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SYNOPTIQUE (HOME)
14 Mar 2005
4271 words

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From Dots-and-Loops to Cut-and-Paste

Arthur Lipsett's *Very Nice, Very Nice*

by Michael Baker

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 vision.

> 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 tuning of placing one sound after another.
>
> –Arthur Lipsett on VERY NICE, VERY NICE in a press release for a TIFF SIXPAN MIDNIGHT GANG

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, mastered an approach having sound and image that ultimately not only secure 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 capitate 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 photographic image contained in the film's image track were taken by Lipsett and the NFB's colleagues and not 'found' at all. The soundtrack, however, was in part composed of found sound. Lipsett's friend, Ron Kelly, in his NFB Film Board of Canada Newsletter interview conducted by Lipsett himself, in Stephen Dwoskin's Cinéma Spontanéo (between 10 July 1961 and 24 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 (original emphasis, Kelly interviewed Lipsett). [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. Lipsett's prodigiously fertile career with a decade-long stint as a staff filmmaker at the NFB, and garnering the twenty-five year old filmmaker radar on Academy Award nomination in 1962.

Sound and Image Relationships

"In this city machines are always made to ... BRAKA – BRAKA – BRAKA [the sound of a car horn blaring]." So begins Lipsett's animation upon the unfortunate course contemporary society has inducted itself upon; one has considers limited by consumerism, controlled by shallow jobs, and typified by the desperate loneliness displayed by the individuals of essentially voiceless crowds. Comprised of hundreds of still images taken by NFB colleagues in Montréal 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 sound, spoken word, and hallucinatory musical compositions initially designed as a stand-alone sound experiment. Press notes from the NFB at the time of the film's original release stoke the importance of the highly structured aspects of the soundtrack, upon which most 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, disconcerting, intriguing, startling. In the contrast between the violence of events and the trivialities of speech the film-maker seems to be pointing up the link of concern of many people with the plans and the employees 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 attributed to film animation (i.e. FANTASIA, 1940), or are associated with the seductive film visualized music. [5] As explained by Siegfried Kracauer, the visualization of music creates, paradoxically and emphatically, the effect for the spectator of making music subordinate to the visuals. 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 to note though that 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 to the super-ordinate power of the visual. [6]

Michael Ciavaccia, in his Masters thesis, "Transcending the Documentary: The Films of Arthur Lipsett", demonstrates the conventional preference for considering sound and music as secondary to image when he discusses Lipsett's working methods. Though Ciavaccia acknowledges that Lipsett's soundtrack for "Strangely Elated" sprang forward "like a seed from the ground", VERY NICE, VERY NICE, he then states that the task of animation in order to prologue 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 images, and as rhythmic tool which helps 'paced' the appearance of the still photographs. Furthermore, it is through this commentative relationship and instances of prediction that the soundtrack manipulates the viewer into the viewer's own emotions, and ultimately, the political bias of the director and filmmaker. In this way, what was previously a sort of found image 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 into the broad-based critique of society.

While there is no denying the discursive tone, the dramatic arc of VERY NICE, VERY NICE is attenuated by Lipsett's mania 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 tone with a little bit of comic relief and relaxed, "Lipsett writes of the proposal, however, this is way of the 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 "*fatal element of society*" that assists in the "*fear of personal intimacy*" that mobilizes the lonely and isolated people of the city and transforms their collective depression into an awareness and fluency of self-expression that "explains fragmentary power structures." [10] This is illustrated by sustaining images of children and adults rushing through city streets. An up-tempo piano score propels these still-photographs into motion and their stillness in such a way that movement, is implied, but in part due to society's change, is arrested.

Lipsett's specialty seems to be the structuring of sound as a being agent, allowing the audience to engage with the images in spite of their fleeting presence unknown. 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 have the pop culture of Andy Warhol, the cinema verité, Gordon Matters, the director of the NFB's Screen Study film education program explains, "Arthur was using film in Japan, Asian form and was still creating multiple images – his images and sounds were much more abrupt, which would carry over as bridges of little sequences." [11] These "bridges" are fundamentally sonic.

There are four 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 transitions into a march; the ominous plundering of trumpets; a Beat-sounding jazz piece identified by Lipsett in his script as "Police pianfree 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 function, states:

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

Although the tympanic 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 metric nature of urban space through its aggressive juxtaposition of music, sound effects, and speech.

Lipsett's soundtrack becomes an energy on the rapid development of urban space. He argues that it is a site the segregates 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 "lenty" referred to in the original script statement is one of contrasts and concentration. The contrasts are between the city and the countryside in such a way that this sense of alienation is underscored by the audience. William Weaver, commenting on the associative process as it is connected 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 of all the film's images fit. Yet, no matter how unrelated their original contexts might have been. [12]

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 audiovisual silence is the backdrop 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, if any, instances of people outside and an urban landscape. This site is dominated by the sounds of busting crowds, bellows crying and woman screaming; each interrupting the other and effectively silencing the collective. If Lipsett's take of the city means the search of the massive for a new way of life, the clustered 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 images together), the theorist Jean Mitry argues it is not the structure of the soundtrack that reinforces the images (incident but rather that it operates on an entirely different level of signification which succeeds even when removed from the diegetic 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 mission into the film at a specific moment does not have a precise signification. Film music is not expression, 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 notions revealed by Kracauer and Mitry can be found in myriad examples of narrative film. A particularly interesting case is Andrei Tarkovsky's filmmaker who has gained agency, categorically, mouse in cinema, though in practice has been unable to successfully from himself of it.

Music can be used to produce a necessary distortion of the visual material. Music can be used, however, 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 the 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 dependent* [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 cloud raised high atop a protester's protest. 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 underlined 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), "Ideographic: Ethical Space in Documentary Film," examines how the ethical and ideological position of the non-fiction filmmaker are revealed by the way in which the apparatus and the process of representation: "The presence (and absence) of the filmmaker in the image, in an ethical space, in the acoustic fields of voice-over and off-camera, in the and graphics underlining, and, of the politics, of considerable importance to the viewer." [16]

What strikes me most significant in this passage with regards to the delineation of the ideographic space of Lipsett's work is the political import given to such inconspicuous elements as titles and graphics. What role does Lipsett play in instructing the response of the viewer vis-a-vis his soundtrack? Nichol, 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-paste 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 works are doubly complex in their significance. Scenes of people gallivanting in the streets become ironic when juxtaposed with recurring images of bleeding soldiers; protesters gazing on stage as an outline of Nikita Kruschev Stanley Jackson reading the line "warmth and brightness will return... and renewal of the hopes of man" is curiously interrupted by the cries of another man – "DEATH!" Propaganda of police keeping protestors at a distance sweep across the screen as a soft voice subtracts the screaming man. "Virtually, take it away these folks... hey, you know I wanna what's going to happen." The pleasure 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, lent 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 prioritizing of the masses, and, as we will see, any such balance and will not be forthcoming respected.

Throughout VERY NICE, VERY NICE sound first operates as a marcher in the image track, only to become a subversive agent as the image is deconstructed the juxtaposition of sound and image produces a critical reflection vis-its the image's relationship to continue space a course orientated by the soundtrack. Nichol, "bring 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 competitors 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 gathering portraits of soldiers and the artificial beauty of pageant contestants. A portrait of Eisenhower follows; his relaxed by-stitles punctuated by the pageant, before the Stars and Stripes of the American flag and the flame of a bomber ad dropping by jaunted replace it. Each successive photograph flashes crescent in synchronization with the marching band that has crept into the soundtrack. While discussing the soundtrack of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, Mitry acknowledges the essential relationship between soundtrack and photography in Lipsett's film and concedes "[by] films communicate through sound and image which are recognizable as observations, or rather 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 "[artist] in comedy, through his images, contends which were an outward projection of his visions, rather than an implication of these images themselves." [18] VERY NICE, VERY NICE concludes with a prolonged tease-frame of a bomber dropping wrong-doing demonstrably outside the frame. The manna that has previously overtaken the soundtrack during a cacophony of speech, sound effects, music and noise has subsided, leaving only the bleeding and crying and the battling chatter of an unseen mass:

> Well, if you're interested in truth you know what I mean but it sort of makes – besides the – 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 want your – 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 (the credits, the narrator exhibits a banality that pervades much of the dialogue heard throughout VERY NICE, VERY NICE. The phraseology of the phrases used by Lipsett to create the sound collage becomes very recognizable at the end of the soundtrack. Portions of dialogue are interrupted by others as anonymous speakers contradict one another and render their attempts at expressing thoughts and ideas futile. The rhythmic structure that drives the prevailing 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 declamation such as Angela Davis (McTheir, 1969, CENSOR ATLANTA, 1984, NAPPER, 1987) demonstrate the powerful effect of foregrounding the soundtrack in order to most 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 NAPPER], first, and then the sound was cut in, and things became much more powerful. Suddenly 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 need. The image is kind of way too 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 point of density such that the viewer is unable to decode what is most significant and 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 dialogical relationship between the viewer and 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 completely 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 the technique 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 can rearrange the debris of the cultural past." [21] Should someone take up the task of debunking Lipsett's source as belonging exclusively to the modern or postmodern art movements of the mid-twentieth century, his genius would lie in his ability to reveal through the accuracy with which he legislate the elements of society he considered unattractive, not just using "debris", but elements constituted 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] McLaren 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 (1940), LINES.

[2] Expansive receptivity submitted to the Budget Committee of the NFB includes this device was rented by Lipsett on the noted dates for SHOLSS. NFB Archives, Montreal, Quebec. Production file 61-205: VERY NICE, VERY NICE, 1961. 90 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] Scott Krawcow and Mitry analyzing 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: Extinction Principle*. Princeton University Press, 1997/1putz-133.

[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 actually images to prevailing sound. The technique of plotting image to sound in this way was an animation technique." Michael Ciavaccia, "Transcending the Documentary: The Films of Arthur Lipsett," M.A. Thesis (Communications), 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] Gordon Martin quoted in interview with Lois Siegel, "Arthur Lipsett: A Child Encounter of the Fifth Kind," *Cinema Canada* (Feb./February 1978). 9.

[11] Kracauer 139-140.

[12] William C. Weaver, *Recycled Images* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).15-16.

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

[14] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).108.

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

[16] William C. Weaver, *Making Poetry Where No Poet Has Gone Before*. (aka: Chairborn Vest of London, unpublished 1986 (appears in Ciavaccia). 3.

[17] Kracauer 161.

[18] This other is Richard Wagner's Mit-thesis from Universals de Montreal, "Les collages cinematographiques d'Arthur Lipsett comme manipulation epistemologique" (1993). I should also recommend Bert Kaufmann's piece from 2004 in Devices of Cinema: http://www.secondsheets.com/contents/articles/kaufmanlipsett.html.

[19] Abigail Child, interview with William C. Weaver, *Recycled Images*, 11 February 91.

[20] Steven Best & Douglas Kellner, The Postmodern Turn (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997).123.

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ISSN 1715-1841
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