Being Modern

Bud, Robert, Greenhalgh, Paul, James, Frank, Shiach, Morag

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The cinematic sound of industrial modernity: first notes
Tim Boon

This chapter is about the ways in which filmmakers in the first decade of sound on film used sound to represent industrial modernity. The value in undertaking such a study relates to the importance of sound on both sides of an equation: as a key interwar focus for debate about modernity and as a means of representation in the new media of the time. Emily Thompson’s use of Murray Schafer’s term ‘soundscape’ is valuable here: ‘Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world’.1 This central reflexivity of the period – that industrial technology was both author and witness, producer and subject – I offer as an exemplification of Marshall Berman’s neat encapsulation that modernisms of various kinds may be seen as responses to the modernity their authors experienced.2 In suggesting that it will be particularly interesting to consider how new sonic technologies used sound itself to represent modernity, I will limit myself here to cinema in the decade from 1927. The virtue of this time frame is that by choosing it we can see a modernistic form in its infancy developing techniques and a language that were later codified or, in some cases, left behind.

First, I consider the sound-on-film practice embodied in two specific films that, in one way or another, are concerned with the nature of industrial modernity, one documentary and one feature. My examples are Paul Rothe’s 1935 documentary The Face of Britain (British) and René Clair’s 1931 feature, À Nous la Liberté (French). The directors of these two films both chose industrial modernity as their subject, reflecting back to their societies their own particular responses to it,
using modernistic conventions that were necessarily still in the course of being formulated. Both films also have particularly interesting, and self-consciously made, soundtracks, which their authors also discussed in print. Each of these self-conscious cinematic auteurs had highly engaged views on how sound should work within the cinema; their views revolved around the creative possibilities of rejecting for various reasons the synchronised sound of the talkies, where lips are seen to speak words, and instead focussed on the asynchronous use of the soundtrack, where sound is used as part of the montage to convey meaning additional to the vision track. I mean by taking these differing examples to suggest a field of cinematic and sonic study that could be populated with many further examples, a possibility which I discuss briefly in the concluding section of this chapter.

There is a further way in which this chapter seeks a synthesis of work pursued in separate fields. Scholars in science and technology studies (STS) will be aware of ‘sound studies’, the recently opened-up interdisciplinary area between STS, cultural studies and musicology, as represented by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld’s *Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* or the 2013 issue of *Osiris* on the topic. The discipline of film studies also made a turn to the sonic a generation ago with foundational publications in 1980 that included Rick Altman’s special issue of *Yale French Studies* entitled ‘Cinema/Sound’ and in 1986 with Elisabeth Weis and John Belton’s compendium, *Film Sound*. This essay bridges these two disciplinary areas.

### Noise and modernity

As Rick Altman has argued, the world into which cinema was born was one of growing sonic variety, largely the product of new technologies not only in manufacture and transport, but also in sound technologies themselves, including phonographs and telephones. As he says, ‘at the turn of the twentieth century, no enterprise involving sound could possibly develop independently of this newly complex soundscape. The sound “vocabulary” of every era depends on the ways in which contemporary media present sound …’. His argument about the changing sonic qualities of so-called ‘silent’ films goes on to stress the wide range of sources for this vocabulary as it developed in the first 30 years of cinema. It is important to remember that this pre-1927 prehistory of the sound-on-film era was part of the sonic world that the filmmakers under discussion here inhabited, part of the ‘vocabulary’ put to work via the
new grammars of sound on film that they were actively developing in the 1930s.

The significance of noise in interwar modernity is clear on the celebratory side, for example in the noise music of the Futurists. The composer Francesco Balilla Pratella’s 1911 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Music* argued that ‘all forces of nature, tamed by man through his continued scientific discoveries, must find their reflection in composition – the musical soul of the crowds, of great industrial plants, of trains, of transatlantic liners, of armoured warships, of automobiles, of aeroplanes. This will unite the great central motives of a musical poem with the power of the machine and the victorious reign of electricity.’ Luigi Russolo took up the refrain; his manifesto *The Art of Noises* gloried in ‘the muttering of motors, … the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shriek of mechanical saws [and] the starting of the tram on its tracks’. His composition *Awakening of a City*, as scored for an ensemble of *Intonamauri* – or ‘noise-intoners’ – which he had designed to reproduce machine noises, was heard in London in 1915.

On the distaff side, several authors in sound studies, and especially Karin Bijsterveld, have drawn readers’ attention to the negative perception of noise in the emergence of noise abatement movements on both sides of the Atlantic. In New York, Julia Barnett Rice formed a Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise in 1906. Britain had its Anti-Noise League, typical of the interwar polity of voluntary health associations. Active debates were staged in public using contemporary media; the Science Museum in London was, for example, home to a temporary exhibition in 1935 on the theme. The catalogue essay by the League’s president, the eminent physician Lord Tommy Horder, shows one of the ways that anti-noise sentiment was presented in public:

> Doctors are definitely convinced that noise wears down the human nervous system, so that both the natural resistance to disease, and the natural power of recovery from disease, are lowered … Some people say that our nerves are so flexible, and have got such great reserves of energy, that they can adapt themselves without difficulty to noise … It is true that our nerves have got this power of adjustment. If they had not we could not stand up to the conditions of modern life without becoming hopeless neurasthenics.

James Mansell has shown that Horder’s interpretation of the harm of noise via neurasthenia was already rather archaic by the mid-1930s. But this should not cause us to underestimate the significance of
anti-noise discourse – understood via several pragmatic and theoretical approaches – in the period. Notably, anti-noise discourse was threaded through with a dialectic of noise and peace, or noise and silence. That dialectic provided one of the ways in which the problem of noise was re-represented to people in the 1930s, via products, advertising and films, as will be clear below.

Paul Rotha’s 1935 documentary *The Face of Britain*

Rotha had gained permission to make *The Face of Britain* as a side project, taking advantage of the monthly cross-country trips by car to Barrow-in-Furness where he was filming the construction of the cruise liner *Orion*, the subject of its twin film *Shipyard* for the company Gaumont-British Instructional. Rotha structured *The Face of Britain* as a cinematic and historical dialectic about the impact of the first and second industrial revolutions on the British landscape. In terms of its argument, in its sections on the industrial revolution and its outcomes, Rotha’s film is highly critical of the social impact of laissez-faire capitalism, as was conventional for anyone on the left at this time. In terms of film technique, as I have described elsewhere, he derived his understanding from his close study at the editing bench of Russian films as well as such written texts as had by that point emerged from Russia, including almost certainly Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov’s joint ‘Statement on sound’. This influential couple of pages, published in English translation in the art film magazine *Close Up* in 1928, clearly expressed an anxiety that sound on film’s technical capacity to synchronise speech would ineluctably result in the cinema becoming more theatrical, privileging more ‘proscenium arch’ styles of filmmaking that would tend to stress speech at the expense of anything more intrinsically cinematic. By contrast, the view of the authors was that the essence of film was that:

> The fundamental (and only) means, by which cinema has been able to attain such a high degree of effectiveness is montage (or cutting). The improvement of montage, as the principal means for producing an effect, was the undisputed axiom on which was based the development of cinematography all over the world.

It followed for them that:

> Only utilisation of sound in counterpoint relation to the visual montage affords new possibilities of developing and perfecting
montage. *The first experiments with sound must be directed towards its pronounced non-coincidence with the visual images.* This method of attack only will produce the requisite sensation, which will lead in course of time to the creation of a new *orchestral counterpoint* of sight-images and sound-images.\(^\text{20}\)

In making these arguments, the authors were addressing more than simply aesthetic concerns; silent films – with some translation of intertitles – sold into an international market, whereas talkies were specific to particular language areas.\(^\text{21}\)

Rotha proceeded on the basis of contrapuntal sound and vision, and in *The Face of Britain*, each of the dialectical sections – ‘heritage of the past’, ‘the smoke age’, ‘the new power’, ‘the new age’ – has a different sonic quality as well as differing pace in the editing and different typography.\(^\text{22}\)

Sonically, the first section, presenting a golden pre-industrial age, combines birdsong and pastoral-style string music with sparse narration. The second ‘smoke age’ section, on which I will concentrate here, has a much more experimental soundtrack, including a wordless rhythmic, percussive and metallic sequence representing industrial work in steelmaking, ceramic production, mechanical engineering and their industrial locales, that lasts for a whole minute within the overall 20-minute duration of the film. ‘The new power’, which introduces hydro-electricity and its transmission via the grid, mixes birdsong, water sounds, sparking noises, the whine of a test oscillator and music. ‘The new age’ starts with a montage of construction noises, which give way to abstract rhythmic sounds and short passages of music accompanying short scenes in the vision and commentary. No composer is credited for the music, but it is likely that Jack Beaver was responsible; he was working for Gaumont-British Instructional at the time, and is credited with the music for *Shipyard* and provided scores for many of their *Secrets of Nature* films.\(^\text{23}\)

In 1937 the sound recordist William Frances Elliott\(^\text{24}\) brought out a book, *Sound Recording for Films*, which he believed to be the first such publication.\(^\text{25}\) His description of the *Face of Britain* soundtrack conveys the character of the ‘smoke age’ section of the film; his words – almost certainly unknowingly – echo the Futurists:

> One cannot but commend the freshness of invention as led to the use, in Paul Rotha’s ‘Face of Britain’, of orchestrated *noises* … with the rhythm provided by practically every form of machine, it is not a very long step to taking some of the less agreeable noises, each invested with marked significance, and each with its individual
rhythm, and orchestrating them all into a symphony illustrative of the kaleidoscopic panorama of industrial background treated in the film.26

He went on to explain that ‘actually a “musical” score was written for each of several unconventional “instruments”. Hammers were beaten upon empty, resonating, iron tanks in exact tempo to the score, and so on.’27 One of the two sound scripts for the film preserved in the Rotha Archive gives preliminary instructions:

Then let sound build to a crescendo – using every type of machine, steam, forges, hooters, wind on mike, rhythmic pistons etc. Punctuate here and there with trams and hooters over the town shots. Climax comes on shot of Angel with Industrial Landscape.28

These were very early days in the documentarists’ use of sound; the ubiquity of sound films in commercial cinemas made it a necessity for documentarists to have soundtracks for their films to stand any chance of gaining theatrical showings for them.29 Rotha described the making of the soundtrack of Face of Britain in his autobiography, explaining that it would have been far too costly to take a 1930s sound truck with them on their journeys. Here he also revealed that Elliott, recordist on the film, was co-author of the soundtrack:

The sound tracks … apart from a minimum of music, were fabricated in the back of the studio. With the imaginative help of the recordist W.F. Elliott, every kind of sound effect was conjured up by synthetic means, including a waterfall (the toilet was useful here), a flashover of a million-volt spark, shipyard riveting and so on. We bought a number of old disused cisterns and water tanks; they made a wonderful variety of sounds. A rawlplug driller made an excellent riveting sound. And so on … such synthetic fabrication of sound and the intermixing and overlaying of sound tracks (for some sequences six separate tracks were mixed together into one master track, to be mixed again with voices) were imaginative, stimulating and provided amusement.30

In sum, we see in Rotha’s use of sound in The Face of Britain a commitment specifically to asynchronous sound, partially because of his conviction as a devotee of Russian filmmaking technique, and partially because the novelty of the technique and the unwieldiness of
the equipment made any other technique impossible. As he said in his 1936 primer, *Documentary Film*, which he was writing as he edited the film:

> In the same way that we learnt how to create on the cutting-bench, to use the god-like vision of the camera to express in terms of relation and conflict, to dissolve our images one into another, to create tension and suspense by the juxtaposition of shot against shot, so we must employ the cutting-bench and the re-recording panel to give meaning and dramatic power to our sounds.\(^{31}\)

Given all that can be said about Rotha's approach to the soundtrack of *The Face of Britain*, there remains the question of what kind of account of industrial society the film presents, and what can be said about the contribution of sound to that account. *Documentary Film*’s twenty pages devoted to sound technique vividly conveys his excitement about how sound montage could combine the ‘raw materials’ of location recordings, studio approximations and music, using the cutting bench and the re-recording panel to layer sounds creatively. He writes warmly about the potential of ‘imagistic’ use of sounds separated from synchrony with the objects that create them; he gives one explicit example from this film: ‘in *The Face of Britain* the plea for slum clearance is ironically commented upon by shots of slums overlaid with the sound of explosions; but the slums remain unchanged.’\(^{32}\) The sequence in the film runs thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caption: ‘The New Age’</strong></td>
<td>Commentary: ‘A great new world lies ready to be created. There is much to be done.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoke on Trent landscape</td>
<td>[explosion]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slum demolition</td>
<td>[shovelling sounds, explosion]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slum demolition, including pneumatic drill</td>
<td>[pneumatic drill, explosion]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slum demolition</td>
<td>Commentary: ‘The heritage of the smoke age, the ghastly squalor, brought about by the uncontrolled spread of industry, chaos and filth of an obsolete age’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graveyard monument</td>
<td>... the scarred and derelict ruins that today are seats of unemployment and misery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slums in Coatbridge (Lanarkshire coalfield)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker on construction site riding on crane</td>
<td>Commentary: ‘... the scarred and derelict ruins that today are seats of unemployment and misery can have no place in the new face of the land.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This sequence provides a clear example of the ‘contrapuntal’ technique for sound and vision recommended by the Russian authors of the ‘Statement on Sound’. The ‘smoke age’ section that I have concentrated on earlier uses precisely the kinds of sounds that excited the Futurists put to work in counterpoint to the vision track to represent industrial modernity. Furthermore, although the film is not directly concerned with noise – the commentary nowhere mentions it – the noise abaters’ contrast between modern industrial or urban noise and rural peace is built into the film’s dialectic, with the first and third sections conveying the comparative peace of the rural past and the rural source of hydroelectricity, and the second and last sections encompassing and representing the noise of modernity; first in industrialisation and latterly in the then current ‘age of scientific planning, organisation of cooperation and collective working’. In this final section, the sounds include music, resonant water tanks struck with soft mallets, and commentary. The film ends with resolved string chords and fanfares accompanying views from the brow of a hill, echoing its first section.

Rene Clair’s 1931 À Nous la Liberté

Bringing my second main example, À Nous la Liberté, into comparison indicates the potential breadth of study in this subject of the cinematic representation of sonic modernity, as this film, whilst also containing a critique of industrial modernity, could scarcely differ more from the earnestness of Rotha’s documentary. Clair’s film is a satire on the dehumanising nature of Taylorised work, as he stated in a 1952 interview: ‘At the time I was closest to the extreme left, and I wanted to combat the machine when it becomes an enslaver of man rather than contribute, as it should, to his happiness … Above all [the film is directed] against the idea of the sanctity of work when it is uninteresting and non-individual’.34

À Nous la Liberté tells the story of Emile and Louis, two ex-convicts who, at the beginning of the film are experiencing the drudgery of a Fordist production line making toys in a prison. Early in the action, Louis manages to escape the prison, after which he is seen working his way up from selling gramophones to owning and running a gramophone factory that ultimately becomes entirely mechanised. Throughout the film, the prison metaphor for modern work is reinforced, with the same sets, lightly redressed, doing service for prison workshop, factory and cafeteria. The characters of the two main protagonists reinforce the anarchistic motif, typical of the surrealists: Louis is preternaturally
lucky and – it seems – cannot help himself from becoming a successful capitalist, despite his ultimate disregard for the trappings of wealth. Emile, meanwhile, is a dreamer reluctant to succumb to the Taylorist yoke, and with a tendency to fall in love – his pursuit of Jeanne is one of the narrative drivers of the film’s second half. In the end it is Emile’s determination to seize the freedom of the vagrant’s life that drives the film to its denouement in which the pals leave behind the world of capitalism and head for the open road.

Considered an exponent of ‘pure cinema’, Clair was one of those, like Rotha versed in silent cinema, who initially resisted the transition to sound; in common with the authors of the ‘statement on sound’ he disliked the tendency for ‘talking films’ to become wordy and theatrical, to become ‘canned theatre’, as he called it. He promoted instead ‘sound films’, making use of asynchronous sound – a careful selection and organisation of sounds – ‘to recapture some of the poetic energy that animated the silent cinema’. Generically, Clair’s sonic solution was musical; as he recalled:

in order to avoid everything that might make it look like a message picture, I retained the operetta formula. I thought that À Nous la Liberté risked being heavy if treated realistically. I hoped that characters who expressed themselves in song would help put over the satirical nature of the film. And then also I wanted to get to the audience, and I thought that the bitter pill I was preparing would be more easily swallowed if it was coated in amusing music.

We can recruit the author Kurt London to provide a definition of this archaic category of ‘operetta film’; in his 1936 Film Music (which Elliott had read), he explained the role of the score:

the music accompanying the scenes which are without dialogue in a sound film is neither illustrative nor mimetic. It is an altogether new mixture of musical elements. It has to connect dialogue scenes without friction; it has to establish association of ideas and carry in developments of thought; and, above all this, it has to intensify the incidence of climax and prepare for further dramatic action.

He explained that Clair had studied sound-film technique in Berlin at a time when Wilhelm von Thiele – director of Chemin de Paradis (1930), a French remake of a German operetta film – was experimenting with film operetta technique, matching the film’s plot to musical
rhythms. According to London, this film ‘was one of the first examples of what a modern mime, transferred to the medium of the sound-film operetta, should be’. He also cites the composer Friedrich Holländer (composer for Hanns Schwarz’s 1930 film Einbrecher) who had ‘shown in some experiments how the music has to grow organically out of the rhythm of the pictures and their action. If it then expands into a song … then one can endorse the raison d’être of the theme song, because it is dramatically premised’. This is a technique used at several points in À Nous la Liberté.

Georges Auric, the composer Clair chose to write the score for À Nous la Liberté, was at that stage beginning to become well established. Along with Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Tailleferre, he was counted one of ‘Les Six’. À Nous la Liberté was the second of his scores, after Cocteau’s Blood of a Poet composed the year before, and he went on to write the music for around 130 films. As Colin Roust has explained, Auric and Clair had moved in the same Parisian avant-garde circles since at least 1924, meeting at the Boeuf sur le Toit restaurant. Auric was a convert to Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Cocteau’s esprit nouveau, which in music rejected German Romanticism in favour of ‘a new and distinctly French musical aesthetic inspired by the popular music found in Paris – that of the circus, the music-hall, the café-concert, and the street fair’. Roust finds the spirit of Apollinaire and Cocteau abroad in Auric’s published music criticism from 1922 to 1924, which rejected the confines of the Parisian musical establishment of the Conservatoire and Opéra in favour of kinds of music that would be net (plain) and dépouillé (stripped-down). In these reviews, Auric also made a play for full collaboration between film directors and composers so as to create a unified aesthetic. It seems that À Nous la Liberté became the exemplification of these principles; musically the soundtrack is chanson-like, tonal and melodic, making use of familiar musical forms including march, waltz and foxtrot. Equally, the collaboration with Clair was strong, with Auric gaining second billing ahead of the designer and actors; his presence on set during most of the filming; and the replacement of various originally scripted sound effects with his musical cues.

In his survey of film music composers of different nations, Kurt London speaks warmly of Auric’s music for the film: ‘in collaboration with the gifted director, he succeeded not only in capturing the desired musical atmosphere, but … in giving a fitting musical finish to the type of musical film developed by Clair – following the self-same principles which we laid down in the section on the various forms of
musical sound-film.\textsuperscript{47} In London’s account, these principles relate to the opportunity within the true sound film for composers to attain ‘an artistic uniformity of style’, some of whose components included ‘the detached item for a wordless scene (to-day naturalistic noises are dropping-out more and more)’ and ‘the musical number based on rhythm, with its preparatory stages’, as in the example of Friedrich Holländer’s technique described above.\textsuperscript{48}

Roust identifies two major musical components within the film’s semiotics; a march – first heard during the opening titles – represents the heroes’ friendship and the freedom of life beyond capitalism. A waltz stands for an idealised vision of love; each has a full set of lyrics that are repeated complete or in excerpt at various points in the film.\textsuperscript{49} But here, as my concern is with the film’s use of contrapuntal technique in putting across its critique of industrial modernity, I will take two other examples.

Following the sequence that shows Louis’s rise to capitalistic success, there is a two-and-a-quarter minute establishing sequence portraying work at his gramophone factory (starts around 14’30’’). We see a shot of an industrial works, settling on the gramophone company’s logotype displayed on a chimney; a dissolve (accompanied by a drum roll) takes us to a clocking-in machine and workers arriving at the factory, clocking in at a phalanx of machines. The only sonic accompaniment is wordless music closely matched to individual shots, with drums, triangle and percussion joined by sparse woodwind and brass phrases suggesting a march, at first tentatively then definitely, as the workers make their way to the production line. The march motif in a laborious form underpins the mechanised and repetitive work shown throughout the sequence. Workers are seen at conveyor belts attending to gramophones in several stages of production. We see a change of shift, with the workers being frisked to make sure they have removed no tools as in the earlier prison sequence, then taking their lunch at an identical conveyor belt carrying food (with the sparse piano and percussion motif, the same as accompanies the prisoners’ meal in the opening sequence). The camera returns to external shots, with workers continuing to march in. The sequence ends on an exterior shot of the factory with the logotype in the foreground and another drum roll. In all, this exemplifies Holländer’s technique of growing the music organically out of the rhythm of the pictures and their action. The images and music work in counterpoint to convey a critique of Taylorised work under somewhat militaristic conditions.

The concluding sequence of the film starts with the factory after it has become fully mechanised (around 76’50’’). Two workers playing
cards sit at a table with a bottle of wine whilst two conveyor belts
disgorge complete gramophones behind them, to the accompaniment of
a dance tune melody played by woodwind, brass and triangle. A drum
roll introduces a march motif somewhat in circus style and the vision
shows a panning shot of a geometrically arranged field of the machines.
A succeeding pan takes the viewer out of the factory to show the workers,
no longer needed in the factory, fishing in the river. Here a chorus singing
a refrain about liberty replaces the march. The pan continues to reveal
an outside dance floor where characters from the film are waltzing,
including Jeanne with her lover.50 This leads to the denouement where
the heroes – one leaving behind a business, the other a sweetheart – make
for the road. The music returns to the pals’ march theme for the end title.

Arthur Knight has commented – echoing Rotha’s contemporary
judgement that ‘we must employ the cutting-bench and the re-recording
panel to give meaning and dramatic power to our sounds’ – that ‘what
Clair had done, what creative directors everywhere were trying to do at
the same time, was to discover how to control all the elements that went
into the making of a sound film as completely as, in the simpler days of
silence, one could control everything that went before the camera’.51 À
Nous la Liberté was typical of a group of films whose achievement, in Noel
Burch’s words, derives from ‘a penchant for asynchronous sound based
on a paradigm of montage juxtaposition as a means to manipulate, to
interpret, and to reconstitute pro-filmic events’.52

There is more than coincidence to the fact that both Rotha and
Clair selected the asynchronous approaches to the film soundtracks I
have described; in a strong sense they were fellow travellers as cineastes.
Rotha in particular saw himself as a filmmaker working within an under-
standing of cinematic technique and its history more broadly, as is
evident in his critical writings; before he ever made a documentary he
had written The Film Till Now, a major work on the history of world
cinema.53 His published criticism continued in parallel with his
filmmaking, and Clair was one of the directors he admired. In the third
edition of this book, he described À Nous la Liberté as ‘Clair’s masterpiece’
in the context of his two previous sound films, Sous les Toits de Paris
(1929) and Le Million (1930). Echoing the point in the ‘Statement on
Sound’ that the talkies constrained international exhibition, Rotha
enthused: ‘at a time when the language barrier had bereft every European
film industry of its foreign market, Clair’s marvellous comedies with
music were achieving huge success in New York, London and in every
capital of Europe … It seemed that Clair had solved the problem of sound
film form, and that in doing so he had restored the international appeal
of national films. In a 1931 review of Clair’s earlier work, he had stressed what Clair owed in his sound films to the film operetta tradition of Wilhelm Thiele (as we saw in Kurt London’s account) and Ernst Lubitsch.

Like *The Face of Britain*, *À Nous la Liberté* does not directly represent nor comment on the noise of industrial modernity. Rather, it uses sound, and explicitly music, to underpin the critique of uninteresting and non-individual work that is carried by the story. Musical themes are used throughout in counterpoint to the action of the film. The use of repeating motifs to signify the prison-like nature of Taylorised factories, compared with choral, chanson-like passages in march time to underpin liberation from the tyranny of work, is one of the main sonic devices of the film. It is worth stressing that, where Rotha and Elliott used industrial sounds as a key component of their soundtrack, Clair permitted Auric to replace various intended naturalistic sound effects with musical cues instead. Recall that Kurt London’s view had been that ‘to-day naturalistic noises are dropping-out more and more’. In one of his characteristically provocative pieces of journalism, Clair had complained in 1929 of the tedium of synchronised and banal sound effects, proceeding to argue ‘we must draw a distinction here between those sound effects which are amusing only by virtue of their novelty (which soon wears off), and those that help one understand the action, and which excite emotions which could not have been roused by the sight of the pictures alone’. It is easy to see that Auric might quite readily have persuaded him to make the substitution.

**Conclusion: the empty category**

Rotha and Clair in these very different films used contrapuntal sound and vision tracks in distinct, but not unrelated, ways to convey their critiques of aspects of modernity. Honouring the principle of following historical actors’ categories, we may follow the already quoted 1930s authors W.F. Elliott and Kurt London to explore how our differing examples can help us to understand the broader picture of the sonic representation of industrial modernity. Elliott’s account gives us access to contemporary debates because, writing as a professional sound recordist for films, as early as ten years after *The Jazz Singer* he already had a sense of changing practice; in this chapter’s argument, he stresses particularly sound and music for industrial scenes. Elliott’s discussion presents *The Face of Britain* as a contrast with an already discarded tradition. Giving the
example of Fedor Ozep’s 1931 film of *The Brothers Karamazov*, he describes good soundtrack practice as the use of music to suggest all the sonic aspects of a scene (as we have also seen in the case of Clair’s film). Bringing to mind Auric’s technique in *À Nous la Liberté*, he comments that ‘scenes in railway stations, with departures of trains, were expressed entirely by orchestration, yet the spectator remained with the impression of having heard all the sounds incidental to such scenes’.58 Kurt London was in agreement; for him, Ozep’s *Karamazov* was ‘exemplary in its form, its rhythm which follows the course of the picture, and its success in seizing the atmosphere of Dostoevsky’s masterpiece’.59 The success in his view derived from the fact that the director cut his visuals to the completed score, ‘the composer [Karl Rathaus] could create a form complete in itself on the basis of the pictures already taken, and this form was regarded as the foundation of the final structure to be attained after cutting’.60 We may see this as a different route to the kind of result achieved by close working between Clair and Auric.

But Elliott went on to decry the over-application of the technique as it developed in the hands of Ozep’s and Rathaus’s imitators:

> Unfortunately, as sometimes happens, the lesson was learned all too fully by all and sundry, and thereafter the ordinary cinema-goer learned that the appearance of machinery upon the screen was the cue for “machine music”, a convention that has persisted almost to the same degree as the theme-song.61

Elliott’s endorsement of the technique used on the *Face of Britain* soundtrack follows immediately after this statement, with no attempt made to populate this fascinating category with any examples. There is not the opportunity here to seek or to discuss any further examples, but it is all the same a fascinating proposition for further research: a long forgotten overworked cliché of ‘machine music’ developed between the fourth and the tenth year of the ‘talkies’ and already superseded by the later date (1931–1937).62 Elliott’s argument proceeds instead to endorse the benefit of the recordist understanding ‘the artistic concept of the entire film in advance’ so as to ‘be able to produce a more harmonious and well-balanced result than his less-penetrating confrères’, an opinion that aligns well with the views on film music of several authors discussed above.63 This endorsement on behalf of recordists of the kind of composer-director relationship promoted by Auric provides good evidence that interest in sound technique at that point extended beyond montage-trained directors to sound experts too. But this also may not
have had currency for long, if at all; it is striking that John Huntley’s influential *British Film Music*, published a decade later, did not cite *Sound Recording for Films*. This suggests that the informed marriage of music and sound recording technique recommended by Elliott in 1937 did not become the normal way of thinking about the soundtrack, any more than the operetta style triumphed in the international market much beyond the relative success of *À Nous la Liberté*, or than post-synchronisation became the normal recourse for all documentary sound.64

It is clear that once film on sound became a possibility, any filmmaker telling a story about, representing or critiquing industrial society would have a whole new sense dimension to employ. The evidence presented in this essay shows that industrial society provided particular opportunities for those self-conscious filmmakers who wanted to experiment with the soundtrack, but who wanted to do so in a way that extended the techniques of juxtaposition and rhythm that were the basis of film construction in the silent cinema. These are very different examples: *The Face of Britain* is a serious-minded documentary, using historical dialectic to describe the changing landscape and society of Britain transformed by the first and second industrial revolutions, whilst *À Nous la Liberté*, by contrast, is a romp, an anti-capitalist squib against the tyranny of work. As objects of reflection and study – both in the 1930s and today – they provide vivid examples of how filmmakers could use sounds and noises to represent modern society back to itself. At the same time as they suggest categories of sonic object – including ‘machine music’ – worthy of extended consideration, they also act as testaments to the sound worlds of our antecedents in High Modernity.

**Notes**

6 A somewhat broader account is given by Karin Bijsterveld in *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of*
7 Quoted in Thompson, Soundscape, 135–36.
8 Thompson, Soundscape, 136.
11 Thompson, Soundscape, 121.
13 Noise Abatement Exhibition Catalogue, 1–2. See also James Mansell’s dissection of these claims around neurasthenia in Mansell, Hearing Modernity.
14 Mansell, Hearing Modernity.
17 T.M. Boon, “The Shell of a Prosperous Age”, 107–48; S. Eisenstein et al., ‘Statement on sound’, which had been published in the film art magazine Close Up in 1928. See James Donald, Anne Friedberg and Laura Marcus, Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism (Princeton University Press, 1999). I have not found a specific citation to the essay in Rotha’s published work. In The Film Till Now, in a passage alluding to Pudovkin’s views, he states a similar conclusion to theirs: ‘the sound of rain, leaves, animals, and birds; of trains, cars, machines and ships. These are to be woven into a unity in counterpoint with their visual images, but never in direct conjunction with them’ (London: Jonathan Cape: 1930), 310; see 303–11. He was certainly acquainted with V.I. Pudovkin, Pudovkin on Film Technique: Five Essays and Two Addresses, trans. Ivor Montagu, second edition (London: George Newnes, Ltd., 1933 [1929]), which contains two chapters on sound.
18 The original uses the term ‘mounting’; for the purposes of clarity, I have reverted to the more normal term.
19 Eisenstein et al., ‘Statement on Sound’, 83.
20 Eisenstein et al., ‘Statement on Sound’, 84. Italics in the original.
21 Eisenstein et al., ‘Statement on Sound’, 84.
23 The BFI database entry for Shipyard notes Beaver as the uncredited composer for that film. There is certainly a strong stylistic similarity in the writing for strings between Rotha’s two 1935 films. Beaver was one of the coterie of composers who worked under Gaumont-British’s resident music director, Louis Levy; John Huntley, British Film Music (S. Robinson, 1947), 33. Huntley notes that Beaver composed all the music for Secrets of Life from 1934–46 (104–05).
24 Forenames according to one BL Library entry.
26 Elliott, Sound Recording for Films, 77.
27 He continues: ‘This is but one example of the relation of music to other sounds, quoted to point the way for individuals who will be able to evolve their own ideas and elaborate upon them’; Elliott, Sound Recording for Films, 77. James Kennaway has pointed out to me that a similar sound is audible in Wagner’s Rheingold, which can be viewed here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZP-yXsNV2E at 1hr 08’10”, accessed June 2018.
28 ‘Sound Script for “The Face of Britain”’, undated [1935], Face of Britain documents, Box 12 Rotha Papers, (Collection 2001). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
29 Conventionally, *Workers and Jobs* (1935) and *Housing Problems* (1935) are presented as the first documentaries to use location sound. See, for instance, Rachael Low, *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s*. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), 120–01.

30 Rotha, *Documentary Diary*, 104–05.


32 Rotha, *Documentary Film*, 222.


36 Elisabeth Weis and John Belton, *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York; Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1985), 77.


41 London, *Film Music*, 129.

42 London, *Film Music*, 130.


44 Colin Roust, ‘“Say It With Georges Auric”’, *Film Music and the Esprit Nouveau*, *Twentieth Century Music* 6, no. 2 (September 2009): 133–53, 134.

45 Roust, ‘“Say It With Georges Auric”’, 135.


47 Roust, ‘“Say It With Georges Auric”’, 138–41, 43.


50 A script for the film, reconstructed from viewings has been published: René Clair, *À Nous la Liberté et entracte*.


52 Noel Burch, ‘On the Structural Use of Sound’, in Weis and Belton, eds., *Film Sound*, 200–09, 266.


57 I have located no other written work by Elliott, despite a search of likely periodicals (*Cinema Quarterly, World Film News, Cine Technician*). Biographical information on him is sparse; he had started in radio, is said to have gained a breadth of outlook on film sound from his work on post-synchronising and adapting
English and American films into other languages, had worked abroad and, by the time of the book’s publication, was in charge of the production recording department of British Acoustic Films; Rotha, foreword to Elliott, *Sound Recording for Films*, vi.; Anon. ‘Sound Recording for Films (review)’. *World Film News* 2, no. 9 (December 1937): 39.


The most prominent ‘machine’ film of the previous year (1936) was undoubtedly William Cameron Menzies’s film of H.G. Wells’s *Things to Come*. Is this a candidate for the laborious use of ‘machine music’? Certainly Kurt London criticised Arthur Bliss’s symphonic style in the film’s score: ‘his orchestra, a big symphony orchestra, has not yet managed to free itself from the symphonic tradition. But the microphone is indeed a problem which even the most prominent musicians have to solve for themselves in practice. In future scores Bliss too will no doubt revise his style’; London, 217–18. See John Huntley, *British Film Music*, 39–40 for an ambivalent account.