions are always dependent on technological developments (cf. Kerins 2010, Sonnenschein 2001 and Whittington 2007).

Immersive aurality is the interplay between image and sound track under the guidance of aural elements for achieving immersive effects on the spectators.

Narrative functions

Films can be described as narrative texts, sequences of signs which represent a sequence of events (cf. Vogt 2008, 117). The sequence of signs (discours) and the sequence of events are closely entangled with each other via the temporal succession of what we perceive on screen (cf. *ibid.*).

Talk of the narrative function of aurality is directed at the level of discourse or plot: for instance, if the sound track is synchronised with the movement of the image track, it can be correlated to characters, themes, motifs, or to narrative tools such as narrative

perspective or focalisation. The latter term refers to the perspective/consciousness through which a story is presented. Focalisation answers to the question of *who* is perceiving what we see and hear in the film (cf. Branigan 2007, 80).

Let us take a look again at the sequence from *DAS KLEINE GESPENST* (Alan Gsponer, 2013). Aurality assumes a narrative function here because all three general ways of focalising character perceptions are being represented aurally: In the beginning of the scene, we are confronted with an instance of zero focalisation – you can see this in the screenshot of the little ghost flying around the castle's rooftop in a wide-angle shot. Later, in the picture gallery of the castle, the film switches to internal focalisation, represented via subjective camera perspectives. Perception of the diegesis is limited to the perspective of the little ghost, which focuses on the oil paintings of aristocrats on the wall while talking to them. This is followed by a shot on the little ghost through the glass window of a shelf; now the film turns to external focalisation of the inner-filmic events. This switch in focalisation is mirrored by a corresponding switch in the musical structure between verse and refrain of the song of the little ghost.

Dramaturgic function

If the sound track is synchronised with the movement within the image track, then aurality can assume dramaturgic functions via the correlation with the plot structure or single plot points. Let us give you an example for clarifying this idea: a short clip from Detlev Buck's film adaptation of *BIBI & TINA* (2014).

The film's dramaturgy roughly follows the classical plot paradigm developed by Hollywood scriptwriting gurus like Syd Field (2000, 11-120): The richly coloured horse farm frequented by the two girls is in danger from two sides: On the one hand, there's the shady business man with the – for German ears – telling name Hans Kakmann, who wants to get his hands on Tina's favourite foal „Socke“ (engl.: socks). On the other hand, there is Sophia von Gelenberg, a „beautiful careerist of aristocratic descent,“ as the press German press kit puts it. Sofia pursues two rather dishonest goals: She wants to convince

Tina's boyfriend Alex to attend her own elite boarding school, and of course she does so out of rather, well, amorous interests.

That's the first act of the film so far, and, we guess, it is not too hard to imagine the further confrontative course of plot events, whose climax is the horse tournament so typical for the genre of the film (another recent film in which a horse tournament figures dramatically is, of course, *OSTWIND* by Katja von Garnier). Of course, Bibi and Tina have to master a horse race against Kakmann, and the bet is, of course, Socke. However, Herr Kakmann is not able to ride his horse himself, and that's why Sophia challenges the two girls. How the story ends is hardly a guess: Of course there will be a happy ending and the beginning of a wonderful friendship. But before that happens, the female opponents encounter each other before the tournament begins. And this scene is what we want to take a look at:

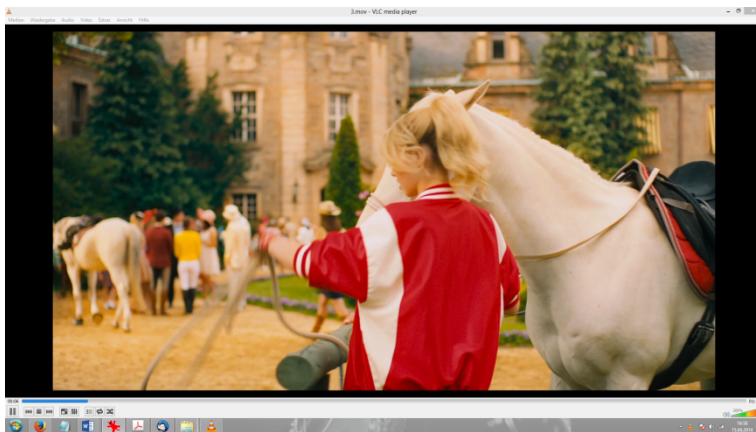


fig. 3: screenshot Bibi & Tina (Buck 2014)

This encounter between Tina and Sophia is not merely an allusion to the Western genre, the synchronisation of character movement, the use of slow motion, the carefully orchestrated shot – reverse shot pattern also reveals the aural composition of this second plot point of the film: the encounter between the two antagonists is a dramaturgic turning point of the film text, which determines the further development of the confrontation in the second act.

The aurality of the blockbuster film

The focus of this presentation was on children's film. But aurality is also an integral part of blockbuster cinema. Insofar as it is family entertainment, it wants to address adults as

well as younger audience members: As a now digitalized „cinema of attractions“ (Gunning 2006, 382) it stands in the tradition of the fun fair and of 19th-century vaudeville theatre. It does everything in its power to unplug its (adult) audience from their everyday routines for at least two hours, and to give them at least temporary access to the way in which they experienced the world (and the world of cinema) when they were children. And, yes, this is a kind of updated escapism thesis.

Corresponding to his logic of attraction there is the crescendo of increasingly spectacular and photo-realistic, computer-generated audiovisual effects, and corresponding to this there is the introduction of new technological standards – because the more intense the effects, the higher the probability that the spectators are drawn out of their everyday life, being subjected to the power of the film.

In addition, blockbuster cinema raises the attention of children and young adults precisely because it focuses on means of expression which adheres to their cognitive dispositions. In that way, the concept of aurality delivers a cognitively grounded answer to the question how contemporary cinema masters the ambivalent task of incorporating and balancing an adult as well as child's perspective – a question raised by Werner Barg (2012, 55-61: 57). At least blockbuster cinema which is centered on delivering immersive experiences celebrates a return to childhood. In other words. Blockbuster cinema is always already children's cinema for adults.¹

In this presentation, we have presented aurality as a way of specifically tailoring the means of expressions of the medium of film to the cognitive disposition of young film spectators. To put it more succinctly: We believe that (a higher focus on) aurality can be the core of a future aesthetics of children's film.

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¹ Thanks to Benjamin Moldenhauer for useful suggestions concerning this last part of the paper.

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