**Audiovisual Dissonance in Found-Footage Film**

At its most basic, the found-footage film extracts images and sounds from a variety of sources and places them into new audiovisual configurations. Cinema history has thrown up numerous examples of such re-appropriation, from the borrowing of stock footage and locational shots between Hollywood films in the 1930s and ‘40s, to the stitching together of new and original material to form a seamless narrative in more recent films such as *Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid* (Carl Reiner, 1982) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994). While these examples from mainstream culture produce a new, yet coherent, visual re-contextualisation of sources by obscuring the different production qualities between clips, however, the experimental found-footage film creates something different. Although making use of compilation, cut-up, free-association, détournement and the super-cut, experimental directors also embrace footage taken from mainstream culture as their primary material. And yet, they seek to highlight and reinforce the different qualities between collaged clips, inviting audience members not only to construct coherence between newly-contextualised images, but also to generate critical readings of the original, deconstructed texts. The form of double engagement that such a process engenders can transform culturally iconic footage into a critique of cinema’s values and methods of construction, as Michael Zryd writes: “Found-footage filmmaking is a metahistorical form commenting on the cultural discourses and narrative patterns behind history. Whether picking through the detritus of the mass mediascape or refinding (through image processing and optical printing) the new in the familiar, the found-footage artist critically investigates the history *behind* the image, discursively embedded within its history of production, circulation, and consumption.”[[1]](#footnote-1) While Zryd is correct in his understanding of found-footage filmmaking as a metahistorical form, however, I suggest that such a critical investigation interrogates not just what lies behind each image as an isolated, nomadic excerpt, or its re-situation within a new visual flow, but also what develops within the spaces that lie between the recombined images. The use of music within and across these spaces can have a profound influence on how we receive the new in the familiar.

The ways in which the history behind images can be revealed and reconfigured visually and sonically are diverse. A common method has been to cut up pre-existing films. For *Rose Hobart*, Joseph Cornell re-edited a selection of shots from a single film in order to explore the aura of the eponymous Hollywood starlet; in *Remembrance* (1990), Jerry Tartaglia re-worked images of Bette Davis taken from *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) “in order to undo the images which dominate my waking and dreaming life”;[[2]](#footnote-2) and Ken Jacobs continually re-imagined and re-photographed a brief 1905 film for *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969) in order to expose and deconstruct the conventions of the cinematic gaze. Matthias Müller and Christoph Girardet, on the other hand, employed the entire output of a single director for *The Phoenix Tapes* (1999), combining scenes from 40 Hitchcock films in order to draw attention to the presence of the various leitmotivic tropes running through his oeuvre. Others have found their material from numerous sources: for example, Christian Marclay made use of over 10,000 film clips for his short film *Telephones* (1995), and Arthur Lipsett used discarded footage found on the cutting room floor in *Very Nice, Very Nice* (1961). In all methods, however, the new collage initiates a critical reaction to each original, de-contextualised source. As a result, the possibilities for new interpretation become manifold, as artist and director Standish Lawder explains:

Stripped of its original context, the shot becomes veiled with layers of speculation, subjective evocation and poetic ambiguity. Questions of intentionality and meaning become slippery. The true significance of the *a priori* original image hovers just off-screen; we cannot be certain exactly *why* it was filmed. Yet *what* was filmed remains firmly fixed, only now surrounded by a thousand possible new *whys*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Along similar lines, William C. Wees argues that experimental found-footage films “present images *as images,* as representations of the image-producing apparatus of cinema and television, but collage also promotes an analytical and critical attitude toward its images and their institutional sources”.[[4]](#footnote-4) But what happens when the images chosen are not simply images? When their disjointed flow results in a similarly disjointed sonic tapestry? Or when original sounds are enhanced or replaced with a new soundtrack able to flow across the previously unrelated clips? What happens when the *a priori* original image is not only de-contextualised, but also sonically re-imagined?

Fiction film that refers to the found-footage style in order to divulge a sense of unedited realism, such as *The Blair Witch* *Project* ([Daniel Myrick](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0617130/?ref_=tt_ov_dr) and [Eduardo Sánchez](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0844896/?ref_=tt_ov_dr), 1999), *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigalow, 2008) and *Argo* (Ben Affleck, 2012) rarely includes music for fear that a soundtrack may counter the illusion of non-interventionalism being sought: moreover, the sudden changes in sonic texture between the pieces of (apparently) roughly-edited hand-held camera footage are used to enhance the developing fear, tension and “realism” of the story. In experimental film, there is often no such illusion. Here, pre-used footage can be collaged in such a way as to bring the conventions of mainstream cinematography and the languages of mass media to the fore. And when the sound and / or music of a clip is changed, as it most often is, the process of détournement not only relies on an image being placed against other images from different scenes or sources, but also on the conjoining of each pre-existent image with a new sound. If the new sounds extend across several disjointed clips, our reading of the resultant collage can be fundamentally different from a reading of a collection of images merely *as images* (this is of course a basic function of all screen music). If we think of the found-footage collage as a horizontal compilation of visual clips *and* as a highly-charged *audio*visual montage that mobilises a vertical form of deconstruction (between sound and image), then investigation into the resultant “poetic ambiguity” requires a double form of engagement. Understood in this way, the experimental found-footage film becomes capable of critiquing cinema’s cultural tropes and iconography, as Lawder and Wees suggest, while at the same time revealing its methods of luring audiences into pre-determined narrative positions through the use of sound and music.

Although there are numerous ways in which music can interact with a film’s visual track, Nicholas Cook has identified three primary modes of operation: music can complement the image by bringing to light certain emotional or narrative aspects; it can operate through conformance by matching or replicating certain aspects of the image or its rhythmic construction; and it can provide a contrast to the image by working against it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Each type of vertical alignment is created according to a different aesthetic and each initiates a unique form of audience engagement. The first two types are commonly found in mainstream cinema, in which a coherent and complimentary flow of both image and music has historically been highly desirable, whether at the level of absolute synchronicity or via a more symbolic form of signification. The third type, however, is relatively rare. Audiovisual dissonance is unusual in mainstream cinema, as it comes with the risk of rupture, both at a filmic level—whereby sound and image push and pull at one another—and at the level of reception—in which an audience must navigate the gap that such a rupture engenders. Michel Chion has outlined two forms of audiovisual distance: “true free counter point” is “the notion of the sound film’s ideal state as a cinema free of redundancy, where sound and image would constitute two parallel and loosely connected tracks, neither dependent on the other”; “harmonic dissonance”, on the other hand, occurs when music and image work in active opposition to one another, clashing against a “precise point of meaning”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Both types of dissonance are very difficult to find, however, not least because the very idea suggests that there is an absolute ‘standard’ against which such ‘contrast’ can be measured; even if a film has established a certain audiovisual context, and then does something musically or sonically that disrupts that context, perceptions quite easily adapt to accommodate what might often be thought of as ‘contrast’, so that it no longer appears dissonant. Such is the highly attuned ability of the film goer. But when a contrast is achieved, it can be extraordinarily powerful. The shock of both forms of audiovisual dissonance on an audience attuned to synchronicity can transform an otherwise coherent visual passage. In mainstream film, such a clash is most often used to provide an ironic commentary on the image—think of Stealers Wheel’s “Stuck in the Middle With You” playing as Mr Blonde slices off the cop’s ear in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992)—as it runs the risk of leaving an audience feeling unsettled. In the case of *Reservoir Dogs*, the distance between disturbing image and jolly song leaves the audience with a sense of horror greater than that achievable through image alone (Mr Blonde is enjoying the task; he finds it amusing; it’s no big deal). As we struggle to empathise with the character, the torture takes on an even more sinister edge. The issues here, however, is that we have come to expect such techniques in the comic-book style films of Tarantino. And if expectation is fuelled, is it still possible to treat such scenes as audiovisually contrasting, or dissonant, at the level of reception?

Whether or not such scenes are experienced as jarring or are readily absorbed by an efficient and accomplished film goer, the active state that the distance between sound and image demands of an audience, who must navigate between two contrasting narrative trajectories, has been embraced by many directors of experimental film as a way to expose the conventions of film’s syncretic languages. During the early twentieth century, for instance, those experimenting with film often sought to produce unforgiving statements through a clashing and aggressive form of audiovisuality. Eisenstein, Pudovkin and G.V. Alexandrov called for a contrapuntal form of audiovisuality that would pit image and sound against each other, affording each an equality that would force audience members into an activated form of reception (“Statement on Sound”, 1928); Hans Richter accused mainstream filmmakers of providing an easy form of consumption—a “sugar”-laden product—and collaborated with experimental and avant-garde composers to create complex audiovisual products able to test his audiences’ interpretive juices; and Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel chose randomly-selected music for their dream-inspired images in order to create a form of audiovisual free-association and surreality (*Un Chien Andalou*, 1929).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The experimental found-footage film can oscillate continually between all three types of audiovisual engagement, either drawing together disparate sources to highlight their differences or suturing the new construction to form the semblance of coherent flow. These forms of horizontal and vertical pulsations can fundamentally influence our experience of a collaged composition, as they determine our awareness of original context, draw out particular relationships between clips, and construct or repel larger narrative arcs operating with or against the visual progression. With this in mind, it is possible to split found-footage audiovisuality into three types. First, the replacement of existing sounds with a continual flow of original music that encourages a mode of engagement very similar to that of mainstream film. Second, the removal of original sound in favour of new, yet pre-existent music, which produces a secondary form of found-footage compilation that runs in “harmonic dissonance” to the de-contextualised visual collage. And third, the mixture of original and new sounds to create a disjunctive and dissonant audiovisual flow that requires an audience not only to re-read, or “undo” images, but also continually to oscillate between aural contexts, prompting a hyper-awareness of times, eras and cultural tropes. What is significant about all types of musical play in found-footage films is that there is a clear preference for the reuse, or production, of relatively tonal—even mainstream—musical forms and timbres. Just as found-footage film often provides a discourse on its mainstream counterpart through dismemberment and re-voicing, so too is the soundtrack used to comment on traditional uses of music in film and the ways in which it can strongly influence audience perception. There is a difference, then, between avant-garde, or experimental music and avant-garde audiovisuality. Here, an experimental form is created from the clash of several re-situated forms of filmic discourse: and all of these can be taken from the mainstream idiom.

**Audiovisual Synchresis**

The collaging of pre-existent and new material to fashion a refreshed audiovisual text is a common trope of new media, with music video, Vjing and video mashups all making good use of visual collation and re-contextualisation. Often, these practices begin with, or are predicated on, a musical framework: in music video, music comes first; VJing is a real-time response to a musical performance; and the eclectic visual progressions of video mashups are often edited to a consistent sonic sweep. The combination of pre-existent images with a new soundtrack has also become popular in films that sit somewhere between music video and feature film, and that operate from within a documentary, or essay, aesthetic: British Sea Power’s low-fi indie response to a string of footage collected from the British Film Institute’s National Archive of Britain’s early twentieth-century seaside culture in *From the Sea to the Land Beyond: Britain’s Coast on Film* (Penny Woolcock, 2012) produces an intense wash of nostalgia that draws awareness away from the different quality and style of the montaged clips, for instance. Here the concern with highlighting the similarity between shots (and hiding the gaps inbetween them) in order to develop aesthetic strands is paramount, a smoothing gesture that lessens awareness of discontinuity while leaving plenty of room for viewer participation. The form of synchresis (a word coined by Chion to describe “the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time”) that arises here is familiar.[[8]](#footnote-8) It does not invite overt critical attention, but rather an aestheticisation—or appreciation—of the images, although the power of nostalgia to provoke subsequent critique can quickly turn appreciation into a far more subjective experience.

This provision of a new soundtrack is the least common of the three types of experimental audiovisuality, however. This is partly due to the DIY aesthetic of the found-footage compilation and the fact that many experimental directors work with small, or nonexistent, budgets that rarely extend to the services of a composer or band; but as we have seen, it is also because found-footage film operates according to the aesthetics of undoing and “refinding the new in the familiar”.

**Audiovisual Re-alignment**

More in tune with the aesthetic of repositioning the found object is the placement of pre-existent images with found, or re-used, music. In this model, both sound and image can operate according to the same aesthetic of undoing and reconfiguration. Pre-existent music, which comes with its own pre-conceptions, can realign and comment on the images; it can determine how we react to a visual progression and whether we treat the original source with humour, horror or simply a renewed criticality. But, more importantly, it can also comment on its original setting, opening wide the film’s interpretative possibilities. When music is placed against an image, the process of détournement begins before the image is received within its new horizontal re-alignment. The first encounter with the de-contextualised shot or scene, in other words, demands a sonic, rather than a visual, interpretation.

As we have seen, a collage of found-footage material produces a series of different sound qualities and points of audition that can highlight the disjointed nature of the images. If several film sources have been combined, the changes in audio quality will be greatly magnified. Some filmmakers have embraced such sonic juxtaposition, treating it as a form of *musique concrète* by dislocating actuality sound from its visual referent and using it creatively to form a soundscape as abstract as the images. If a single film has been cut up and rearranged, these differences in audio mastering may be slight, although acoustic ambience will most likely resonate differently between scenes. Nevertheless, music is commonly used to soften the edges of even the most aurally-coherent montages. And yet, whereas music in the mainstream montage takes us into the diegesis, in the experimental film, it can ensure that we remain at a critical distance from the new construction by leaving the spaces between shots wide open.

Joseph Cornell’s 1936 *Rose Hobart* is one of the most famous examples of an experimental found-footage film that makes use of disinterested, pre-existent music. The short film is a cut-up of a 1931 B-film called *East of Borneo* (George Melford 1931), a jungle drama set in the fictional Indonesian kingdom of Maradu. One of the first talkies released by Universal Studios, the story follows a heroine played by Rose Hobart, a little-known actress whose fame petered away shortly after the film’s release. Hobart’s character travels with great bravery to Maradu to bring back her estranged husband, but on the way encounters a prince with evil intent and an array of ferocious jungle animals. Although there is some confusion surrounding the way in which Cornell came by the print of the film, gallery owner Julien Levy has recalled that the artist acquired it by chance, as it was included in a batch of film being sold by the pound for its silver nitrate.[[9]](#footnote-9) Cornell wasn’t the first to plunder the film, however: its stock footage, along with shots taken from other feature films, newsreels and travelogues, reappeared in another Universal film, *The Perils of Pauline* (1933), starring Pearl White.[[10]](#footnote-10) But whereas *The Perils of Pauline* incorporated the pre-existent stock footage into its new narrative in order to set the scene and provide a cheaply-sourced backdrop for Pauline’s adventures (with most images of Hobart avoided), Cornell embraced the opposite aesthetic. His interest lay with the actress herself. Although Cornell’s short begins with a shot of an eclipse taken from another film, *Rose Hobart*’s gaze lingers almost entirely on selected images—often close-up studio shots—of the heroine. With all connective strands and narrative links removed, the result is an oneiric, cubist meditation on the actress. Cornell bathed the collage in a blue, or, in the Anthology Film Archives print, violet tint (this was originally achieved by holding blue glass in front of projector’s lens) and projected the film at a slowed rate of sixteen or eighteen frames per second in order to enhance the radiancy of Hobart’s aura.[[11]](#footnote-11)

While *The Perils of Pauline* used parts of *East of Borneo*’s soundscape, *Rose Hobart*’s entire soundtrack, including, significantly, the voice of Hobart herself, was replaced. For the film’s first screening at the Julian Levy Gallery in New York in 1936, Cornell continually flipped between the two 3-minute sides of a 78rpm record, allowing the musical contours to be dictated according to the technological abilities of the equipment. Rumour has it that during the premiere, Dalí, convinced that the artist had stolen ideas from his dreams, kicked over the projector in disgust.[[12]](#footnote-12) Perhaps as a result of Dalí’s actions, Cornell was reluctant to screen his film again, and it did not appear again in public until 1963, when Jonas Mekas requested another public screening. For this event, and for most prints in current circulation, Cornell settled on three tunes, repeated several times, from *Holiday in Brazil* (1957), an album by Nestor Amaral and his Continentals released 26 years after *Rose Hobart*’s visual track. The choice of Amaral, a Brazilian musician, conductor and actor who moved to Hollywood and became known for his accessible style of samba music, is strange, as it has no identifiable relation to either *East of Borneo*, or to Cornell’s cut-up eulogy. The silencing of the heroine adds to the ghostly effect of the film, which, when played at the requested frame rate, harks back to a silent-film style, although the absence of causal links and intertitles removes any semblance of plot. The resultant confusion is enhanced by Cornell’s placement of music, which changes randomly when each song comes to an end. The soundtrack appears to have been formed via a similar aesthetic of cut-up as the image-track then, but with little or no reference to their co-existent flow.

The film opens abruptly with a jumble of out-of-sequence references sutured together by Amaral’s upbeat “Corrupção”. After the eclipse, we are given a scene from later in *East of Borneo*, in which Hobart meets with the Prince of Maradu (played by Georges Renavent); after a black screen, this is followed by the opening two shots from the original film and a close view of the heroine through a mosquito net. After a brief image of a candle (again from another film), the camera shows Hobart rise and move into the open (the scene is truncated before the roaming camera reveals her co-star in order to preserve attention on the protagonist).[[13]](#footnote-13) As the arresting, yet disjointed, visual track progresses, the Brazilian music continues over the different edits and several instances of Hobart’s mutely-mouthed words, pursuing its own rhythms entirely. Half way through a close up of a dramatic, watery splash in the ocean, for instance, the music changes to the instrumental “Porto Alegre” with no regard for the obvious visual sync points at the beginning and end of the splash. The next musical change is to “Playtime in Brazil”, with words in English and introduced by a vinyl crackle as though to highlight the disparity between sound and image technologies. This song is again unconnected to visual events and proceeds to wash over several different locations, outfit changes and ensemble shots. In fact, there is only one musical change that fits loosely with the images. Coinciding with the visual shot of an erupting volcano, the music changes back to “Porto Alegre” in what appears to be an appropriate change of mood, although the syncronicity falls apart once again as we see a group of characters arriving by raft to a torch-lit group of locals.

The next change abandons the parallel synchronicity of mainstream audiovisuality in an even more emphatic way: half way through a scene of Hobart playing with a monkey, the music returns to “Playtime in Brazil” and continues as we see the characters walking slowly through the torchlit corridor. On a filmic level, there is no discernible leitmotivic association with the previous time we heard this track, and it fails to lead us into any new understanding of the previous scenes, or to draw forth any associations that may change or influence our reading of Hobart’s current action (in fact, Michael Pigott suggests that the alternation between the two tracks was intended to replicate Cornell’s rotation of his 78 record during the original screening).[[14]](#footnote-14) On a local level, the music reflects nothing of the worry and wonder clearly displayed in the faces of the characters; in fact, its style, mood and rhythms seem insensitive to the subtleties of the visual track, something the subsequent re-appearance of “Porto Alegre” does nothing to change. Despite the songs returning several times, they do not seem to represent, or draw anything from, the images; the music appears thoroughly disinterested not only in the rhythm of the visual track, but also in its mood and atmosphere.

As mentioned above, a-synchronicity is more common in avant-garde film than in the mainstream tradition. A clash of audio and visual elements has been a popular device amongst avant-garde directors to both distance themselves from, and critique, the languages of mainstream cinema. But such clashes have most often been highly considered: Eisenstein’s clashing signifiers were the result of significant aesthetic debate, while the mixture of Argentinean tango and segments of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* in the Surrealist *Un Chien Andalou* used the principle of the automatic to allow new, or hidden, meanings to arise. But *Rose Hobart* is different: the audiovisual dissonance is too strong; the gap between the ethereal, slow-moving images and the upbeat, jocular Brazilian samba beats too great for easy interpretative navigation. In fact, the choice of music distracts from the images and their connection to one another. As we have seen, many found-footage assemblages have unpacked pre-existing works to reveal the aesthetic mechanisms behind them. But a common reading of *Rose Hobart* runs along the lines that Cornell, rather than critiquing the objectification and aura of the female Hollywood star, in fact relished it, a reading supported by Cornell’s collaborator Stan Brakhage, who describes the film as “one of the greatest poems of being a woman that’s ever been made in film, or maybe anywhere.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In his article on Hollywood stars in avant-garde found-footage films, Wees analyses several films that “betray their makers’ fascination with the source of their images and show less interest in opposing than in reinterpreting and re-evaluating the images Hollywood produces”; in such cases, “critique merges with admiration, analysis with appreciation, deconstruction with reconstruction to invest the stars’ images with ambiguous auras that not only signify the filmmakers’ attitude toward their borrowed images but, in more general terms, reflect the avant-garde's ambivalent and unequal relationship with Hollywood.” *Rose Hobart*, he argues, treads these binaries particularly well:

Rescued from the patently artificial mise-en-scene, stereotyped characters, and narrative clichés of *East of Borneo*, the mysterious allure-the aura-of Hobart's image becomes much more apparent and prompts interpretations, fantasies, and an aesthetic appreciation of an actress with nothing like the widely recognized “star quality” of Bette Davis. Nonetheless, Hobart achieves an equivalent aura, thanks to Cornell’s sensitive-one might even say obsessive-reediting of a minor Hollywood film. [[16]](#footnote-16)

In Wees’ reading, the fascination with the female protagonist is deconstructed in order to further enhance it. Indeed, visually, Hobart’s slow-moving, blue-tinted beauty makes her luminous and transcendent. Both colour and speed allow us time to take in her aura—much like a slow shutter speed enables more information to seep into the image—and to contemplate, without the interference of narrative, her presence. And if we consider only the image-as-image, then Wees is right. This reading also holds true if we take into account the removal of all diegetic sound and dialogue, a decision that provides the heroine, according to Catherine Corman, with a “a glaze of interiority” that allows her to assume an ethereal role: “Joseph Cornell mutes the exterior world to more clearly witness the ephemeral spirit of another person”.[[17]](#footnote-17) But if we include music in the analysis, then this interpretation becomes unstable. Faced with the mute protagonist stripped of her rescue mission, a reading of the film based on aura and star quality takes on a more sinister edge. Continuing with her argument, Corman understands the apparently haphazard placement of music as another way in which Cornell moves Hobart into the ephemeral: “If we feel we are approaching her, the scene shifts abruptly, the music flips to the other side of the record”.[[18]](#footnote-18) But there is another way to read this. Not only is Hobart’s ability to communicate aurally taken away, but her silenced visual actions are overlaid by frivolous and disinterested music that fails to react to visual changes and, in some cases, actually belittles potentially dangerous, or daring, activities. Considered audiovisually in this way, Cornell’s film is not a celebration of aura, but rather a reduction of it. As Hobart’s beauty and screen presence are enhanced, her ability to initiate action or to voice an opinion diminishes to such an extent that her condition as a plucky heroine, which even *East of Borneo* provides her with to some small degree, is negated by the new soundtrack. While Cornell was undoubtedly captivated by the aura of Hobart, then, his relocation of her image within a new sonic wash can also be read as a derisive commentary on the frivolous treatment and objectification of Hollywood’s female stars, forged not by an obliteration of original context, but by holding up a magnifying glass to cinematic culture and its conventions. This interpretation does not require any form of particular knowledge of *East of Borneo* as it works with early Hollywood’s conventions in order to create associative connections and promote a dual and objective form of audioviewing.

Such an aurally-subversive reading of found-footage film is not unique to *Rose Hobart*, but can be found throughout experimental cinema’s history, including in works that draw on numerous visual sources for their construction. Like Cornell, Bruce Conner has consistently emphasised the role of music in his work. In fact, the title of father of music video has been liberally applied to the artist, despite his frequent refusal of the accolade.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is easy, however, to see how the designation came to be bestowed. Conner’s interest in found-footage and music, often taken from mass culture, stemmed from a desire to comment on, and undo, the conventions of pop culture. Accordingly, he set several short collage films to music, including a compilation of industrial, educational film and news footage for Devo’s “Mongoloid” (1978) and two audiovisual pieces in collaboration with David Byrne with Brian Eno for their 1981 album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (“America Is Waiting” and “Mea Culpa”). But he also worked with composers to create new soundtracks for his films, most famously with Terry Riley in *Looking for Mushrooms* (1967, although in 1996 he replaced this music with the Beatles’ “Tomorrow Never Knows”), *Easter Morning* (2008) and *Crossroads* (1976), which also included an electroacoustic soundscape by Patrick Gleeson.

Pre-existent music appears in several of Conner’s films, including the found-footage *Cosmic Ray* set to Ray Charles’s “What’d I Say” (1959) (1961 and re-imagined in 2006 as the expanded *Three Screen Ray*) and *Valse Triste* (1977), set to the waltz from Sibelius’s incidental music, *Kuolema*, Op.44 (1903). One of the most well-known examples of a found-footage film set to a pre-existing piece of music, however, is Conner’s *A Movie*, an assemblage of B Movie outtakes, softcore porn, newsreels and educational clips aurally merged by Respighi’s *Pines of Rome* (1924), performed by NBC Symphony Orchestra with Toscanini at the helm. Although Respighi’s piece seems well suited to the carriage riding and car racing near the beginning—even at times appearing neatly synchronised—at other times the music—this time a grand symphonic poem to the Italian capital—sits awkwardly against the visual collage. The film can be read as a eulogy to death, as terrifying and daring exploits rub against images of destruction, although, as with most experimental films, it is not as straight forward as this. Like *Rose Hobart*, Conner’s film plays with cinematic devices and visual expectation from the start. The opening, taking up over 120 seconds of the 12-minute film, features the film’s title, “End of Part Four” and a countdown, followed immediately by “THE END”: the found-footage collage then begins. Throughout, “A MOVIE BY BRUCE CONNER” flashes across the screen in ironic acknowledgement that none of the footage was actually shot by the artist; a gesture that, along with the frequent separation of shots by black leader, simultaneously highlights the authorship of editing and the artificiality and stylised nature of film’s construction. The database narrative exposes the montage aspects of the film, as different qualities and styles jostle against one another, demanding a reorganisation of their original associations within a new journey that builds slowly to a halting visual climax as the images and their juxtapositions grow in significance.

Again, all diegetic sound is silenced—we see Teddy Roosevelt silently mouthing a speech, for instance—in favour of a consistent sonic wash. First heard is “The Pines of Villa Borghese”, which helps to soften the impact of the frantic compilation that follows the opening, in which shots of speed—a chase scene from a Western, an elephant charging towards the camera, cars racing, crashing and falling from cliffs—are placed in a flow so quick that the editing itself becomes harmonious with its images. Although the tempo and rhythm of Respighi’s music suits the energy of the dislocated clips, its upbeat mood jars with the urgency of the images, washing over their potential danger and propelling the next shot to enter just before each moment of impact.

Next, “THE END” re-appears and the music promptly stops as the screen turns black, forming an abrupt and unexpected point of audiovisual synchronisation. The next section begins with slower music (this time, the “Pini Di Roma”) over more serene images and editing style: we see exotic ladies with large baskets on their heads, a blimp crossing a cityscape, a couple slowly rotating high above a street and a tightrope walker, interspersed again with “A MOVIE BY BRUCE CONNER”. The iconic montage in which a shot of a submarine is followed by another of an alluring lady, as though the submarine’s telescope is directed towards her, before cutting back to the submarine and away to the dropped atomic bomb slowly billowing, enjoys a harp and woodwind wash that defuses the crude comedic suggestion, making it instead quite beautiful. However, there follows another example of audiovisual disconnection. After a surfer is seen falling into large waves, the shots become increasingly humorous: rowers battle enormous waves, a waterskier falls, a funny assortment of bikes is shown and motorbikes become stuck in the mud. And yet, the music’s mood changes to a slow lurch as lower wind and brass in the minor, supported by percussion, take over, a change that renders the images almost tragic. Conversely, the musical timbre becomes more optimistic during the last sequence, in which the images become increasingly upsetting and the flow more disjointed as black screens separate each shot from the others, opening wide the spaces between clips in order to give the audience time to reflect on what has just been shown and to develop a strong sense of dread at what the next image might bring: a firing squad, people hanging from a bridge, soldiers lying dead in a field, the atomic bomb cloud, a dead elephant and so on. The result is an unsettled and hesitant progression at odds with the thunderous and over-determining climax of the music, which fills the visual gaps with a conflicting commentary. Becoming more disquieting as they progress, the images in this final montage (with the exception of the terrible slow-moving grandeur of the atomic explosion) fail to reach the same triumphant heights as the music. In fact, image and music move away from each other in true counterpoint to create a structural, vertical dissonance. This makes the ending unclear: as a diver disappears into an underwater wreck, the sun is seen shinning from above the water and the music ends. Is this sudden change of heart, in which the visual track falls briefly into line with the musical trajectory, supposed to signal redemption, resurrection, hope, unity? Or, like *Rose Hobart*, is this Conner performing a satirical comment on the happy Hollywood ending, where everything resolves and sound and image work together?

Both *Rose Hobart* and *A Movie* deconstruct cinematic conventions—the construction of the starlet; and the use of editing and visual leitmotivs to build (or dismantle) dramatic arcs—but they also satirise the ways in which music is used to make audiences less aware of these formations and devices. If we return to Zryd’s assertion that found-footage filmmakers interrogate “the history *behind* the image”, we can see how it is in fact the soundtrack that best deconstructs the original material. The haphazard placement of popular Brazilian tunes against close-ups of a Hollywood star who would disappear from favour shortly after the original film’s release highlights the power of big studios to make or break (or silence) their leading ladies; the placement of a symphonic poem about a European city against a rapid-fire of increasingly-disturbing images forces an audiovisual rupture that exposes the ability of music to influence the reading of images *as images*.

**Original and New Sound**

While the films discussed above use a consistent musical score—or at least songs or movements by the same musician—to create an aural uniformity that counters the disjointed visual flow (even though it can encourage us to read that flow in a unique, musically-determined way), films that retain some of the original, often mismatched, sounds from the chosen clips add yet another layer to the found-footage collage. If we move from the avant-garde outposts towards films underpinned by a more conventional aesthetic, we can find examples of collage film that operates according to a remarkable audiovisual constancy. Terence Davis’ 2008 partial found-footage film, *Of Time and the City*, is a semi-autobiographical essay that lingers over newsreel and documentary footage from his childhood in 1950s and 1960s Liverpool. As in the examples above, the soundtrack adds a satirical coherence to the multi-sourced visual collage. And yet, it does so in a different way. Davis’s laconic, metaphorical and poetic voiceover, which offers opinions and thoughts as well as snippets from the work of Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and others, is combined with occasional ruptures of diegetic sound and pre-existent music from Perotin, Listz and Tavener to The Hollies and Peggy Lee. Much of the time, the nondiegetic music replaces all onscreen sound, leading the viewer towards a particular, romanticised view of the images. The most powerful audiovisual moments, however, arise when sounds taken from the original footage are combined with newly-composed, or differently-sourced, sonic elements. Because many of the images were not shot by Davis, their sounds are inconsistent, of low quality (because they were recorded with early microphones) and lacking in the finesse of fiction film’s post-production techniques. And yet, the interweaving of these sounds with pre-existing, well-recorded music heightens Davis’ sentimental recollection.

Towards the beginning of the film, slow moving shots of the city’s terraced streets are introduced to the opening clarinet and horn chords of Popescu Branesti’s *Priveghiati si va Rugat* (arranged by Chris Hazell). A scene change to an empty children’s playground, the swings moving desolately in the wind, is initiated as the strings take over and the choir enters. The intensely melancholic music lends the following black-and-white clips of early-morning activity a nostalgic air. After a short while, we see a group of children playing with hula hoops in a school playground and their cheerful diegetic voices rise in a chant above Branesti’s music. The subsequent entrance of Angela Gheorghiu’s soprano voice initiates a duet with the children’s song that offers a haunting lament for Liverpool’s lost communities. Here, the sound design weaves an elegant path through the different styles and textures in such a way that a remarkable consistency of image, sound and audiovisuality arises.

We are, of course, accustomed to such a mixture of voice-over with diegetic sound and music from mainstream fiction film: and with the use of anachronistic nondiegetic music, which propels films such as *A Knight’s Tale* (Brian Helgeland, 2001), *Marie Antoinette* (Sophia Coppola, 2006) and *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Luhrmann, 2003). But here, residing at the more experimental edge of feature film production, this mixture takes on a new role. While music in the scene above drives the images towards an over-sentimentalised depiction of post-war Liverpudlian life, it nevertheless does so with an ironic nod to the dramatic sweeping scores from Hollywood’s golden age. The music is too much, becoming almost comedic as it forces images of desolate streets into a highly romanticised vision of the director’s childhood. The gap between idealised and true past is prised open further in a scene in which the diegetic sounds of Liverpudlian teenagers dancing to The Beatles are replaced with Ronald Binge’s “Elizabethan Serenade” (1952) in order to represent Davis’s dour view of the band and his preference for classical music.

While Davis creates a subtle audiovisual rupture, others have aimed at a clear counterpoint between image and music, achieving either a fragmentary and anachronistic soundtrack that mirrors the bricolaged images, or a parody of Hollywood sound design and musical placement. The first type can be found in many short films by Jonas Mekas. In *Imperfect Film*, for instance, Mekas combines visual outtakes from his own work and unidentified found-images with distorted real-world sounds, such as church bells, his own voice singing a poem by Hannelore Hahn and the improvised piano playing of composer and filmmaker Auguste Varkalis. At certain moments, this soundscape pushes and pulls at the images, warping and distorting them into visual elongations of the sounds.

The second type can be found in György Pálfi’s *Final Cut – Ladies & Gentlemen* (2012). The feature-length film weaves a relatively coherent love story that is at once gripping and familiar. By supercutting numerous scenes—many of them iconic—from existing Hollywood films, Pálfi removes key moments and places them against similar moments from other well-known works in order to create a wave-like motion through a new story, with a main protagonist played by many different actors. As in *Rose Hobart*, there is a clear respect for the “aura” of the original images, which are not deconstructed but rather use their original, iconic power to create a super-protagonist from film history’s leading men. *Final Cuts*’ press release explains that the work is a collection of “images from 450 emblematic films from world cinema, from *Metropolis* to *Indiana Jones*, via *The Godfather*, *Avatar*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Psycho* or even *Modern Times*, with a few television series thrown in as well.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Despite flouting most of the rules of classical continuity editing, as well as combining film styles from different eras and genres, the film is able to offer a remarkably rational and easy to follow tale. Unlike the oneiric world of *Rose Hobart*, or the exhaustingly-edited journey of Conner, *Final Cut* emulates the narrative style and character stereotypes that it deconstructs. The comment here, then, is on the similarity between Hollywood products; the ability to undo and recombine numerous films, only to arrive at a new narrative strikingly similar to the ones that have been plundered.

The soundtrack operates in much the same way. Many of the clips retain their original sounds, while others are given new nondiegetic music, although the resultant sonic collage is unusually harmonious. The mainstream feature usually aims for a consistent aural track; voices and Foley are recorded afterwards to ensure continuity in both timbre and acoustics. But here, the diversity of musical style and diegetic sound is embraced as much as the variety of visual texture, depth and editing technique. Emotional and narrative flow, however, is helped by the diegetic manipulation of sound designers Tamás Zányi and Gábor Balázs and by the careful and intermittent placement of pre-existent music against particularly disjointed, or important, visual progressions. The result is a sonic evenness that belies the craze of visual activity and ensures that the clips gel together according to a single guiding sentiment. Although some of *Final Cut*’s music is taken from music history, much of it is film music; and its point of origin is significant.

[Miklós Kiss](http://sensesofcinema.com/author/miklos-kiss/) describes *Final Cut*’s first minute, in which the ‘protagonist’ is seen waking, as “a *narrative* exposition that (super)cuts James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), Milos Forman’s *Hair* (1979), Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* (1935), Károly Makk’s *Liliomfi* (1956), Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999), Danny DeVito’s *The War of the Roses* (1989), another Hitchcock, this time *Psycho* (1960), Garry Marshall’s *Pretty Woman* (1990), Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974), and Jean-Luc Godard’s *À bout de* *souffle* (1960)”.[[21]](#footnote-21) The mélange of seventy years of film history is pulled together and smoothed out by Thomas Newman’s “Wow” from *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton, 2003), appropriate for its use of birdsong, although the original diegetic sounds become louder as the clips progress until the music finally fades away. Although the following scenes of showering and shaving are accompanied by their synced sounds, there is a clever use of acoustic bleed between the clips in order to cover any jagged edges and lessen awareness of different sonic qualities. Sound remains diegetic until the protagonist jauntily leaves the house, at which point the montage is again subsumed by music, this time the Bee Gees’ “Stayin’ Alive” (1977). When the male protagonist collides with his female interest for the first time, we hear Nino Rota’s “Their First Meeting”, from *Romeo and Juliet* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1968). As the woman leaves, we are left with Marty Crane’s infamous statement from *Back to the Future* that “this has got to be a dream”. The musical choices are obvious rather than subversive, their role the same as in the original film, not in specific detail, but in their larger form of commentary.

The bricolage of found-footage demands, according to Kiss, a rethink of the ways in which conventional filmic flow and coherence is created: “*Final Cut*’s opening scene, as well as the whole film, not only violates most of these continuity norms and rules, but, by ultimately providing a relatively smooth experience, also disproves their absolute necessity as components considered to be exclusively responsible for invoking the feeling of narrative continuity.”[[22]](#footnote-22) And yet, the “smooth experience” is not only produced from the placement of clips showing similar actions together, but also by the use of sound to reinforce and develop these similarities. To hide geographical and temporal leaps is one of the major achievements of the mainstream film score and Pálfi embraces these abilities, using his collated musical excerpts to hide the stylistic and timbral discontinuities and to pull the images along according to dramatic musical arcs. In fact, when placed against the compilation of images, the musical collage of *Final Cut* forges an unusual degree of audiovisual cohesion. The musical snippets may be out of context, but they still operate according to the highly-evolved languages of film music, even when placed in new vertical alignments, demonstrating how perceptually attuned to a cut-and-splice screen aesthetic a contemporary audience has become: it is easily possible to make sense of an audiovisual flow despite logical ruptures and continual extra-filmic associations.

In *Final Cut*, then, music operates both as film music, capable of immersing audiences into pre-determined viewing positions, *and* as hypertext, by continually referring to music’s use within film history as a discursive and influential device. For its success, the film’s audience must continually undo famous images and sounds from their original contexts in order to be swept up in the new narrative, while at the same time remaining aware of the very process of audiovisual re-contextualisation that they are enacting. Indeed, the film relies on this dual ability. To return to Wees’ earlier assertion that the found-footage collage encourages us to be critically aware of cinema’s “images and their institutional sources”, it is clear that here it is the history behind both image *and* sound that is being interrogated.

**The Sound-Image**

The examples of found-footage film above are taken from many different schools of experimental filmmaking and from different eras and aesthetics. And yet, each film offers a sonic constancy very different from that present in many of the other films analysed in this collection. In fact, at first glance, the placement of sound against image appears similar to the many forms of audiovisuality found in mainstream fiction filmmaking: a form of immersion with the film world is initiated by music that stitches together filmic elements to create a more coherent visual flow, draws out narrative arcs not necessarily clear in the newly-collaged images and lures audio-spectators into the diegesis; processes amply theorised by scholars of mainstream film soundtracks. But in the experimental film, music is used as another part of the collage technique, repelling its suturing abilities in order to draw attention to the materiality of the new visual combines. Familiar-sounding or pre-existent music, used in an unfamiliar manner, not only creates a sonic form of de-contextualisation that mirrors the undoing of the visual clips, but also, and most significantly, forms a new and highly critical *audiovisual* collage. The de-familiarisation of sound, as well as image, in other words, questions the appearance of audiovisual synchronicity to initiate a vertical (audiovisual), as well as a horizontal (visual, or aural), collision. The result is a “true free counter point”, in which neither image nor sound are dependent on the other, although they work closely together in order to participate in, and undo, the cinematic conventions at play in their original sources. The activated form of audiovisual consumption that arises from this process encourages a form of alienated listening. Music does not encourage absorption into the film, in the same way as a mainstream soundtrack can. Rather, it retains a coexistent sense of its origin, of its new placement and of the resultant “poetic ambiguity” that lies between these two spaces.

1. Zryd, “Found-footage Film as Discursive Metahistory: Craig Baldwin’s *Tribulation 99*”, in *The Moving Image*, 3:2 (2003), 41-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tartaglia quoted in William C. Wees, “The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films”, in *Cinema Journal*, 41:2 (2002), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lawder, “Comments on the Collage Film”, in *Found Footage Film,* ed. Cecilia Hausheer and Christoph Settele (Luzern: VIPER / zyklop, 1992), 113–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wees, “Found Footage and Questions of Representation”, in Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 98-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Film* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1994), 39, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See for example, Robert Robertson, *Eisenstein on the Audiovisual: The Montage of Music, Image and Sound in Cinema* (London: Tauris Academic, 2009); Hans Richter, *The Struggle for the Film*, (1934-1939), trans. Ben Brewster (St. Louis, MO: Wildwood Press, 1986), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Levi cited in Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1997), 85-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Guy Barefoot uses this first film to demonstrate that, in the 1930s, the recycling of images was not the reserve of the avant-garde, but also formed a prevalent part of low-budget Hollywood filmmaking: “Recycled Images: *Rose Hobart*, *East of Borneo*, and *The Perils of Pauline*”, in *Adaptation*, 5:2 (2011), 152-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wees explains the tinting of *Rose Hobart* in “The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films”, n.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The legend is recounted in Michael Pigott, *Joseph Cornell Verses Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Barefoot identifies the original placement of the film’s opening moments in “Recycled Images”, 159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pigott, *Joseph Cornell Verses Cinema*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Brakhage quoted in Catherine Corman, “Theater of the Spirits: Joseph Cornell and Silence, in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 370. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wees, “The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films”, 4-5, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Corman, “Theater of the Spirits”, 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Corman, “Theater of the Spirits”, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See for example, *Bruce Conner: MEA CULPA* (directed by Chris Green, 2013), at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzqL4G6oA58> (accessed 1 September 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See “Press Kit for *Final Cut*”, at <http://www.finalcut-movie.com/pages/p/presskit> (accessed 1 September 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [Miklós Kiss](http://sensesofcinema.com/author/miklos-kiss/), “Creativity Beyond Originality: György Pálfi’s *Final Cut* as Narrative Supercut”, in *Senses of Cinema*, 67 (2003), at <http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/creativity-beyond-originality-gyorgy-palfis-final-cut-as-narrative-supercut/#b13> (accessed 1 September 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [Kiss](http://sensesofcinema.com/author/miklos-kiss/), “Creativity Beyond Originality”. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)