

Sara Pinheiro

“Sound has  
always been  
immersive.”

An Interview with  
Michel Chion

Michel Chion (1947) is a French film critic and composer. His career began as an assistant to Pierre Schaeffer in 1970, at the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM),<sup>1</sup> which also led him to collaborate with the French journal *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* between 1982–87. This practice, together with his interest in perception and the arrival of the videotape, triggered a book trilogy on sound in film: *La voix au cinéma* (1984; published in English as *The Voice in Cinema* in 1999)<sup>2</sup> in which he analyses the hierarchy of voice in the soundtrack (“vococentrism”); *Le son au cinéma* (1985, in English as *Film, a Sound Art* in 2003), where he continues to access human language through film-sound; and *La toile trouée. La parole au cinéma* (1988), in which he accesses the development of sound-film through dialogues.

His seminal work arrives then with *L’Audiovision. Son et image au cinéma* (1990, English as *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 1993) around which most of his career evolved.<sup>3</sup> In this book, Chion describes the relationship between sound and image and establishes the core terminology of sound for film which has been endlessly repeated since then. Based on the principle that “the audiovisual relationship is not natural but rather a sort of symbolic pact to which the audio-spectator agrees when she or he considers the elements of sound and image to be participating in one and the same entity or world” (p. 222), Chion argues that a sound and an image do not remain the same once perceived together. Thus, “The Audiovisual Contract” lies in the fact that sound and image are mutually influenced. He also accesses film scenes according to their sonic “added value”, that is, the “expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression ‘naturally’ comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself” (p. 5).

Additionally, Chion describes three listening modes in this “audiovisual contract”: “causal”, “semantic” and “reduced listening”. Whether the first two listening modes are self-explanatory of the audiovisual experience (one sees what one hears and one understands what one hears even if not seen), the third one is more complex. In fact, the “reduced listening mode” is imported from Pierre Schaeffer’s early studies, where theories of acousmatic music were drafted for the very first time.<sup>4</sup> In its turn, the term acousmatic is borrowed from a long mythology that may or may not have started with Pythagoras.<sup>5</sup> In either approach, the definition of “reduced listening” is entangled with the concept of “acousmatic” sound: in the same way that an acousmatic sound is a sound of which one does not see the

1 The Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) is a musical research center created by Pierre Schaeffer in 1958. It became official part of the Research Service of French Radio and Television in 1960, and then in 1975 integrated The National Audiovisual Institute (INA).

2 The book was published in 2020 in Czech by AMU Press (NAMU).

3 He has also written monographs on several filmmakers (Charles Chaplin, David Lynch, Terence Mallick, Jacques Tati, Andrei Tarkovsky, Stanley Kubrick), assessing their authorship.

4 Pierre Schaeffer. *In Search of a Concrete Music*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013.

5 See: Brian Kane. *Sound Unseen. Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

source, reduced listening focuses on the sonic traits in spite of the source. In other words, both emphasize the listening experience. However, the concept of reduced listening has led to many discussions among theoreticians and practitioners, with some defending that the listening experience cannot be “stripped of its external associations”.<sup>6</sup> In a way, Chion’s listening modes are themselves a variation of Schaeffer’s original listening modes in *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966, published in English as *Treatise on Musical Objects* in 2007),<sup>7</sup> which Chion had already attempted at clarifying in 1983 in the *Guide des objets sonores: Pierre Schaeffer et la recherche musicale* – and was, in fact, what brought him to GRM in the first place.<sup>8</sup> But Schaeffer’s ideas have led to multiple interpretations. The foundation is an understanding of music based on the idea that anything is a sound object, that is, “an organized totality that one can assimilate into a ‘gestalt’”.<sup>9</sup> These ideas were not and should not remain absolute and have generated multiple variations: concrete, acousmatic, electroacoustic, tape, minimal... it is all music.

In other words, Chion’s approach of sound for film was drawn from musical theories, musique concrète in particular. His own compositions are themselves a cross-over between acousmatic music and scripted narratives, as sonic melodramas (*Requiem*, 1978), and his films a somewhat experimental composition (*Eponine*, 1984). In 1990, he also published the manifesto *The Art of Fixed Sounds*, where he attempts at clarifying the definitions of concrete and/or acousmatic music, delving in versions of fixed media (tape music) and live electronics.

Currently, Chion is developing two books: *Le Livre des Sons, une célébration* (*The Book of Sounds: A Celebration*), which ought to be a stock of words and texts in different languages; and *Chronologie du cinéma verbal et sonore depuis 1895* (*Chronology of Verbal and Sound Cinema since 1895*). He has founded the association Acoulogia in order to promote musique concrète and the discipline of acoulogy, in which he teaches the practice of “reduced listening”. In this line, he had already published *Le Son, traité d’acoulogie* (2010, in English as *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise* in 2016).

In 2019, Chion visited FAMU for a two-day lecture on his concept of *Audio-vision*. Within this context, Chion shared with *ArteActa* his views on sound for film and musique concrète, in particular his take on reduced listening, technology and the contemporary cultural assessment of sound. While reviewing the foundations of his previous books, we discussed the upcoming works.

6 Joanna Demers. *Listening through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music*. Oxford University Press Inc, 2010, p. 83.

7 Schaeffer enumerates four listening modes (*écouter* – to listen; *ouïr* – to perceive aurally; *entendre* – to hear, and *comprendre* – to understand).

8 John Dack and Christine North have offered an unofficial translation to English available online in 2009.

9 Michel Chion *Guide des objets sonores: Pierre Schaeffer et la recherche musicale*. Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1983, p. 34 ; Also: J. Demers. *Listening through the Noise*.

*What do you think musique concrète and film sound have in common?*

There are two common points between film sound and musique concrète: One is that the sounds are fixed with a specific duration, a specific and unique quality and intended silences. The other is that the sounds can be of any kind: music, voice (spoken or sung), a breath; anything from location sounds to sound effects. There is no limitation, neither cultural, physical, nor aesthetic; and there is no distinction between sounds and noises.

But when we add an image to musique concrète, the space is affected by the phenomenon I call “spatial magnetization”, which also occurs in reality. At the same time, it breaks the solidarity between sounds: which is why I say that in cinema “there is no soundtrack”. If we want a “soundtrack”, as the totality of the sounds combined with one another, then the image is not necessary. The big difference is that, in cinema, sound is transformed by what we see, and in itself transforms what we saw: that is the audio-logo-vision. This is why I refuse to make musique concrète for fiction films; and it is also why I don’t add musique concrète to my short films.

*But doesn’t this idea of audio-logo-vision, which is also the principle of the “Audiovisual Contract”, contradict the “Reduced Listening mode”?*

There is no contradiction. Reduced listening is not about ignoring the nature of the sounds, but listening to other characteristics other than their concrete and real natures – such as structure and shape. It is an addition to the other modes of listening (causal and semantic listening modes). For example, when I compose, I use voices and spoken words. There is no need to ignore the meaning of the words or to ignore that it is a masculine or a feminine voice. Reduced listening allows us to understand not only musical sounds, but the relationship between sounds and images. Just as in reduced vision, we see colour and shapes; reduced listening also contributes to the understanding of the content and the story. Reduced listening does not try to exclude other types of listening but to complete them. It provides a further understanding of sound and its relationship with the image.

*Do you think that reduced listening depends on the listener’s availability to listen as such?*

Reduced listening is a practice. It is not enough to read the definition in a book. Certain things we can learn by ourselves, but others we learn better with a master. Exactly like practicing gymnastics or piano. This is why I teach reduced listening in schools.



Michel Chion at FAMU.  
Photo Jakub Trš.

*Is reduced listening similar to the concept of “deep listening”, mostly known through Pauline Oliveros?<sup>10</sup>*

I know of Pauline Oliveros, but I am not familiar with her concept, so I cannot compare. But reduced listening has a very objective definition. Perhaps, in traditional music, we already practice reduced listening, without being aware of such. Pierre Schaeffer defined reduced listening as the listening to all sounds with broader criteria, even sounds that we might not be able to describe on a tonal scale, they have a form. And to describe forms, we need to use terms that seem more ordinary. For example, in the beginning of the 19th century, some English scientists have shown interest in classifying the

<sup>10</sup> Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016) was an American composer and accordionist. She was a central figure of experimental music, and a pioneer in electronic composition. In 1985, she founded the Pauline Oliveros Foundation in which the practice of “deep listening” became central. “Deep Listening” combines meditation and attentive listening, together with exercises of free improvisation. Oliveros received the John Cage award for 2012 from the Foundation of Contemporary Arts (FCA). She last visited Prague in 2014, within the vs. Interpretation Festival, held by The Agosto Foundation. In her “deep listening” workshop, she described it as “a way of listening in every possible way to everything possible, no matter what you are doing”.

shapes of the clouds. And we understood that clouds have relatable abstract shapes that cannot be described geometrically, but yet they can be categorized. Reduced listening doesn't refrain from emotions or affection. But if you listen to some music that moves you, you do not have to forget that this music is in a major or a minor key.

*Do you think filmmaking has changed according to constant technological developments?*

I think it did not change that much. It is the same when colour was invented. In the past, many of the movies were already shot in colour but were still broadcast in black and white on television. We were losing something, but the essential structure was kept. It is a kind of transcription. Some of the content changed, but the essential principles remain the same. As for the sound, most films are still oriented towards dialogue, which I call "voco-centrism", which is a human condition.

The modalities of the audio-vision, from the sixties to the present are almost the same. The majority is meant to be compatible with different technical conditions. And, as most movies are built on a narrative drive, they continue to function even when they are watched on a small screen and played on a monophonic system. The meaning and the effects are contained within the movie in spite of the technical conditions.

*But there are multiple ways to watch films nowadays which also affect the perception of the film itself?*

There is never an ideal condition, neither an ideal theatre hall, nor an ideal sound system, nor ideal production. As for music, there is also not an absolute ideal condition. The sound is always mixed with other elements in the hall. In some countries, movies were shown in noisy environments, so we would make sure that the speech was understandable. For music, it is the same, people never listen to music in perfect conditions, even theatre-halls make noise. I make music for loudspeakers only. I refuse to play my music outdoors, in open-air locations. Some music requires good listening conditions, even almost perfect conditions.

*And, after all these years, how was the process of revising the Audio-vision<sup>11</sup> book?*

There is an actualization of the book with two or three new additions in the French edition, which has also been translated to English.

11 For an in-depth review of this edition see: Sara Pinheiro. Revisiting the Canon of Sound Theory (Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*). *Illuminace*, 2021, ç. 1, s. 141-147.

*In these additional examples did you find anyone else that you would like to write about, such as you wrote about David Lynch, for instance?*

In France, the possibilities of publishing books about films are very limited nowadays. In the past, I was lucky to have the opportunity to write about filmmakers but now, if I was younger, I would discuss less the authors themselves (because in my opinion this has been done enough), and I would emphasize more the different eras and the different movements in cinema, the zeitgeist as we say in German. I was invited to Berlin for a year to research the periodization of cinema, which is the classification of the history of cinema into periods. It will probably never be published because I may not have the resources, but it is still very interesting to me to think about the collective history of film sound.

*Is this the upcoming Book of Sounds?*

No, this is something different. *The Book of Sounds* is a collection of quotes. I first started collecting words in French, then I continued in the other languages that I can understand. There are countless quotes from different periods, from old to recent books, novels, poetry, religious books wherein they refer to sounds. How are sounds referred to in the bible or in the Quran, or how did authors such as Leo Tolstoy or some Portuguese poet describe sounds? First of all, it is the pleasure of words – many people address sounds throughout the beauty of the human voice, their emotions, or any sounds they perceive. Second, it is also a historical pleasure, considering that some sounds in the 19th century were a significant part of daily life – for example, gas lighting. When they were not using electricity, people used gas not only for heating or cooking, but also for lighting. These things produced their own sound. Actually, Franz Kafka briefly mentions the sound of the light and gas in his journal. Often, researchers mention the same sounds: the bells, the noise of the city, and so on. These are all stereotypes. There are many other sounds that belong to daily lives, which are much more specific. And so, this book is an anthology of the words for sounds and in the realm of sound. There are some words that cannot be translated into other languages. I always quote the Italian word “tonfo”, which cannot be directly translated into French. It means the dull sound of something falling. Or “thump” in English. So, there will be a list of words in different languages with an historical interest. Like a collection. But I am not making a thesis about sounds nor trying to advocate that the world is becoming more and more noisy. I believe this is not true.

In this book, I trace a cultural trait of people discovering the variety of words that describe sounds. Thirty years ago, I was told that it is hard to discuss sounds due to the lack of vocabulary in French. This is when I started to list these words. I would say there are about eighty words in French to designate different sounds, but nobody uses them actively. What





Michel Chion at FAMU. Photo Jakub Trš.

if we activate this forgotten vocabulary? But first of all, we should know of the existence of it. Nowadays we live in such a sensory culture... I would say that when we no longer use words to designate sensations and feelings, barbarism takes place. Some of my students were moved by some films, but they were not able to express what they felt. Or they were maybe afraid to lose those sensations by naming them. This fear is completely irrational, but it happens. This is why it is important not only to watch films, but also to read novels. In novels or in poetry, and even sometimes in thrillers that are not necessarily great literature, there is a substantial use of a vocabulary describing feelings and sensations with many nuances. If we watch films, it seems there is only love or hate, good or bad, without any nuances. And when we open a book, we get to read the nuances of those feelings. Emotions are not so absolute.

Proust, for example, evokes the complexity and richness of emotions. And this richness of human emotions manifests itself through words, not through measuring a heartbeat. Many people believe that if they can measure something, then they know it. But no, these are only abstract measures. We would not lose any of our sensations using those words, but on the contrary, enrich them. The same as the culture of good food and good



drinks, we have developed the taste for them and can also refer to them as sensations. Or as we enjoy nature and we are able to name colours, plants, flowers, and the different shapes of clouds. I think in today's society we are on the edge of barbarism, in the sense that there is an overload of sensations. These are provided by films, video games, and the modern world in general, which is fantastic. I do not oppose it, but it seems that people are becoming deprived of naming their sensations and emotions. Films in particular are too intense, they offer a very fast and very fascinating range of sensations (blockbusters and animation films, for example). But if we assign words to textures, tastes, temperatures, we do not lose their sensations, we humanize them.

I think many philosophies on sensation are obscurantist. Michel Serres wrote a book on the five senses and I thought I was going to learn something new, but I did not. He wrote in *The Five Senses* that we should not read too much, that we do not need to use books or words, but we should experience the sensation without naming it. It takes him about two hundred pages to say that reading books and studying sensation is pointless. To me this is obscurantism, because there are not only five senses, but it is more complex than that. Aristotle wrote: "there are only five senses and



Michel Chion at FAMU. Photo Jakub Trš.

not more”, but the sixth sense is not necessarily the third eye in the middle of the forehead. For example, thermal sensation (sensing hot and cold) is a sixth sense. Some of the physical sensations are a seventh sense, and thus there is an infinite amount of senses, not only five.

With audio-vision and when I speak of trans-sensory, I try to acknowledge the senses, not the philosophy. The sense of rhythm doesn’t have an assigned organ but is an extra sense. We will never be able to say how many senses we have, as we will never be able to count how many stars there are in the sky. And thus, I think that we are in an intellectual period of obscurantism and that the cult of sensation makes us dull. I am not against strong sensations, or beautiful sensations, but against the rejection to talk about them, to understand them, to discuss them, and to name them. I oppose obscurantism.

*Are your processes of composition and filmmaking similar?*

I work differently depending if for film or music. When I make music, I can change the composition any time. But if I make a film, I would rather do the preparation in advance. I write a scenario, dialogues, prepare editing beforehand, even if it will change afterwards. I do it in a different way than my music. The short film I made, *Eponine*, is a film that was completely written in advance. A twenty-page script. I made a visual sketch.<sup>12</sup> The process is completely different from how I make my music.

*On a final note, what do you think about immersive sound within this contemporary era of technological dependency?*

Sound has always been immersive. In a concert hall or in a church, with the reverberation, it is immersive. So, it is a way of phrasing it. When I started making music, in the end of the sixties, we were calling it electroacoustic music. We were putting four or eight loudspeakers, two in the front, two in the back, maybe some in the side, and it was not called immersive. It means that it is not necessary for sound to be always in the center, because life is immersive. It is almost an advertising strategy, we call it an “immersive concert”, it is just a way of putting. It is a hysterization of the senses. For example, in France, when you go to Place de la Bastille in Paris, there are advertisements to subscribe to the Paris Opera. We do not see any of the composer’s names – the advertisement promotes the sensations – but we see the face of a beautiful woman who is listening to an opera in ecstasy. Which opera? It does not matter. And so people are invited to channel their sensations. It is as if all music, all art is about sensations. As if we can only enjoy being alive because it means we can enjoy music or art, whatever sensation it brings. So even listening to any sound becomes completely

hysterical. I believe there is more accent on the sensation than on the emotion. So to say, immersion is pure sensation. If I want to be immersed, I go take a bath. It might seem simplistic, but there is also nothing so extraordinary in being in the middle of the sounds. We are always in the middle of the sounds.

Current technologies invite people to focus on their sensations. It feels like humans are precious beings because they can experience rare sensations. And thus, they jump off a bridge with a rope [bungee jumping] to get an adrenaline rush. They climb because it is dangerous. They don't do it to appreciate the mountains, or to socialize with each other. I get many invitations for premieres of musical events that promote new sensations. For example, an octophonic loudspeaker system playing circular sounds for an audience sitting on chairs with bass shakers. But this is very basic, we do not need music for that, it is enough to sit on a boat or on a tram. This is a very curious fact for me, because despite the pleasure of the sensation, we do not need art to have the same feeling. Art involves sensations, of course, but it makes sensation hysterical. Immersive is banal. Fifty loudspeakers will not make the sensation stronger. I think that people do not believe in the importance of the form in the art anymore, but that they need an additional value – something more sensational. It is all about the experience, for example, the temperature of something which we enter and feel it is hot. There is no style or form attached to it. I am not against sensations but there is nothing new in it, and it is basic and sometimes reactionary. As if people would be told that “your intelligence is useless, your taste for style is useless, your taste for aesthetics is useless, you are just a receptive animal”. When something is good to eat, it is not only because it is very hot, it is a constructed combination of textures and smells – it is structured. The idea of immersion seems to me as being a promotional tendency that goes along with the narcissism of the sensation. In Paris, and in other big cities, people jog with all kinds of devices to measure their heartbeats. In some cases, it is because people are hypochondriacs. But in others, it is because people want to quantify their sensations. It is not about the quality anymore, but the quantity. What matters is the value of the sensation, the quantity of the effort, or measuring the distance. Is this an influence of sports? Sport is good, running faster and faster, but we do not have to make our heartbeat rate the fastest heartbeat in the world. We go through many medical exams and if someone is a hypochondriac, s/he can feel more anxious because of a blood test, or any other exams. In the past, there was no quantified data or value to be measured. The doctor was listening to the body and measuring was only possible with a thermometer. The number of blood cells was unknown, the blood pressure was not accurately measured, as it was impossible to monitor the inside of a body, etc.

My hypothesis is that people try to re-appropriate their own body like this. In an era where everything can be measured, quantified, observed, everyone can think they know their bodies because they can read their

blood pressure. They visualize the rate of their heartbeat, they can count their blood cells. People do not come closer to each other but instead they become more distanced and more isolated from the world. There is a new trend of concerts with headphones, and I am tempted to take off the headphones and say: “look, we are together!”, like when watching a 3D film where we have to wear special glasses. It is a weird phenomenon – people gathering together to then be alone? All these immersive stories are very narcissistic to me, because to experience them we have to be isolated, and self-enclosed. On the contrary, in traditional cinema when people are moved by a film and cry, they share a common emotion and release it in the theatre. Sometimes it is not noticeable, the theatre can be very quiet, but even then, if two people watch the film together, they will be moved by it together. For some people, it is like it is necessary to wear a sensory device, which I do not judge, but sensation is nothing new to me. I have always experienced concerts with circular sound. Even before loudspeakers existed, the acoustics of a church reverberated the sound and made the experience immersive. Sonic immersion is not new, but the accent we put on it makes it as if it was something unique, extraordinary and special. It is neither unique, extraordinary, nor special.

Translated from French into English by Donia Jourabchi.