From Dots-and-Loops to Cut-and-Paste Arthur Lipsett's: Very Nice, Very Nice

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Michael Baker, in this close analysis, argues that it is through the rhythmic collage of the soundtrack that spectators engage, deduce, and scrutinize the thematic construct of Arthur Lipsett's experimental short film VERY NICE, VERY NICE. Furthermore, it is the juxtaposition of sound and image that outwardly communicates Lipsett's inner visions.

> I was just having fun with sound at first. One day I joined two scraps of sound together and they sounded interesting. I began collecting scraps of sound from the wastage…. It was initially a sound experiment – purely for the loving of placing one sound after another.
> **– Arthur Lipsett** on *Very Nice, Very Nice* in a press release for *A Trip Down Memory Lane*.

It could be argued that not since Norman McLaren's pioneering dots-and-loops sound experiments of the 1940s has the work of an NFB filmmaker been so profoundly informed and controlled by sound. [1] Arthur Lipsett, over the course of seven experimental films, pioneered an approach fusing sound and music that ultimately won his oeuvre a place in the canon of Canadian avant-garde film. His first film, *Very Nice, Very Nice* (1961) would open the eyes of the international filmmaking community and captivate audiences with an inventive and illuminating soundtrack.

Although most writers refer to Lipsett's short films as found footage, it would be just as appropriate to discuss *Very Nice, Very Nice* as *found sound*. The majority of the photographs that comprise the short film's imagetrack were taken by Lipsett and his NFB colleagues and not "found" at all. The soundtrack, however, was in part comprised of sound tape acquired from the snip bins of the NFB editing rooms. The remaining material was recorded by Lipsett himself on a Stellavox Candid Taperecorder between 11 July 1961 and 18 July 1961. [2] Preparing a sound editing assignment for a workshop sponsored by the NFB, Lipsett went through hundreds of hours of material before completing the sonic experiment originally entitled "Strangely Elated." [3] Enthusiastic about the results, the production committee encouraged the realization of *Very Nice, Very Nice*, establishing Lipsett as a celebrated filmmaker of the avant-garde, briefly providing him with a degree of artistic carte-blanche at the NFB, and garnering the twenty-five year old Montreal native an Academy Award nomination in 1962.

SOUND AND IMAGE RELATIONSHIPS

"In this city marches an army whose motto is – BWAA – BWAA – BWAA [the sound of a car horn blaring]." So begins Lipsett's rumination upon the unfortunate course contemporary society has launched itself upon: one he considers blinded by consumerism, controlled by shallow politics, and typified by the desperate loneliness disguised by the mobilization of essentially voiceless crowds. Comprised of hundreds of still images taken by NFB colleagues in Montreal and by Lipsett on a personal tour of New York, Paris, and London in 1960, *Very Nice, Very Nice* is image accompaniment to a soundtrack of found sounds, dialogue snippets, and fractured musical compositions initially designed

as a stand-alone sound experiment. Press notes from the NFB at the time of the film's original release allude to the importance of the highly structured system of sounds, speech, and music designed by Lipsett to lead the viewer through an abstract narrative of rising tension and release:

> The juxtaposition of such sights and sounds is by turns wryly amusing, discomforting, intriguing, startling. In the contrast between the violence of events and the trivialities of speech the filmmaker seems to be pointing up the link of concern of many people with the day's news or the emptiness of what they see and hear – emotions that seem not to rise above '*Very Nice, Very Nice*.' [4]

Conventionally, in film studies, discussions of the close marriage of sound and music as the pre-dominant agent of meaning in film are reserved for film animation (i.e. *Fantasia*, 1940), or are associated with the reductive term *visualized music*. [5] As explained by Siegfried Kracauer, the visualization of music creates, paradoxically and unexpectedly, the effect for the spectator of making music subservient to the image. Kracauer describes *visualized music* as music which "determines the selection and the rhythmic configurations of visuals that are intended to reflect the music's moods and meanings in one way or another". Kracauer goes on, "even though the music fathers the images, it is invariably overpowered by them; and instead of seeming to set the tune, as it actually does, it affects us as an accompaniment in the usual sense of the word. [6]

Michael Dancsok, in his Masters thesis, "Transcending the Documentary: The Films of Arthur Lipsett", demonstrates the conventional preference for considering sound and music as "accompaniment" to image when he discusses Lipsett's working methods. Though Dancsok acknowledges that Lipsett's soundtrack for "Strangely Elated" existed before it was used for *Very Nice, Very Nice*, he ties this practice exclusively to the realm of animation in order to privilege his discussion of Lipsett's visuals. [7] This seems disingenuous. For *Very Nice, Very Nice* it is clear, even at the level of its production, that the sound leads the images. This perceptual and analytic shift, I will argue, is key for understanding Lipsett's work.

There seem to be two distinct ways in which Lipsett's soundtrack controls the images of *Very Nice, Very Nice*. Firstly, it establishes the discursive tone of the film through a commentative relationship with the image, and as a rhythmic tool which helps 'pace' the appearance of the still photographs. Furthermore, it is through this commentative relationship and instances of parallelism that the soundtrack establishes *setting*, and situates the viewer within a specific temporal and spatial environment. Secondly, sound and music work together to indicate the political bias of the images and filmmaker. In this way, what was previously a sort of literal commentary becomes an implicit ideological address. Lipsett constructs a politically acute and ironic foundation upon which the audience engages the film as a whole while developing only the loosest of narratives.

While there is no denying its discursive thrust, the dramatic arc of *Very Nice, Very Nice* is abstracted by Lipsett's manic parade of image and sound. The project proposal Lipsett submitted to the NFB consists of a single chart-graph marking the film's rise and fall of tension. [8] "The film will start off in a somber [sic] repressive mood and build to one of great exultation and release," Lipsett writes of his proposal, "because of a way of life that is revealed and accepted by the tired and frustrated people who appear at the beginning of the film." [9] In *Very Nice, Very Nice* it is the "'Beat' element of society" that assists in the "leap of greatest intensity" that mobilizes the lonely and isolated people of the city and transforms their collective depression into an excitement and fluency of self-expression that topples hegemonic power structures. [10] This is illustrated by quickening images of children and adults rushing through city streets. An up-tempo piano score propels these stillphotographs and animates their stillness in such a way that movement, a metaphor for the rapid pace of society's change, is established.

Lipsett's specialty seems to be the structuring of sound as a fixing agent, allowing the audience to engage with the images in spite of their fleeting presence onscreen. Furthermore, it is through this audiovisual structure that Lipsett provides instructions for observing and critiquing the images. Where do our eyes go? And how do we make the jump from one disparate image to the next? "If you look back now historically he was really anticipating the world of moving images we know today, where we can flip back and forth on the TV between thirty channels," Gordon Martin, the director of the NFB's Screen Study film education program explains. "Arthur was using film in basic linear form and was still creating multiple imagery…his images and sounds would create after-images which would carry over as bridges to other sequences." [11] These "bridges" are *fundamentally* sonic.

There are four main musical themes in *Very Nice, Very*

Nice and each contributes to the animation of the images and trajectory of Lipsett's argument: a recurring drum roll that transforms into a march; the ominous pounding of tympani; a Beat-sounding jazz piece identified by Lipsett in his script as "Police plaintive music"; a rag-time piano standard that sounds as though its original source was a scratchy piece of vinyl. Kracauer, identifying *commentative music* with regards to its aesthetic functions, states:

> Parallel commentative music restates, in a language of its own, certain moods, tendencies, or meanings of the pictures it accompanies. Thus a speedy gallop illustrates a chase, while a powerful *rinforzando* reflects the imminent climax, as it unfolds on the screen. In addition to conditioning the spectator physiologically to the photographic nature of the film shots, music in this vein may also assume the cinematic function of underscoring discreetly some of their implications.

Although the tympani theme appears as a leitmotif in conjunction with the recurring image of the hydrogen bomb explosion and the launch of a rocket, the other pieces emerge in fits and starts, seemingly unrelated to any particular concept although motivated by the cadence they work collectively to create. The disjunctive aural environment of *Very Nice, Very Nice* establishes and communicates the manic nature of urban space through its aggressive juxtaposition of music, sound effects, and speech.

Lipsett's soundtrack becomes an essay on the rapid development of urban space. He argues that it is a site that separates individuals from one another and removes their voice – this concept is introduced and underscored by the sound of the car horn interrupting (perhaps even speaking for) the narrator. The "army" referred to in the film's opening statement is one of commerce and consumerism. The images alternately support and contradict the soundtrack in such a way that this sense of alienation is understood by the audience. William Wees, commenting on the associative process as it is concerned with the reception of experimental and avant-garde works explains:

> [The] more common process of association links shots conceptually, metaphorically, and thematically. As each shot contributes to a reading of the one next to it, so the accumulated readings produce thematic categories or paradigms in which most if not all of the film's images fit, no matter how unrelated their original contexts might have been. [13]

Very Nice, Very Nice opens with static shots of office buildings, all looking the same as the next. The visually striking screen composition consists of dozens of frames within frames, the windows illustrating the disconnectedness of the individuals sitting behind them. The solicitous silence is then fractured with the aforementioned blare of a car horn. Lipsett's gaze thus establishes urban space as the site of sound. Individuals and the masses come together in the city; there are few, if any, instances of people outside of an urban landscape. This site is dominated by the sounds of buzzing crowds, babies crying and women screaming, each interrupting the other and effectively silencing the collective. If Lipsett's tale of the city involves the search of the masses for a new way of life, the cluttered sonic space acts as the narrator and outward manifestation of this confused state.

With regards to the complex forms and compositional relationships created through the collage approach employed by artists such as Lipsett (i.e. cutting-and-pasting such incongruent sounds and voices together), film theorist Jean Mitry argues it is not the structure of the soundtrack that reinforces the images onscreen but rather that it operates on an entirely different level of signification which succeeds even when removed from the dialectic relationship it shares with images:

What was true for the text also holds good for music: good dialogue need not have any meaning, any logical dialectic – especially when it is divorced from the images which might give it meaning. Good film music can do without musical structure provided that its intrusion into the film at a specific moment should have a precise signification. Film music is not explanation; nor is it accompaniment; it is an element of signification (no more or less) but from which it gains all its power once associated with the other elements: images, words, and sounds. [14]

Practical support for these theoretical ideals forwarded by Kracauer and Mitry can be found in myriad examples of narrative film. A particularly interesting case is Andrei Tarkovsky, a filmmaker who has argued against, categorically, music in cinema, though in practice has been unable to successfully free himself of it: Music can be used to produce a necessary distortion of the visual material in the audience's perception, to make it heavier or light, more transparent, subtler, or, on the contrary, coarser.… By using music, it is possible for the director to prompt the emotions of the audience

in a particular direction, by widening the range of their perception of the visual image. The meaning of the object is not changed, but the object itself takes on a new colouring. The audience sees it (or at least, is given the opportunity of seeing it) as part of a new entity, to which the music is integral. Perception is deepened. [15]

In *Very Nice, Very Nice*, the atmosphere of crowded city streets is captured by the sonic debris of urban noises, just as the voice of the individual is often silenced by the recurring image of an ominous skull raised high atop a protestor's picket. The significance of these images is lost without the context of the soundtrack – in fact, they are not adequately rendered without it, and their original source retains its significance.

The thematic concerns of *Very Nice, Very Nice* are understood through the juxtaposition of image and sound and elucidate the original intention of Lipsett's "Strangely Elated". The discursive thrust of *Very Nice, Very Nice* is found in the relationship of image and sound. What is not as immediately apparent is the ideological position of Lipsett.

A section of Bill Nichol's *Representing Reality* (1991), "Axiographics: Ethical Space in Documentary Film," examines how the ethical and ideological position of the non-fiction filmmaker are inextricably linked to the film apparatus and the process of representation: "The presence (and absence) of the filmmaker in the image, in offscreen space, in the acoustic folds of voice-on and voice-off, in titles and graphics constitutes an ethics, and a politics, of considerable importance to the viewer." [16]

What strikes me as most significant in this passage with regards to the delineation of the axiographic space of Lipsett's work is the political import give to such inconspicuous elements as titles and graphics. What role does Lipsett play in instructing the response of the viewer vis-à-vis his soundtrack? Nichols would argue Lipsett occupies a very powerful place in his films, one that is no less purposed when the screen is filled with black leader or cut-and-pasted photo collage. Meanwhile, it is the soundtrack of *Very Nice, Very Nice* that is most centrally positioned to communicate the politics and ideologies of the filmmaker, insofar as Lipsett's concern for the individual within the ever-expanding urban mass is revealed through strategies of sound.

It could be argued the images in Lipsett's work are doubly complex in their significance. Scenes of people protesting in the streets become entangled with recurring images of beauty pageant contestants parading on stage as an outtake of NFB narrator Stanley Jackson reading the line "warmth and brightness will return… and renewal of the hopes of man" is coarsely interrupted by the cries of another man – "NOHHHH!" Photographs of police keeping protestors at a distance sweep across the screen as a soft voice subdues the screaming man: "Alright, take it easy there fellas… hey, you know I know exactly what's going to happen." The protests of the masses are reduced to mere spectacle by unconcerned government forces; their voices are not heard and their actions are rendered futile. Lying beneath this entire passage is the jazz number, itself an ideological statement and marker of deftly balanced intellectualism and raw emotion; the value of jazz is found in its ability to balance the performance of the individual within the milieu of an ensemble. The protesting masses, it seems, are without any such balance and will not be formally recognized.

Throughout *Very Nice, Very Nice* sound first operates as a narrator to the image-track, only to become a subversive agent as the image is *detourned*: the juxtaposition of sound and image produce a critical reflection via the image's insistence to continue upon a course unendorsed by the soundtrack. "We're living in a very competitive world today," an unseen commentator explains, accompanied by stills of basketball players and track runners in action, "as compared to what we would compare to thirty or forty years ago; everything is highly competitive." Images of athletes and athletic competitions race across the screen as a drum roll loosens up and becomes a breezy march. Soon thereafter, the faces of athletes are juxtaposed with the grimacing portraits of soldiers and the artificial beauty of pageant contestants. A portrait of Eisenhower follows: his election to office paralleled by the pageant, before the Stars and Stripes of the American flag and the image of a bomber jet dropping its payload replace it. Each successive photograph flashes onscreen in synchronization with the marching band that has crept onto the soundtrack. While discussing the technique of literary collage, Wees acknowledges the essential relationship between soundtrack and photography in Lipsett's film and contends "[his] films communicate through sound and image which are recognizable as 'documents', as 'raw data' carefully selected and juxtaposed to evoke Lipsett's complex, tragic-comic view of the world." [17]

Kracauer identifies the ideological position of the avant-garde filmmaker and the "[wish] to convey, through his

images, contents which were an outward projection of his visions, rather than an implication of those images themselves." [18] *Very Nice, Very Nice* concludes with a prolonged freeze-frame of a beautiful young woman staring disinterestedly outside the frame. The mania that had previously overtaken the soundtrack during a cacophony of speech, sound effects, music and noise has subsided, leaving only the distant strains of music and the babbling chatter of an unseen man:

> Well, if you're interested in truth you know what I mean but it sort of makes – besides I'm – you can't know anything [general babble] and confusion. He says you can't, you can't well it depends what you mean do you ever get I mean you're shaped from birth you know by everything around you – you can't you can't prove your… [different voice] Bravo, very nice, very nice.

This last voice speaks over a black screen as a brief credit sequence begins. Once again, this narration exhibits a banality that pervades much of the dialogue heard throughout *Very Nice, Very Nice*. The physicality of the process used by Lipsett to create the sound collage becomes very recognizable at this point in the soundtrack. Portions of dialogue are interrupted by others as anonymous speakers contradict one another and render their attempts at expressing thoughts and feelings futile. The rhythmic structure that drove the preceding segments is no longer present and the voices are no longer working together to communicate a clear message. The inanity of this man's words is illustrated and underscored by the young woman's distracted look and exemplifies the filmmaker's ideological position – Lipsett has animated the masses, identified the reasons for their malaise, and facilitated their uprising. It seems, however, that the same apathy that precipitated their isolation in his eyes could keep them from breaking the control that continues to suppress their voices.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Very little has been written about Arthur Lipsett's work, and few have taken the time to analyze and discuss the importance and impact of sound and music in his films. Dancsok's thesis is one of only two academic treatises on Lipsett's work. [19] His influence upon found footage filmmakers, however, is undeniable. With *Very Nice, Very Nice*, Lipsett further refined a template conceived as early as the 1920s in works such as *The Fall Of The Romanov Dynasty* (Esther Shub, 1927) which would foster the construction of narratives within found footage films and accentuate the ideological position of the filmmaker. Presently, individuals such as Abigail Child (*Mutiny,* 1983; *Covert Action*, 1984; *Mayhem*, 1987) demonstrate the powerful effect of foregrounding the soundtrack in order to more succinctly convey the discursive and thematic concerns of a project:

> You get that quality of history and expectation from the soundtrack. I had a silent rough cut [of *Mayhem*], first, and then the sound was cut in, and things moved into different areas until everything kind of fell together…. Without a script, sound could be my script, and specifically found sound…. The sound supports a certain reading of the image that I twist. I'm trying to keep you conscious. I'm trying to give you pleasure and make you conscious of its source, where your pleasure is coming from. [20]

If Lipsett's intention is to guide the viewer to a particular point in the sonic interface of his films, it is precisely to a point of density such that the viewer is unable to decode what is most significant and must instead accept its complexity as a comment upon the images before moving on to other material. This is not only how the discursive thrust of the project is established but also how the ideological position of Lipsett is embedded within the text.

What is most significant, then, in *Very Nice, Very Nice* is the soundtrack as a whole. The viewer cannot and should not be expected to navigate through the compactly layered sound field, identifying the source and significance of each voice, noise, and melody. Instead, the soundtrack acts as a thematic and conceptual backbone to the collection of images as a whole and has no intention of divulging its origins. Best and Kellner identify the postmodern artist as one whose work is not of a personal nature, but rather finds its significance by communicating through artefacts of a shared nature. "The artist is no longer the originary and unique self who produces the new in an authentic vision but, rather, a *bricoleur* who just rearranges the debris of the cultural past." [21] Should someone take up the task of delineating Lipsett's oeuvre as belonging exclusively to the modern or postmodern art movements of the mid-twentieth century, his genius would surely be revealed through the accuracy with which he targets the elements of society he considered unattractive, not just using "debris", but elements considered garbage – plucked from the waste baskets of a government institution and delivered to a receptive community of spectators excited to call him their own.

NOTES

1 MacLaren experimented with a process involving the manipulation and synchronization of sound and image through a meticulous exercise of drawing and painting directly on the surface of celluloid strips; see DOTS (NFB, 1948).

2 Expense receipts submitted to the Budget Committee of the NFB indicate this device was rented by Lipsett on the noted dates for $45.00. NFB Archives, Montreal, Quebec. *Production file: 61-205*; VERY NICE, VERY NICE, 1961. 06 December 2001.

3 Project proposals for "Revelation" (aka "Strangely Elated"; aka "Very Nice, Very Nice"). NFB Archives, 1961.

4 Press release for VERY NICE, VERY NICE. NFB Archives, 1961.

5 Both Kracauer and Mitry employ the term "visualized music" for discussions of animated subjects, specifically Disney's feature film containing the animated interpretations of classic symphonic scores.

6 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 152-153.

7 "Not only was VERY NICE, VERY NICE unique because it was a film using discarded sound, but it was also one of the few attempts to edit actuality images to pre-existing sound. The technique of putting image to sound in this way was an animation technique." Michael Dancsok, "Transcending the Documentary: The Films of Arthur Lipsett," M.A. Thesis (Communications), Montreal: Concordia University, 1998: 51.

8 Project proposals for "Revelation" (aka "Strangely Elated"; aka "Very Nice, Very Nice") contain Lipsett's original pencil drawn graph. NFB Archives, 1961.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Gordon Martin quoted in interview with Lois Siegel, "Arthur Lipsett: A Close Encounter of the Fifth Kind," *Cinema Canada* 44 (February 1978): 9.

12 Kracauer 139-140.

13 William C. Wees, *Recycled Images* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993) 15-16.

14 Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 249.

15 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) 158.

16 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 77.

17 William C. Wees, *Making Poetry Where No Poet Has Gone Before: Jack Chambers' Hart of London,* unpublished 1996 (appears in Dancsok): 3.

18 Kracauer 181.

19 The other is Richard Magnan's MA thesis from Universite de Montreal, "Les collages cinematographiq*ues d'Arthur Lipsett comme* metaphor epistemologique" (1993). I should also recommend Brett Kashmere's piece from 2004 in *Senses of Cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/lipsett.html.

20 Abigail Child, interview with William C. Wees, *Recycled Images*, 11 February 91.

21 Steven Best & Douglas Kellner, The Postmodern Turn (New York: The Guildford Press, 1997) 133.

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