CINEMATIC POLYPHONY IN LUCRECIA MARTEL'S CINEMA

THE MUSICALITY OF NARRATIVE FILM IN 'THE HEADLESS WOMAN'

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview on the concept of musicality in fiction cinema language, understanding the comparative analysis of both art forms and considering cinema as a potentially musical construction. Furthermore, the examination of polyphonic musical textures and its methodical application in the formal analysis of Lucrecia Martel's cinema (namely in her 2007 film *The Headless Woman*) provides a new perspective on the aesthetical values of the Argentinean filmmaker's work with sound and image, which unveils other forms of assuming fiction film narration.

Introduction

It is often conceived that cinema is a predominant visual art, and even in the regular argot of moviegoers the verb "watch" is widely used to describe the action of experiencing a film. Already enough has been said regarding the dominance of image creation-perception and the undervalued potential of sound design, focusing the discussion on digging in the visual capabilities of sound, and looking at the most concrete and narrative aspects of sound in film creation. However, not much has been said about the sound, sonic or musical aspects of film-image creation, and yet it is undeniable the musical formality that is inherent in cinema. Due to micro and macro structural properties of film, both in sound and image, such as rhythm, time and movement, its similarity with music composition is an area of film studies and comparative arts analysis that has been wandering since the first decades of the 20th century. One of the purposes of this paper is to add some considerations about the conception of cinema as a musical form, experiencing it not only as a visual and sound arrangement, but also (paraphrasing Germaine Dulac's *Visual Symphony*) as some sort of music for the eyes.

These comparative studies between formalities in music and film should not be intended as determining a specific way of composing music in filmic terms,

neither to structure a film as if it were a particular musical structure, because this argument is highly debatable due to the immense amount of formal possibilities both in film and in music. If we consider the vast amount of aesthetical evolutions and variations that film has had, or the even greater developments in the history of music composition, it will not be difficult to understand that both arts have their own formal paths and that no specific model can be applied in an absolute manner to the other art. Nevertheless, it is quite helpful to notice the cases of similarities in both forms, and probably due to the youth of cinema in art history, and its intricate relationships with other arts such as theatre, photography and literature, it results refreshing and truthful to think of cinema in musical terms. One of the main reasons to pose attention to this kind of comparative studies is the fact that cinema industry has excessively relied on formal rules from storytelling and word-based art forms where the main objective is to tell a story through dialogues and human actions; but forgetting almost completely other features absolutely natural to the birth of cinema: moving images, sound design, music, colour, light, rhythm. If we consider these other dimensions of film conception using music as background for understanding its construction, we might find a huge valuable set of tools and characteristics that open up the possibilities of cinema storytelling,

sensations, emotions, thoughts and so on.

One of these strategies to conceive musicality in film creation could be the adoption of analogue concepts in musicology and successfully transpose them, in order to come up with audio-visual tools that cannot otherwise be envisioned solely in the process of screenwriting. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the notion of *musical polyphony* applied to the film language in the films by the Argentinian filmmaker Lucrecia Martel, whose works pose an important vision on both visual thinking and sound design towards a clearly cinematic storytelling beyond the mere actions/dialogues pattern. By considering musical polyphonic configurations in micro and macro levels of her films, both in sound and image conception, we might uncover an important dimension of her creative process and some keys to the understanding of her narrative and socio-political ideas.

Lucrecia Martel's filmography, which becomes part of the so-called 'Nuevo Cine Argentino' (New Argentinean Cinema), stands out by her profound interaction of image and sound, and has been used as an example of how sound can have supremacy or equally narrative value in film language. Her stories always involve multiple characters and female protagonists, and are often dealing with family deconstruction, social clashes

and femininity in Argentinean society. The polyphonic realm of her film language could be easily noticed in the way the soundscapes are treated as a choral symphony of dialogues, ambiences and noises that interact and merge with each other simultaneously; but moreover, this polyphonic aspect can be taken beyond the sonic world into the relation of sound and image in every scene, the multi-layered imagery of her shots, and at a greater scale to the way storylines, characters, spaces, symbols interact in the big structural level. Finally, polyphonic characteristics can be deduced from the way Martel envisions the screenwriting and the socio-political dimensions of the themes her films deal with. I will focus mainly on her latest film "The Headless Woman" (2008), whose narrative departs from the intimate level of her protagonist, to the complexity of the family she belongs to, and in a bolder level of analysis, to the encounter of two social statuses in the northern region of Argentina, which paradoxically becomes also a simultaneous chant of voices. However, polyphony and musicality as such will remain always the main path to discover these different dimensions of her cinematic world from a purely formal methodology.

The first part of this paper will make a brief attempt to grasp the concept of *musicality in fiction film creation*, supported by previous thoughts and researches from some theorists and thinkers of film

studies and comparative arts, trying to set a less unstable ground for the understanding of this particular proposal. Next part will focus deeper into the notion of *polyphony*, both in broader general terms as well as in musical and visual terms, aiming at reaching an idea of polyphony in cinema language. Subsequent parts will delve into the specifics of the work of Lucrecia Martel, applying the methodologies from previous parts in order to analyse her creative process, offering at first a brief analysis of her work and then emphasising in the film 'The Headless Woman' as case study and exemplarity for the notion of polyphonic forms in cinema conception.

Part I. Musicality in fiction film: Music for the eyes

Pure cinema
If our thought process for understanding the film language departs from the somehow romantic idea of 'the essence of cinema', we should ask ourselves about the absolute inherent properties of cinema as a medium. Although cinema shares some qualities with other art forms, it is image in movement accompanied by sound what lies at the very core of filmmaking with all the consequences that this carries, such as the juxtaposition of images through editing, the inexorable relation of image and sound as they play simultaneously, and the affection that cinema generates as a window to 'another life', 'another

reality' that breathes and displays itself as tangible only while the movie is being projected on screen.

This process of thinking an art form resembles to a certain extent the thoughts of Wassily Kandinsky, whose approach to painting tried to be as pure as possible to the visual medium as such. Many avant-garde artists from the beginning of the 20th century were in the search for 'absolute' languages that could be ideal and spiritual, and not being at the service of second purposes by the representation of other realities or appearances. Kandinsky considered that one of the keys to this theoretical approach was the study of the language of music, which he considered would be the ultimate spiritual and purest art form, the one that can convey emotions, ideas and sensations without the need to make use of any elements that belong to the concrete world or from the other arts. His ideas about colours, rhythm, lines, shapes and the musicality in painting is an important background to consider, due to the fact that his art abandoned the intended mimesis of a reality, and focused in an extremely formal way of exploration on the intrinsic qualities of visual arts (Kandinsky, 1912).

One of the main reasons why Kandinsky was interested in the language of music was the fact the sound perception in music is not a representation of any visual, written or spoken language, thus

liberated from any prejudice or connection with the concrete universe; when we listen to music, we do not see objects, places or people, we do not listen to words or stories, and yet we can feel a huge array of sensations, emotions, tensions, reliefs, movements, spaces, all of it with only the composition of sounds, notes, rhythms and patterns. For Kandinsky this was the simplest and purest connection of an art medium with the human emotion, no intermediates of any kind, just abstract sounds that provoke the deepest effects on human intellect.

Later, other artists such as Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and particularly Germaine Dulac brought these approaches to the realm of cinematic language. The fact that cinema is the only visual art that has the privilege of using time and movement, they though it could have the potential to achieve this absolute *purity* of language and be even closer to music than painting. Their experimentation led to the creation of several abstract films where the study of musical structures, patterns and forms, generated a new array of aesthetical possibilities for cinema.

Henri Chomette was the first one to use the term "pure cinema" when he declared:

"The cinema is not limited to the representative mode. It can create, and

has already created a sort of rhythm. Thanks to this rhythm the cinema can draw fresh strength from itself which, forgoing the logic of facts and the reality of objects, may beget a series of unknown visions, inconceivable outside the union of lens and film. Intrinsic cinema, or if you prefer, pure cinema — because it is separated from every other element, whether dramatic or documentary"[1] (Beyle & d'Hugues, 1999, p.33). It is important to notice the use of the word *rhythm*, which of course refers implicitly to the musical notion. These artists were able to view moving image in a completely different way, and draw attention to the intrinsic and still unexplored possibilities of the film medium as such. However, one of their concerns was not to fall into a chaotic and unsystematic methodology where their films ended up in an eclectic, impulsive and selfish formula, and this is where music as a formal example was the best model to take into consideration. Music provided their works with the creative freedom, spirituality and truthfulness with the film medium, but at the same time it proposed strict rules for composition that should not be disregarded. Applying these rules to the film image creation is what interests us the most in the search for a cinema musicality.

For instance, Viking Eggeling developed a theory around the concept of *generalbass,* which in musical terms refers to a constant uninterrupted bass sound

that functions as a ground and fundamental constructive element on top of which other sounds would develop their melodies. He applied this notion to the creation of moving images, trying to find the basic elements, forms, shapes, colours, and movements that would work as the *visual generalbass.* It is not difficult to understand why most of these filmmakers found their ideas to work better in the field of animation and the extremely abstract experimental filmmaking. On top of that, most of their films were titled after musical terms: *fugue, opus, orchestra, counterpoint, symphony*, and so on.

About his film *Rhythm 21,* filmmaker Hans Richter affirmed: "The film gives memory nothing to hang on. At the mercy of 'feeling', reduced to going with the rhythm according to the successive rise and fall of the breath and the heartbeat, we are given a sense of what feeling and perceiving really is: a process – movement. This 'movement' with its own organic structure is not tied to the power of association (sunsets, funerals), nor to emotions of pity (match-selling girl, betrayed love), nor indeed to 'content' at all, but follows instead its own inevitable mechanical laws"[2] (Graf & Scheunemann, 2007, p.13).

French filmmaker Germaine Dulac developed a huge amount of film works in a similar quest for a pure or absolute cinema, and she was also highly

influenced by music. However, she believed that this abstract aspect of pure cinema was not necessarily found only in animation or in the mere reproduction of shapes and lines, her works demonstrated how the observation of reality, places, objects and human figures can carry as much musicality and rhythm as the abstract animated films. Some of her experimental films dealt with dancers, movement and rhythm:

"I evoke a dancer? A woman? No. A line bounding to harmonious rhythms. I evoke, on the veils, a luminous projection! Precise matter? No. Fluid rhythms. [...] Harmony of light. Lines and surfaces evolving at length according to the logic of their forms and stripped of all meanings that are too human to better elevate itself towards the abstraction of sentiments leaving more space for sensations and dreams: an integral cinema."[3] (Graf & Scheunemann, 2007, p.128) The importance of her legacy might lie in the fact that her approach to a *Visual Symphony,* as she called it, can be conceived in the usual images of narrative filmmaking: human characters interacting, movement in real places, locations, light and shadow interacting with objects and bodies. "The integral film that we are all dreaming of composing is a visual symphony made of rhythmic images, which only the sensation of an artist can coordinate and cast onto the screen... There is the symphony, pure music. Why wouldn't the cinema also have its own

symphony?"[4] (Williams, 2014, p.141). Nevertheless, is important to notice her reluctant position to delve into conservative narrative cinema, and how some of her films are still considered more in the realm of experimental film than as conventional fiction cinema.

"Dulac viewed each shot as a 'no-tation,' having a value similar to a musical note, yet representing a specific concept or ideal, which she subsequently juxtaposed" (Williams, 2014, p.129). The notion of shots as musical notes provides us with a different perspective regarding the thinking of cinema language and montage, not that it would redefine completely the conception of editing, as we can find similar analogue ideas in Eisenstein's theories, but it does pose a strong belief towards assuming the inner and outer rhythm of the moving images with the clarity and sensibility as in a musical piece.

For instance, the basic and classical *tonal form* in music composition, which consists of a referential note or harmony (often called as *tonic*) upon which other notes form the melody, can be compared to the dramatic curve of a film story. In music, the notes that place themselves further away from the *tonic* develop a harmonic tension whose increasing progress seeks to be resolved once the melody comes back to the *tonic.* Similar structures of tension and release can be found in either the

development of a scene dramatic tension in shots, or even in the crescendo of a dramatic conflict that must find a climax/resolution in the overall scope of a film narrative.

Rhythm, Movement and Time

The subsequent references to the formal relation of film and music are mostly framed in the usage of music composition as a part of the soundtrack of films: the relations between the music we hear and the images we see regarding storytelling, conceptual, emotional or stylistic objectives, but not extensively about the art of cinema as music. However, similar concepts have been addressed in the theories of montage, sound editing and the composition of movement inside the shot.

Film theorist Noël Burch has contributed important elements to the considerations of film's musical potential in his book "Theory of Film Practice", although with some discretion on whether it is accurate to fully apply musical patterns and structures into film creation. However, he considered the importance of thinking other aspects of the filmic formality rather than the oversaturated attention to story, plot and screenwriting: "The contemporary film narrative is gradually liberating itself from the constraints of the literary or pseudo-literary forms that played a large part in bringing about the "zero point of cinematic

style" that reigned supreme during the 1930's and 1940's and still remains in a position of some strength today. It is only through systematic and thorough exploration of the structural possibilities inherent in the cinematic parameters I have been describing that film will be liberated from the old narrative forms and develop new "open" forms that will have more in common with the formal strategies of post-Debussyian music than with those of the pre-Joycean novel". (Burch, 1969, p.15)

Moreover, Danijela Kulezic-Wilson proposes three aspects of cinema language that can be genuinely compared with musical notions, suggesting that the musicality of narrative film finds its roots in considering the vital role of *rhythm*, *movement* (*film kines*) and *time.* These considerations open up a window to analyse very methodically every single aspect of filmmaking, from the micro details of composition inside the shot to the macro structural considerations of patterns and rhythm in the whole film. "The analogy between music and film does not rely solely on the comparison of common parameters such as time and rhythm but also on the use of similar structural devices like repetition and patterning". (Kulezic-Wilson, 2015, p. 72)

Rhythmic patterns are found in nature, animal life, physics, human body functions, the behaviour of planets and so on. What music brings to the concept of rhythm is a sense of organization and designing, due to the fact that in musical terms rhythm is expressed as patterns repeated in time with measured accents that highlight their structure and gives us the sense of 'cadence'. For Bürch, the notion of musical rhythm in film is highly debatable due to the fact that cinema rhythm is not only the repetition of shots at a certain duration, but that it is affected by a huge array of other variables implicit in the film form (Burch, 1969, p.67). Kulezic-Wilson, on the same topic, considering rhythm and the duration of shots but from a more optimistic point of view, argues that "the aspect of duration would not only include the measure of length but would have to consider the influence of the spatial/visual elements on the perception of temporality. Depending on the content, composition, framing, camera movement of the shot and its 'density', two shots of the same length might be perceived as being different in duration" (Kulezic-Wilson, 2015, p. 38).

Rhythm in film creation can be then perceived in micro and macro scales, resembling both the concepts of chronometric time, integral time and structural rhythm in a musical work. Musical terms can be applied to all of these concepts of rhythm, and most of these patterns obey to a rather musical notion than a literary one.

Time, apart from being the soul to define rhythm and its patterns, is undoubtedly one of the main aspects that make cinema stand out from other arts. Quoting in general terms the ideas of Tarkovsky, the art of cinema might be the art of *sculpting in time*, the unique concept that differentiates film from photography, painting, and even literature and theatre if we really consider the true philosophy behind capturing movement, reproducing it by manipulating time, and its effects on the emotional and psychological perception. Time is also the key aspect of music, the ground where music finds a real shape, and the element that is subjectively transformed when music shapes time with sounds. Moreover, both art forms are perceived in a delimited amount of time, where time itself is manipulated to affect the spectators' reaction.

"Time in both music and film is linear and at the same time cyclical, both in its ability to use repetition as a formal device and in the fact that it can be performed again and again. It also displays discontinuity and multilayeredness, mirroring the shift of our focus from the reliability of absolute time to multidimensional subjective temporality. (Kulezic-Wilson, 2015, p. 106)

Musical score & film score

Taking into account this brief scope on the aesthetical and formal aspects that

film and music share, and the new possibilities that the apprehension of cinema in musical terms might offer, the planning and understanding of cinema creation seems to be lacking an important segment of storytelling potential if we only look at the screenplay as the ultimate guide for film construction. Although some screenwriters might argue the versatility of written language to convey the most abstract ideas of filmmaking (sound design, type of shots or even montage and rhythm notes embedded in the text), or that the envision of a film audio-visual form-style is the responsibility of a later directorial process while the script only serves as a guide to the narration of the story, it feels imperative the need to consider more rigorous attempts to envision and organize a film project in a way that fully comprehends the true potential of its formal parts.

Though several strategies haven been created and officially validated by the moviemaking industry as useful tools to envision the true form of a film's visuals and sounds (director's notes, storyboards, animatics, mood boards, mood reels, camera tests), for the purposes of our musical investigation on filmmaking I would like to consider at least the imaginary contemplation of a *filmic full score* as an analogue form of the *musical full score*, a paper widely used in the composition and production of musical works which include a scope of all the instruments of an orchestra aligned in

terms of time, in addition to the other guidelines of the *sheet music* (tempo, melody, harmonic rules, silences, repetitions, cadence, etc. – see Fig.1), not with the pretention of suggesting the

standardization of such a tool in the filmmaking process, which I consider should be left free to each creator's working methods, but with the purpose of approaching a more truthful sense of

Fig 1. Example of a Musical Full Score for several instruments

a simultaneous, organic, comprehensive and possibly 'polyphonic' way of thinking the use of film language.[5]

The idea of an imaginary *filmic full score* should not represent a divorce from the screenplay, but rather a complementary tool to envision the full potential of a fiction film narration. As Bazin argued, while considering the notions of *pure cinema*, film cannot and should not sever its links with literature and theatre. His idea of '*pure cinema*' was deeply linked with narrative filmmaking. For him, cinema was a tool to tell stories that should

be open to external influences from other media (Bazin, 1967, p.60-61).

As an analogue example of comparative arts studies, Nicolas Marty's article *Deleuze, Cinema and Acousmatic Music (or What If Music Weren't an Art of Time?)* on the relations between filmic movement, time and space and their translation into musical composition notions, proposes relevant questions regarding the visual aspects of film and how to imagine their presence in music. Marty argues that "unlike sculpture or architecture, music is not constituted

of physical objects, so it could not be an art of space" (Marty, 2016), but as he develops his arguments in the defence of the ability of music and sound to recreate spaces in the spectator's mind, he ends up stating that "one piece of music could be a single space, or it could be developed as a succession of spaces, establishing virtual relations between special forms, movements, actual relations, potential relations and the interweaving of time and space" (Marty, 2016). Finally, he ends up proposing several graphics and figures to explain the spatiality and the movement generated by some acousmatic music pieces (see Fig. 2).
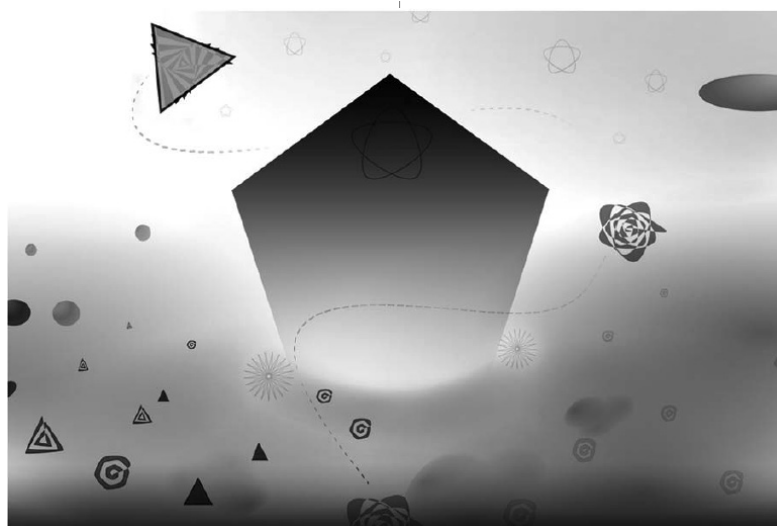
Without delving too much into the specificities of this visual representation of music, what interests us here is the search for a different configuration of creative processes organisation. This attempt to grasp qualities that are not upfront inherent to the language of music could be an analogue to an idea of a *filmic full score* in order to represent or imagine the multi-layered and simultaneously delivery of film's components: plot, dialogues, colours, sounds, rhythm, time, editing, internal shot movements, camera movements, music, etc.[6] An attempt like this would offer a much more comprehensive and honest analysis of the full potential of cinema language, and it could be nurtured from musical concepts to strengthen its expressive and compositional potential.

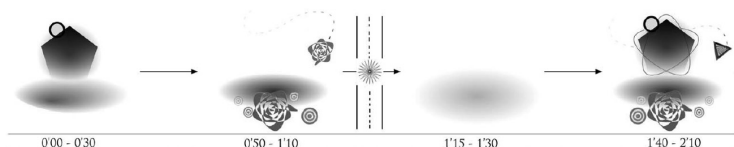| 0'00 - 0'30 | 0'50 - 1'10 | 1'15 - 1'30 | 1'40 - 2'10 |

Fig 2a. Visual representations on Nicolas Marty's ideas of musical spatiality and movement

Fig 2b. Visual representations on Nicolas Marty's ideas of musical spatiality and movement

"For, while there are in fact general analogies between the dialectics of serial music and those of film, there is also a fundamental difference: the fact that these cinematic dialectics cannot be expressed or written down in purely arithmetical terms as musical structures ultimately can be." (Burch, 1969, p. 52)

The musicality in fiction film language is undoubtedly a characteristic that can be found in the most molecular and essential aspects of cinema art form. To have a better understanding of the musical potential of film we must get rid of all the parameters that have been added to the film medium concerning storytelling and plot unfolding, and only focus our attention to the very vital signs of film existence: time, rhythm, movement, images and sounds. Once the evident musical nature of film is unveiled we could use those tools to improve and strengthen our conception/perception of film narrative, realizing the true capabilities of cinema beyond dialogues and explanatory theatrical actions.

Part II. Film Polyphony

Music and sound polyphony

In musical terms, polyphony is a concept to describe one of a series of musical textures where the construction of the composition is made of multiple layers and melodic voices. Texture is defined as a musical characteristic that encompasses the general feeling of how melody, harmony and rhythm are intertwined in a musical piece. A musical texture would often attempt to describe the complexity of the multiple layers and the way they relate and complement with each other. It is common to hear concepts such as *thick, light, dense, thin, wide* or *narrow* to describe the texture of a musical piece, namely the complexity of the several *voices* or the range of tonalities that are pronounced simultaneously (Benward & Saker, 2009).

Apart from polyphonic, it is also possible to identify other musical textures such as monophonic, homophonic, biphonic and homorhythmic. Although musicology scholars and experts might have multiple considerations as the types, number and relevance of some of these musical textures, what interests us here is the identification of the polyphonic notion, the *choral* web of musical lines as opposed to the monophonic texture where only one instrument's melody is heard (see Fig 3 and 4).

It is noteworthy to observe from this last example of a polyphonic score (Fig .4)

how the composition starts with only two voices and as time progresses it becomes more complex and *thicker* when the other instruments join the melody, creating a particular sense of rhythm and movement. In music theory, these multiple voices acquire certain labels depending on their role inside the composition (primary melody, secondary melody, supporting melody, static support, harmonic support, etc.). Interestingly enough, there is a huge resemblance of these categories of polyphonic voices with some aspects of film narration. For instance, the relations and simultaneous development of main characters and secondary characters, as well as the multiple storylines, central and secondary images and metaphors, not to mention the hierarchy of sound and images, or the different layers of soundscapes, dialogues and music.

In terms of sound design, musical polyphonic attributes can easily be translated into the interpretation of soundscapes either as part of a film soundtrack or as pieces of sound art by their own. In this realm it is important to notice the blurry boundaries between some of the latest musical movements, such as *musique concrète, acousmatic music* or *electroacustic music*, with the aesthetics and formal tools employed

Fig 3. Example of a score for a monophonic texture

in cinema's sound design and effects. Although the melodic and harmonic singularities of these type of musical forms do not quite fit into the rules of "academic polyphony" (namely with regard to the relationship of primary, secondary melodies and rhythmic supports), the general notion of polyphonic relations between the sonic elements of the whole composition and its simultaneousness provides a clear perspective to address sound design polyphony.

If treated as music, the construction of sound design in a film can be strengthened by musical concepts such as rhythm, melodic and harmonic relations between the multiple tracks or *voices* it has, and how they are intertwined. Moreover, the very same conception of film soundtrack as the mixing and weave of multiple tracks (dialogues, ambiences,

incidental noises, music, sound effects) is the perfect groundwork for implementing polyphonic schemes. For instance, how *thick* or *dense* the musical texture of a film soundtrack is, might amplify certain expressive or dramatic elements of the film itself; Similarly, the range of sounds (not only including the volume/dynamics, but also the pitch and timbre) and their rhythmic relation to each other could set up many different sonic textures and provide important contributions to cinema storytelling.

Visual Polyphony

Considering the complexity of voices and the multiple layers involved at the core of the polyphonic concept, its translation to visual terms might seem at first as the usage of several visuals that collide and communicate with each

other. If at first we focus on the static visual art forms, it could resemble as an eclectic and somewhat *baroque* visual design where several voices of apparently equal relevance coexist in the same image[7]. Several types of images from different styles would come to mind in trying to think of a polyphonic imagery, but since our interest reside in the filmic image, we must then reconsider visual appreciations in relation with movement and time.

When the dimensions of movement, and consequently the transformation of time, are considered in the capture and projection of moving images, the multi-layered factors of an image increase by a considerable amount. Not only the filmic image is being confronted by the multiple visual elements that might coexist inside the frame, but also
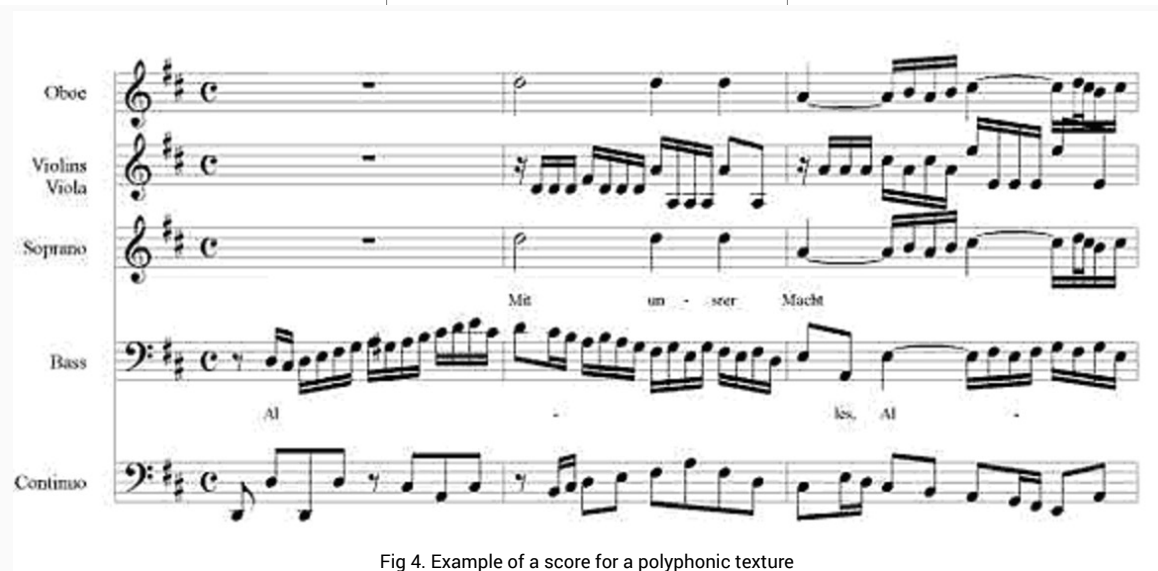

Fig 4. Example of a score for a polyphonic texture

by the consideration of each element's movement or stasis, and the latent appearance or disappearance of elements. Moreover, the complexity of this situation increases when aspects of camera movement and editing are taken into account.

Therefore, moving-image polyphony should be thought in relation with the multiple variables of visuals, both as static images and in relation with movement and time, interpreting them as the various *voices* or *instruments* of the whole visual symphony. The harmonic assemble of these elements could result in both simple and extremely complex visual systems that might resemble the polyphonic texture of a musical piece.

We might think of several examples for this kind of polyphonic cinema with arguably different aesthetical approaches and outcomes. For instance, French filmmaker Jacques Tati, whose understanding of visual architecture is remarkable, could be a good example of polyphonic imagery in film. The opening scenes of his 1967 film *Playtime*, depicts an apparently normal routine in the interior of a business building. Two nuns walk and guide us to a wide shot of one of the corridors where, after a while, a complex arrangement of movements, characters and situations unfold, creating a unique type of visual humour. Furthermore, the way image

composition, lines, squares, movement and characters are depicted, resembles the polyphonic notion, specially if we consider that none of this elements seem to gain more importance than others, they all take part as instruments coming in an out of a symphony: A seated couple look at the two nuns passing by, a rhythmical arrangement of chairs and workspaces, three people with dark clothes are positioned symmetrically against a rather clear-grey background, workers and businessmen enter and exit the frame forcing our eyes to make internal montage of situations, sporadic interactions between some of the characters, all of it happening at the same time in a simultaneous orchestration of image and movements, not to mention the rhythmical usage of sound design, where distant conversations, steps, and occasional noises play an important role in the musical feeling of the scene.

Other examples of visual polyphony can be found in the use of 'split screen' techniques, for instance Brian De Palma make use of this procedure in his suspense film *Sisters* (1973), when during a murder scene the screen is divided into two simultaneous images playing at the same time, depicting a counterpoint of situations and rhythms that increase the dramatic tension of the sequence.

Nevertheless, it was Sergei Eisenstein who most likely used the term *polyphony* for the first time to talk about cinema language. In *The Film Sense* (1942), Eisenstein introduces the concept of 'polyphonic montage' while considering his observations about editing and film language. For him, the polyphonic aspect of cinema montage opened up the imagination of a *vertical* understanding of cinema elements in the timeline, quite similar to the notion of the *musical full score* where all the instruments are

Fig 5. Opening scene from Tati's *Playtime (1967)*

considered and orchestrated simultaneously.

Eisenstein's observation on the visual elements of cinema resembles the continuous flow of musical instruments in the orchestra; each one has an uninterrupted developing line while also a relation to the other voices in the composition. "In order to do this, we will have· to draw from our silent film experience an example of polyphonic montage, where shot is linked to shot not merely through one indication-movement, or light values, or stage in the exposition of the plot, or the like - but through a simultaneous advance of a multiple series of lines, each maintaining an independent compositional course and each contributing to the total compositional course of the sequence." (Eisenstein, 1942, p. 75)

Danijela Kulezic-Wilson analyses Eisenstein's film *The Old and the New* (1934)

in relation to his use of polyphonic montage, highlighting that not only the polyphonic aspect of his cinema is reduced to the formality of the images but also to the complexity of its conceptual and emotional effects, an attribute of polyphonic film language that will also be seen in Lucrecia Martel's films: "For Eisenstein, polyphonic montage is a means of combining constructive elements of a composition's whole, not only those that are part of the image but also conceptual and affective ones. For instance, in the 'procession sequence' in his film *The Old and the New* (1934) he identifies polyphonic 'lines of the heat', 'line of growing ecstasy', lines of male and female voices (the faces of male and female singers), the lines of those who are kneeling along with the lines of those who are crawling. In this, 'the general course of the montage was an uninterrupted interweaving of these diverse themes into one unified movement.

Each montage-piece had a double responsibility – to build the total line as well as to continue the movement within each of the contributory themes" (Kulezic-Wilson, 2015, p. 186-187).

Polyphonic montage in Eisenstein terms has a relevant outcome for the purposes of studying the musicality of film. In addition, its vertical understanding of cinema produced what could resemble a *musical full score* (see Fig. 7). In this graphic representation, film composition is represented in relation to time. Not only duration of shots are taken into account here, but also composition, sound, music and the internal rhythm of the moving images.

What is remarkable from his considerations on film polyphony is that he initially assumed this notion in silent films, only considering the visual multiple layers of montage (both inside the shot and in between shots). He predicted also the subsequent enrichment of polyphonic montage when sound dimension is added to cinema language (Eisenstein, 1942, p. 77-78). Therefore, we could enrich the polyphonic concept by adding the soundscapes and its profound musical properties (as discussed in previous paragraphs). In an attempt to grasp true film language, not only image should be taken into consideration while devising the formality of its creation, also sound should play an important role. Since the attributes of film sound are much more

Fig 6. Usage of split screen in a scene from De Palma's *Sisters (1973)*

similar in form to the ones in music, the relation of sound and image and its appropriate blending into the orchestration of a polyphonic cinema would deliver a comprehensive ground for unfolding cinema's true musicality.

Part III. Lucrecia Martel's cinema

Originally from Salta, a city from the northern region of Argentina, Lucrecia Martel's first feature film *La Ciénaga* (2001) got a considerable amount of recognition both in Latin America and in international scenarios due to her unique cinematic style and the new approach her films gave to themes of Argentinean society, family and gender. Some film critics identified her as one of the most outstanding representatives of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* (*New Argentinean Cinema* movement). Her filmography so far,

apart from several short films and TV works, includes only three feature films: *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp, 2001*), *La Niña Santa* (*The Holy Girl, 2004*) and *La Mujer Sin Cabeza* (*The Headless Woman, 2007*). However not so prolific, the impact of her cinema deserves huge recognition both in the Latin American context and in the international history of cinema language.

The definition of her cinema as part of the so-called New Argentinean Cinema not only responds to a historical moment, but also to the novelty in the observation of strange fictive realities, and the subtle uncovering of micro and macro experiences in the Argentinean society. The New Argentinean Cinema is a label to group a number of Argentinean films that were created mostly during the decade of the 90's and the early years of the 2000's, whose creative and

social impact generated a sense of new perspective on the intimate but also cultural and political issues of this specific Latin American context.

It has been argued that this movement proposed a sense of filmic *minimalism*, a sort of intimate narrative, which focuses on the observation and the life of real Argentinean people and their everyday lives, but form which an awareness of the sociological oddities of the country's situation arises. We might claim that it is a type of cinema where the Latin American political, cultural and social issues are planted in the hidden heart of modest, simple, honest and even poetic film stories. Other issues arise on the lecture of *Argentinean New Cinema* such as identity, gender in society, the deconstruction of family and the clash of social statuses.
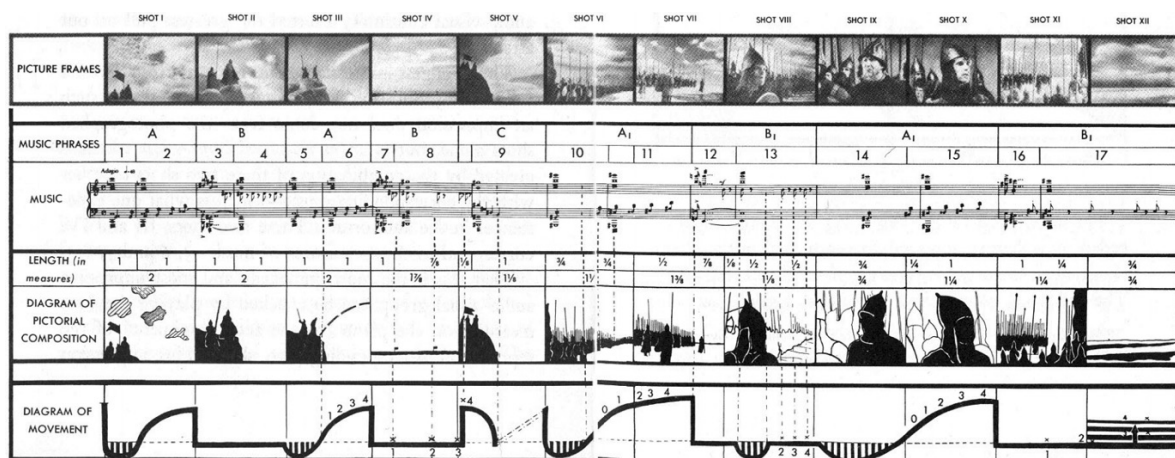

Fig 7. Eisenstein graphic representation of *polyphonic montage*

However, it is quite difficult to grasp a true bulletproof definition of the New Argentinean Cinema of the 90's, and even Lucrecia Martel is the first one to argue and refute the allegedly socio-political interpretations of her own films made by a huge amount of critics, arguing that her cinema is a simple and personal observation of situations, characters and stories from the world that surrounds her. What seems to be an undeniable fact of this group of films is the search of identity both in the filmmakers, their characters and also in the spectators.

Martel's films are charged with both a deep understanding of storytelling, character's development and an exceptional filmic style that foster the equal use of visual and sonic tools to support the narration, but also to take us in a strange and yet organic and extremely honest journey through the reality of her characters. Her scripts are usually highly developed but not enrolled into the usual conventions of movie screenwriting. Her characters seem to wander, and although we have glimpses of their desires and motivations, their destiny is as uncertain, anti-dramatic and surprising than it is for any person in real life. Her cinema is also composed with a sensibility to observe reality, almost like a documentary filmmaker who makes use of fake illusions to create reality, but still provoking an observation on people, manners, places, habits, situations and intimacy. In her films, the apparently

natural and realistic sound acquires a high relevance in terms of mood and storytelling depiction.

The general atmosphere of Martel's films seems to originate from a modest observation of a realistic universe, framed in a concrete geographical and social context, but it later acquires a certain strangeness, somehow we realize that in the complexity of this organic universe something is wrong, either we presence the deconstruction of a micro-society or the intricate intimacy of a character's psychology. Their characters' and conflicts ask for a climax, the fiction universe seems to be about to explode or collapse at any moment. Quite accurately film scholar Dorian Lugo-Bertrán describes this constitutive strangeness when he argues that "as a matter of fact, 'strange' is one of the signifiers that surfaces more often by critics to describe Martel's films. With three feature films to her credit, this director's production does little, according to the general opinion of critics, to present a

'strong story-line'; to explain or justify fully her characters' motivations and liminalities, or even to expound 'great truth' upon narrative conclusion" (Gallagher, Editor, 2012, p. 33-34).

Nevertheless, Martel herself disagrees with most of the filmic and socio-cultural elucidations that scholars and critics have made of her films. She does not consider that her cinema is intended as a mechanism of political criticism of Argentinean reality, neither as portray of social issues of the region she was born in, or as a feminist manifesto about the role of women in cinema or in Latin American society in general. She believes in her cinema in a more simplistic way, trying to runaway from nationalisms and political implications, seeking for new ways to tell stories and the micro realities of her imagination and the places she inhabits. In Martel's own words: "For me *folklore* [refering to the act portraying social, cultural, exotic and typical attributes of a specific country/community in arts] has been always

Fig 8. Shot from the first sequence of *The Headless Woman* (2007)

an useless category, if not a dangerous one. What can be found there seems to be condemned to repetition and unhealthy conversation. As if the expressions of humanity should have history records in order to be valuable. And I would say, as a rather provocative substitution, that I prefer the *trip* than the *folk*. The journey, the adventure, instead of the affirmation of "the ours". There is way too much "my land" in the *zambas[8]*" (La Gaceta, Salta, 2016)[9].

Perhaps an interesting point of view on Martel's films would be the one coming from external perspective, since it is very arguable that the intend to characterize her cinema is highly marked by a national perspective in relation to the socio-cultural and political aspects of Argentinean cinema. It is very interesting to notice how film critic Mark Cousins briefly attempts to describe Martel's films in his series *Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011) regarding *The Headless Woman*: "Argentina's films in the new millennium boldly confronted reality too… [Describing one of the firsts scenes of the film] Usually car accidents in movies are done with fast editing. Here, there is none… Static camera, shallow focus… A tense, tragic, mysterious moment that gives the film its tone… Then she is out of focus, headless (see Fig. 8). A woman who has lost her head. Veronica's isolation is brilliantly shown in this haunting, unglossy movie, one of the best ever made in South America."[10] It

is interesting to consider these observations because Cousins starts talking about the 'confrontation of reality', and ends up declaring the tense and mysterious aspect of the film, in addition to his focus towards the intimate narration of the protagonist's isolation. Lucrecia Martel's cinema seems to have a vast array of viewpoints from where film language could explore the truth of her films, both in the Latin American society context, in the exploration of filmic realities, and also in the intimate and private level of their characters psychologies.

Musicality in Lucrecia Martel's films

One of the singular aspects of Martel's films when tackling the study of its musicality is precisely the absence of non-diegetic music, and yet the few but very precise moments of diegetic music confirm her sensibility for a musical understanding of filmmaking. Moreover, the musicality is present everywhere, both in visual and sonic realms in her films.

One of the most musical elements of her films is the use of dialogues, which apart from fulfilling the habitual mission of information delivery and plot development, obtains through acting, mise-en-scène, and editing, a distinctive melodic and rhythmic attribute. In this topic we should also value her choice of naturalistic and organic dialogue deliveries,

which make use of the musicality embedded in Spanish language, and also of the accent and the specificities of the speech habits in the region of Salta. Regarding the musical quality of her film's characters Lucrecia Martel says: "That is the key. First, because we are musical animals/instruments, we produce sounds with a huge array of modulations… I think that is an extraordinary thing. Furthermore, speech has this double capability to be articulated as language and sound. And in the realm of being sound, between breathing, rhythm, air, tones, volume, high and low pitches, there is processes… With sound you can create things, effects. Not only with senses… For me, all the structures of orality seem quite close when I try to think the structures of the audio-visual tale. Things like drifting, slowing down, the repetition, forcing a topic, the unintelligible, the return to a topic"[11]. Of course when Martel mentions *drifting*, *forcing* or *returning to a topic*, *slowing down* and so on, she is indeed talking about musical qualities of the speech and the way they can be achieved in cinema, and these properties are intrinsically related with rhythm.

In Martel's films rhythm unfolds from an organic method of actors' performances, where the rather modest composition of shots carry us to a state of uncertainty. Her films are not recognized for extravagant uses of fast editing or visual effects to carry on the

rhythmic patterns, but from the observation of a reality that nonetheless is absolutely constructed from the fictional paradigms. In *La Ciénaga,* the very same geographical setting of the film accounts for big part of its rhythmical effects. The backdrop of a countryside landscape with a visibly hot and humid environment, and the visual references to the swamp and the rain are projected onto the film both in the internal rhythm of the scenes as well as in the overall feeling of the movie. The film tells the story of a relatively upper class family and its deconstruction; its decadence is evident through the depiction of habitual scenes inside the house. After being exposed to it, we feel the somnolence and the dragged tempo at which life feels almost static inside the family house. As well as rhythm in musical terms, which is determined by patterns and variations, in *La Ciénaga* the drowsiness of its character's life is contrasted with some sequences of fast movement and vivid actions, bursts of juvenile life usually represented by the younger generations of the family: A group of girls run in the city streets, being chased by their friends who hold water-filled balloons in their hands: the rhythmic sound of the city, the visual complexity of cars and people, the laughing, fast camera panning and short duration of shots to narrate this infantile game[12]. It all resembles a musical piece with long melancholic sounds that is interrupted with sparse appearances of dynamic

phrases to heighten the tension that lies under the rest of the composition. Time is manipulated to its most expressive extents, as in the subjective feeling of musical tempo, rhythm and dynamics, the heavy air breathing of *La Ciénaga* accounts for multiple interpretations of the passage of time: Are the scenes long or is it just the feeling of stasis and decadence? How much time is narrated along the film and how is our relation with its temporality?

Musical temporality and rhythm are also used as cinematic tools towards the end sequence of *La Ciénaga.* A kid, eager to satisfy his curiosity about a dog (whose presence we only explain by the sound it produces) on the other side of a yard's wall, climbs a ladder and accidentally falls on the floor. Before this scene the film has been prominently filled with chattering and multiple characters' choreographies, in a complex and almost cacophonic mise-en-scène. After this scene we only see empty static frames of the house, the rhythm and the visual tempo of the film has changed. It resembles to a coda in a musical composition. Silence and stasis strengthen the overall absorption of the story. The same characters we have seen talking before now are covered by silence.[13]

Besides the musicality of montage and the image composition in Martel's films, it is notable the notion of musical landscapes in the sound editing of her works. Once

again, sound design does not present itself as an extravagant device to exploit the fictive realm of her films: it originates itself from a realistic point of view. The selective process and the "equalization" (in terms of fine-tuning of the elements of sound) of the diverse sound sources gives a sense of rhythm and provides important clues to understand the story universe.

Musical interventions in her films are not made gratuitously. *La Niña* Santa's opening credits are accompanied by a religious chant performed by a feminine voice leading up to a scene where we see a group of young girls attending catholic school. The teacher of the class is who performs the song, suddenly interrupted by the complicity of the camera with the whispering and the reckless actions of some of the girls. Here, music not only sets a pace and a sense of time to the scene, it also brings up the main themes of the film: religion, sensuality and the violation of moral rules.[14] Later on, the appearance of a strange musical instrument called Theremin, which is played by hands that never touch the instrument, accounts for a contrapuntal effect on the film's topics. The sensuality and oddity of the instrument's sound is contrasted with a situation in which the young protagonist, while listening to the music in the middle of a crowd, is sexually touched by an older man[15]. The presence of the Theremin will be recurrent and paced along the film, as if it were a discrete but powerful instrument

in the whole orchestration of the story, gaining more relevance and becoming a haunting presence that invades the privacy of the characters. In *The Headless Woman*, while Veronica drives her car in the countryside, she hits something on the road; cheerful rock-style music is being played on the radio. The music never stops. The dramatic situation of the car accident is contrasted with the on-going music inside the car. Both rhythms collide in one shot, the austere and dramatic situation of Veronica, who does not know what to do, and the cheerful music that also makes us aware of the present time unfolding. Time is explored here by the use of diegetic music, and by the colliding of visual and sound movements.[16]

The movement of bodies gains a significant poetic and musical significance in *La Niña Santa* due to the fact that is a story about 'sexual awakening'. Apart from the repetition of concept of 'the body', both in the collision of character's sensuality and in the fact that one of the characters is a doctor, some of the scenes take place in the swimming pool of the hotel (which is the main location of the story), allowing for the choreography of bodies to take place in unique level of visual melody. One of these scenes shows teenager Amalia watching Dr. Jano from a distance, the shallow depth of field focuses on her face and leaves the man out of focus. Amalia starts to whisper a sequence of prayers that is

contrasted with her shy observation of Dr. Jano's almost-naked body. This leads to a series of images where the bodies in the pool dance in a sensuous orchestration that is contrasted with the sounds of water and the religious

whispering of Amalia: fragments of his body, his neck and hair dripping water, the intrusion of Amalia's mother into the scene and the subsequent gaze from Dr. Jano, the waves on the surface of the water and the echoing of sounds in the

Fig 9. Visual and atmospheric repetition in *The Headless Woman* (2007)

atmosphere. It all sums up for a purely visual and sonic composition of the scene and its narrative implications.[17]

As for the musical concept of repetition, it is not commonly used in cinema due to the risk of over-explanation or unnecessary reiteration of information. However, in *The Headless Woman* the use of repetition has a very musical distinction, as it is not made through the repetition of the same images or through the verbal duplication of dramatic information in the story. The whole film seems to yearn for the reconstruction of the truth about the facts of Veronica's car accident: Neither she nor the spectator is sure if Veronica has run over a kid on the road or if it was just a dog. The film's scenes come back to some of the places of the unsettling incident. The atrocity of such an act as having killed a boy and then runaway haunts both Veronica's mind and the spectator's imagination. In one scene placed almost in the middle point of the film, Veronica and her family drive through the same dusty road as the one of the accident, a couple of adolescents inside the car are playing with a tennis shoe and one of them throws it over the window in a mischievous act to mock his friend. The next image resembles, as if the coming back of a tense melody, the same image as in the initial sequence, where a dusty distant shot partly reveals a lying body on the road. The car stops so that the boy can rescue his shoe and Veronica

steps out of the car clearly recalling this disturbing and blurry memory. The scene does not have any dramatic implication in the sense of plot development, but it serves as a huge emotional impact using a rather musical repetition scheme of the same visual scenario. Later on, after Veronica has confessed the situation to her husband, they both come back to the same place but this time the scene takes place at night, provoking another layer of visual repetition that operates as a variation of the same theme (see Fig. 9).

Visual and sonic polyphony in *The Headless Woman*

Considering the principles of polyphonic textures, the sound design of *The Headless Woman* has a lot to offer in the field of musicality. The already identified aural style of the director covers its most audacious potential in this film, and moreover, the dissection of the several tracks of sound interventions provides a clear view of its polyphonic nature. In this film, the merging of simultaneous dialogue lines, incidental noises, ambiences and most importantly, off-screen sound interventions compound a web of rhythmical and spontaneous polyphony that makes us think of the whole soundtrack as a piece of 'musique concrète'. Although we already have identified the nature of cinema's sound editing and mixing as a potential polyphonic structure, in this film the rhythmical,

tonal and harmonic assemble of the sound sources constitutes a perfect example of true musical polyphony.

Martel's films are already known for the use of simultaneous chattering and the intersection of dialogues in the same scene, bearing into account the complex creative skills that this kind of mise-en-scène requires not to fall into a random incoherent mass of voices. *The Headless Woman* starts with a jabber of a group of kids and their dog playing by the dusty road, the simultaneousness of their words is mixed with the barking of the dog and the sound of their feet against the ground. Subsequently a very intricate scene takes places, where the voices of several woman chatting is entangled with the babbling and laughing of their children in an organic and almost chaotic family scene. In a continuously harmonic way, the voices of the children in the first scene is continued with the voices of the children form the second scene. In this scene there is al least four human voices interacting at the same time, as well as the incidental sounds from the characters' actions. However, the almost cacophonic ambient of the scene maintains its equilibrium due to the fact that each one of these sounds is treated as a musical instrument: the interventions are rhythmical, the voices playfully blend with the kids noises, the percussion of the kid's hands tapping the windows, and finally the mixing of noises and whisperings

play as a harmonic base for the develop-ment of the main dialogues. At the end the scene comes across clearly but also aesthetically intriguing.

This kind of polyphonic texture of voices and sounds is widely used throughout the film. Its complexity not only compre-hends the musical understanding of dy-namics, tempo and timbre of the several sounds and voices, but also the knitting of character's dialogues and the impli-cation of those in their dramatic and psychological development. Mise-en-scéne is usually constructed around the simultaneous micro-scenes inside of the scene, where distinctive conversa-tions merge, diverse, collide and disap-pear. It is not difficult to understand that this kind of directorial approach requires musical skills both at the time of direct-ing actors on set, and while construct-ing the editing of image and sound.

A similar example of this sound polyph-ony, which also adds the dimension of space and movement (the spatiality created by sounds of different qualities and timbres, and the sense of dyna-mism and motion that is created only by the juxtaposition and progression of sounds/notes over time), can be experi-enced in a scene from the second half of the film where Veronica drives through one of the villages of the region looking for the route to come back home. Cam-era being placed all the time inside the car forces the perspective of sound to

a subjective hearing, which is used to enrich the musical qualities of every sound: As the car drives through we hear multiple soundscapes, whose dif-fused sounds make a counterpoint with Veronica's crystal clear voice talking on the phone. The journey takes us through indistinctive chattering, music that is heard at a distance, kids playing around, the sound of the car engine, dogs bark-ing around, all of it being experienced through the movement of the car, thus making use of crescendos and chang-ing dynamics to explore the sense of moving sounds around us.[18]

Nevertheless, cinematic polyphony in Martel's works is not limited only to the realm of sound design, visual polypho-ny and moreover, the confabulation of image and sound polyphonic elements creates what sums up for a more com-prehensive film polyphonic texture. The austere and carefully designed shots of *The Headless Woman* serve as starting point to discover the polyphonic as-pects of its visual universe. Although the film does not make use of fancy cam-era movements or extremely complex cinematography devices, the cleverness of its framing added to the simple but powerful sense of cinema montage,

Fig 10. Headless shots in *The Headless Woman* (2007)

creates the right tools to immerse us in the skin of the protagonist. Starting from the fact that some of the shots deliberately leave Veronica's head out of frame (see Fig. 10), creating a metaphoric game with the title of the movie and telling us a lot about the main character's state of mind. Similar visual tools are employed, such as the calculated choices of focus points, the spatial depth of a shot, and most importantly, the considerations on what is left inside and outside of the frame. In this film, life spills over and out of the frame and denounces the dynamics of the situations that happen off-screen. This last factor

is highly strengthened by the relation of sound and image.

Polyphonic imagery is usually found in *The Headless Woman* when the mise-en-scène makes use of multiple layers of action, opening the opportunity to construct complex image compositions in which the several image layers coexist. This technique results convenient to explore the multiplicity of actions, but also to suggest the underlying tensions that otherwise would come up-front too quickly, or be hidden on a flat *monophonic* surface. In Fig. 11 and 12 we can analyse the interwoven lines of

imagery that play simultaneously in a shot. Shapes, lines, reflections, blurriness, objects and human bodies participate in these compositions.

The interweaving of both image and sound polyphonic elements is what represents one of the most interesting features in Lucrecia Martel's films. In *The Headless Woman*, the image design is thought in terms of its dialogue with sound, the fact that out of frame, shallow depth of field, or deep space framing techniques are used is not a mere display of photographic style, but a tool to leave an open space for sound instrumentation to play a role in the whole cinematic symphony.

One of the main characteristics of polyphonic texture is that the multiple voices have little or no hierarchy patterns among themselves, as opposed to, for instance, the homophonic texture.[19] Polyphonic compositions construct both melodic and harmonic lines in a *democratic* system, where the aesthetic appreciation of music is based on the counterpoints and the multiplicity of voices that converse with each other. Likewise, in *The Headless Woman* the supremacy of visual narrative looses its power when the behaviour of the visual conception is the one of a musical instrument that forms part of a big orchestra. However, the discussion here should not be taken in favour of the narrative skills supremacy of sound design,

Fig 11a. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2007)

Fig 11b. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2007)

but in the consideration of all this elements as equal (yet with different aesthetical qualities) voices in the overall construction of cinema language.

Two aesthetically similar scenes take place in *The Headless Woman* to contribute to this polyphonic notion. The first sequence of the film ends with the

image and sound of rain pouring over the window pane of Veronica's car, as if it were a melodic continuation of this element, the next scene shows a window fully covered by rain drops while Veronica observes someone riding on a motorcycle outside. The multiple layers of the image (Veronica, rain drops, and motorcycle in movement) merge with their sounds added the off-screen voice of a woman talking. What strikes from this scene is that the whole variety of image-sound stimuli serves to highlight Veronica's isolation and melancholic state (see Fig. 13). Later, as if the repetition of a musical theme with a variation, Veronica, her sister and her niece are inside a car in motion, a similar camera angle shows Veronica and her niece divided by the front seat while outside, a girl on a motorbike rides along with them. Here, there are two simultaneous micro-scenes, the conversation between Veronica and her sister, who is out of frame (her presence is revealed through the sound), and the silent gesture-based conversation between her niece and the girl on the motorbike. Both micro-scenes develop at the same time in an astonishing but simple cinematic style (see Fig. 14).

Fig 12. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2007)

Fig 13. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2007)

Fig 14. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2007)

The polyphonic dimension of this film could be envisioned in a similar graphic as Eisenstein's polyphonic montage, or as a *film full score* (resembling the symphonic musical *full score* used by the director). A more complex level of

polyphony is achieved in the scene where Veronica and her sister meet their mother. The scene develops as the three of them watch an old homemade video of Veronica's wedding. The sound of the video is heard while the women's voices also interact and almost compose a soundtrack for the video. Camera work focuses mostly on close ups, leaving us with a sense of no-ubiquity which fits perfectly well with Veronica's emotional state. The images of the video are clearly seen only at the beginning, afterwards its presence is only perceived through the indistinctive sound of the TV. Instead, it is the women's faces what we are exposed to, and even when the TV is on the frame the depth of field privileges Veronica, leaving the video images out of focus. The multilayer qualities of this scene go beyond the simple relations of sound and image if we also consider the time implications and meta-language issues of the situation: Mother and daughters are watching a concrete representation of their individual and collective memories, the scene's expressive layers range from the sounds of the video and its image, to the timing of the scene itself with its own audio-visual layers, and moreover with the implications of the act of remembering, which at this point of the story is a quite complex task for Veronica. All of these elements coexist and sing at a certain rhythm, creating a harmonic composition of cinematic polyphony (see *The Headless Woman*, 2007, from 32:38 to 35:28).

Martel's musicality and narrative cinema

The polyphonic assemble of different formal aspects in *The Headless Woman* can be largely explored, but its most important contribution to the understating of film language is the exercise of re-thinking aesthetical terminology and compositional techniques related to the creation of image and sound. Furthermore, this polyphonic aspect of Martel's cinema can be analysed in a greater level about its implications in the actual process of storytelling of fiction film, and in the unique dramaturgy structure that Martel uses. With these considerations we would be approaching a relevant scope of the study of musicality in film, where it not only serves the superfluous desires for formality and film style creation, but also the realisation that it actually has as much potential (in some cases even more) as the thorough analysis of plots and dramatic constructions in movie making screenwriting.

In *The Headless Woman,* the multiple layers of movement, actions, images and sound address the dramatic constructions of its characters conflicts. Veronica's intimate struggle is highlighted by the way the throbbing universe that surrounds her is presented, sometimes accusing her, suffocating her, sometimes just denouncing her loneliness and the dilemma of her situation. Whenever polyphonic strategies are used in

the film's scenes, they fulfil a narrative or conceptual task: The constant murmur of a family, which feels like a living organism constantly breathing around Veronica's static and numb presence; The haunting existence of other lower class families, apparently secondary characters that interrupt the flow of Veronica's family status; The multiple levels of conversation that only draws attention to Veronica's silence, suggesting the imminence of the secrets kept inside her mind; the hidden truths that become apparent not through direct dialogues, but with the understanding of visual and sonic subtexts (in this aspect polyphony has a big role by condensing the multiplicity of information and bringing up new conceptual elements that would only come alive with the woven texture of its audio-visual voices); and the somewhat anti-climatic structure of his screenwriting, intensified by the fact that most of this multiple characters and dramatic lines continue their flow towards and over the end of the film, as if they were ethereal or eternal repetitions of melodies.

In his appreciation of polyphonic use of sound design in Lucrecia Martel's films, film scholar Dominique Russell declares that Martel's films "use of sound is almost orchestral, as polyphonic as her narratives"[20] (Russell, 2008). Although Russell's appreciation is undoubtedly accurate in terms of describing the nature of her films' soundscapes, I would

suggest to transform the sentence for the purposes of this discussion, and say that 'Lucrecia Martel's films' narrative construction is as polyphonic as the sound design of her films is.'

These last ideas takes us to consider that the polyphonic aspect of Martel's cinema could be nurtured even more if we add the *multi-layerness* of the narratives that coexist in the same story. For instance, the almost surrealistic tale that one of the characters of *La Ciénaga* tells about a dog that was considered a monstrous rat-dog; While the scene takes place next to the pool, the bodies of the young people relaxing and meditating, the other layer of narration takes places and its visual insinuations takes us from the filmic reality of the actual image-sound, towards a complete imaginary layer of suspense and strangeness.

The Headless Woman is a film that basically deals with a contrasting reality of two different social classes in the Northern region of Argentina (Salta). This aspect could be seen in the film as the disparity of upper class families that usually come from the capital or big cities, and lower class families that come from more rural and indigenous ancestry. The insinuation of Veronica hitting a lower class kid with her car and then running away represents no small complexity in the social and personal aspect of the film. Some of these truths

are constantly hidden from the spectator, and the film situates itself in a rather subjective narration of Veronica's struggling and the universe that surrounds her. The film never takes a denouncing position, neither it tries to depict evil or good intentions in regards to this clash of social structures.

The most important aspect of this social interpretation of the film relies on the assumption layers and voices that can be experienced in the filmic narration. Therefore, when image or sound make use of polyphonic structures, it usually also conveys the coexistence of both social universes in the same geography, in the same time-space. The constant presences of other characters (*lower class* workers and groups of kids) that merge into the somehow refined upper class lifestyle of Veronica make a strong impact on the emotional level of the film. It serves to enrich its cinema language, but also to portray Veronica's conflict from different points of view, as if tackling the same melodic theme with different perspectives or variations.

An even clearer example of this narrative polyphony takes places in the general analysis of *The Holy Girl*. This film is a constant surrounding of lines around the issues of sexual awakening, moral dilemmas and religious concerns. While one of its storylines depicts a teenage girl conflicted by her sexual desires and the unexpected sexual assault of an old

man, a doctor that is visiting her city; the same narrative web tells another tale, a sort of love story between her mother and the doctor. Furthermore, the film proposes several lines to tackle the same issue from different angles, that is to say as if multiple melodies of almost equal relevance develop their participation surrounding the central melodic theme: Amalia's best friend is conflicted by the sexual desire she has for her cousin, the religion teacher is being constantly challenged by the sharp questions of her students regarding the logics of god, and the appearance of sexual or sensual related elements in the film, such as the swimming pool, the Turkish bath, the medical convention, the Theremin player, and so on.

The risky but thought-provoking proposal proposed here is to assume polyphony also as a general notion that could help the understanding of narrative, conceptual and sociological implications of a film's narrative. Lucrecia Martel's decisively anti-classical methods of storytelling open the possibility to understand the structures of her scripts in musical terms, and perhaps draw from there a sense of formal harmonic composition.

Conclusion

Comparative studies in the fields of music and film could lead to better understandings of the creative potential of

each art form. In the particular case of film language, which holds an already withered link with literature and theatre, has partially sever its formal relations with other arts like music. However, a brief historic revision of experimental cinema and aesthetical studies reveals important similarities in the intrinsic aspects of both film and music: the manipulation of time, the sense of movement and the concept of rhythm accounts for a multiplicity of expressive tools that cinema could make use of. Considering the truthfulness of its visual and sonic potentials, narrative cinema can explore (and has already did so) multiple layers of its expressive, emotional and storytelling structures. It is not to forget that cinema is an art form that, due to its late birth in the history of arts, has been nurtured by aspects of other art forms, therefore it is a duty of both filmmakers and film studies researchers to explore the implications of musical formalities in the conception and perception of cinema language.

 As a case study for this dissertation, the musical qualities of Lucrecia Martel's cinema open up a new dimension for her films' analysis. It seems quite accurate to make use of complex and abstract musical concepts in the attempt to describe Martel's cinema due to the fact that her film style does not respond to classical Hollywood conventions, and moreover when considering the extremely expressive use of both sound and image design to tell her stories. Although some critics have raised awareness about her unique understanding of sound design, not much has been said regarding the undoubtedly musical properties of her cinema, which range from the compositional mixing of soundscapes, to the rhythm of the mise-en-scène, and the efficient way in which image and sound create a musical amalgam that is extremely hard to express in verbal terms.

Polyphonic texture results an accurate way to define some aspects of Martel's cinema language, specially in regard to her last film *The Headless Woman,* in which the overlapping of different sounds, images, voices, dialogues, spaces and shapes, and its simultaneous manifestation throughout the film, offers an important point of view about the responsibilities of image and sound design in the musicality of a narrative film. As in a *film full score,* the film unfolds in time in the same way as a musical symphony, revealing with rhythmic patterns, both in sound and montage, the flow of cinema storytelling in an exceptional way. Furthermore, the whole structure of the film's macro rhythm responds much more to musical configurations than to screenwriting ones: An unexpected car accident sets up a mystery and the subsequent quest for truthfulness, proposing a recurrent *coming-back* (which should be assumed as musical repetition) to the facts, times and places of the fore-mentioned accident. The film ends with a scene where Veronica, partially transformed, joins a celebration held by her upper-class family and friends at the very same hotel where she stayed the night of the accident. However, it seems that all the traces of what has happened has been erased. This cyclical pattern is much better understood under the light of musical terminology and in resemblance to the also cyclical characteristics of some musical compositions.

Finally, polyphony and other musical aspects of Martel's films could account for a better comprehension of the intimate, social, cultural and artistic pretensions that are somehow hidden beneath the surface of her cinema. Although is quite hard to define the *New Argentinean Cinema* movement that she belongs to, or the actual political and social implications of her films, the formality of her movies in terms of music sheds light on the creative reasoning behind her cinema making.

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Notes

1 Henri Chomette, as quoted in Claude Beylie and Philippe d'Hugues. T*he forgotten names of French cinema*. Editions du Cerf. Paris, 1999. P.33.

2 Hans Richter, as quoted in Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (Editors). *Avant-Garde Film*. Editions Rodopi. Amsterdam, 2007.

3 Germaince Dulac, as quoted in Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (Editors). Ibid. P. 128.

4 Germaince Dulac, as quoted in Tami Williams. *Germaine Dulac: a cinema of sensations*. University of Illinois Press. P. 128.

5 Sergei Eisenstein had already proposed this approach in his idea of vertical montage, a form to understand the simultaneousness of film elements in time.

6 A similar approach has been often used by some editors who assemble a timeline canvas/chart of simultaneous lines, notes, and images for every scene elements, using it as a tool for planning or analysing the process of montage.

7 It is interesting to consider the notion of *baroque* here, due to the fact that Renaissance and Baroque art periods are the ones mostly associated with polyphonic textures in musical composition.

8 *Zambas* refers to 'zamba salteña', a traditional music genre that belongs to the folklore of Salta, Argentina.

9 Translated from Spanish by Jerónimo Sarmiento from the interview Lucrecia Martel gave to La Gaceta Salta. Published on 8th of December 2016. Retrieved at http://www.lagacetasalta.com.ar/nota/60482/espectaculos/lagacetasalta.com.ar

10 Transcribed from Mark Cousins' voice over in the 15th episode of the series *Story of Film: An Odyssey* (Cousins, 2011) (15:12 to 17:51).

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11 Lucrecia Martel on an interview for *La Fuga Magazine*. Translated from Spanish by Jerónimo Sarmiento. Pinto Veas, I. (2015). Lucrecia Martel, *laFuga*, 17. [2017-04-12] Retrieved from: http://2016.lafuga.cl/lucrecia-martel/735

12 See La Ciénaga (The Swamp, 2001) from 08:59 to 09:38

13 See La Ciénaga (The Swamp, 2001) from 1:28:32 to 1:32:27

14 See La Niña Santa (The Holy Girl, 2004) from 00:40 to 03:58

15 See La Niña Santa (The Holy Girl, 2004) from 09:50 to 11:31

16 See La Mujer sin Cabeza (The Headless Woman, 2007) from 04:22 to 06:07

17 See La Niña Santa (The Holy Girl, 2004) from12:50 to 15:48

18 See *The Headless Woman* (2007) from 1:09:29 to 1:11:58

19 In music, the homophonic texture is the most commonly used by popular music. It does use a multiplicity of instruments at the same time, but its hierarchical structure prioritize only one main melodic voice, while the other instruments serve as harmonic or rhythmical bases.

20 As written in the issue No. 50 of Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media (2008). Retrieved from: https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/LMartelAudio/text.html

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