



Invisible Labour? Re-examining the Aesthetics of Sound Design in 1970s American Cinema

Jay Beck. *Designing Sound: Audiovisual Aesthetics in 1970s American Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016. 274 pages.

Reviewed by Kyla Smith

The “New Hollywood Cinema” of the late 1960s and 1970s has often been characterized as a period of relative creative freedom. Following the collapse of the studio system, new forms of representation in American cinema emerged through the work of a fresh generation of filmmakers who rose to prominence in that period. These filmmakers were both willing and able to experiment with new techniques and aesthetics in their approach to filmmaking, and developed new modes of representation in their films. This fertile moment in American film history is the subject of Jay Beck’s *Designing Sound: Audiovisual Aesthetics of 1970s American Cinema* (2016). Beck is an Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the evolution of sound practices in American cinema of the 1960s and 1970s under the supervision of Rick Altman, whose influence is evident in this work. Altman’s notion of “crisis historiography” informs Beck’s aims to study a “crisis of identity” that he locates within the Hollywood of the late 1960s and 1970s. This crisis, according to Beck, resulted from changes in industrial and technological standards which were occurring in the industry. Through his analysis of a broad range of films from the period, Beck aims to demonstrate how the American film industry experienced a “renaissance of film aesthetics” through the adoption of techniques from parallel industries (Beck 7).

While he concedes that abundant scholarly attention has been paid to the New American cinema, Beck suggests that it has overwhelmingly favoured the study of the visual aspects of the films alone. He contends that the study of film sound in this period has been sorely neglected, especially since the impact of advances in film sound practices during the late 1960s and 1970s can so readily be seen when one examines the films of the period. Thus, for Beck, film sound serves as an heuristic to explore facets of cinema’s history—its function in a certain period, modes of cinema-going and meaning-making, and inquiry into the changing systems of production. Moreover, while there remains a paucity of scholarship on film sound in the New American cinema, Beck also contends that the period remains misrepresented in narrativized histories of the Hollywood film industry. When it is discussed, Beck argues that it is characterized as an hermetic period, in which the experimentation of a few maverick filmmakers was all but forgotten by the beginning of the Blockbuster era. The intent of this book, then, is to refocus attention on those filmmakers. It aims to study their contributions to the use of sound in the aid of storytelling and the practice of filmmaking as both art and cultural commentary.

Comprising a large number of case-study films, *Designing Sound* is roughly organized chronologically. Beck describes the book as a “compendium” of the advances in the use of sound in the American cinema (8). Rather than a narrativized historical recounting of the period, the book is best thought of as a series of essays in which Beck puts forth detailed, narrowly focused analyses of the use of sound in chosen films. The book is divided into three sections, and the first, entitled “General Trends,” lays out the historical antecedents of the New American cinema of the 1970s. Here, Beck sets up the context of the Hollywood of the late 1960s, one increasingly influenced by the aesthetics of international cinemas and parallel industries.

Chapter 1, “The British Invasion,” delineates a direct connection between the sound aesthetics of the British Free Cinema movement and American films of the late 1960s. These include *The Loved One* (Tony Richardson, 1965), *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), *Petulia* (Richard Lester, 1968), and *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969), each of which were directed by filmmakers who began their careers in Britain. These directors were influenced by the aesthetics of the Free Cinema movement, which emphasized observational techniques. Beck traces the ways those influences carried over into their American work, and how their films in turn went on to influence other American filmmakers.

Chapter 2 charts the impact of American television and documentary aesthetics on cinema. As live news reporting became prevalent in the 1960s, the aesthetics of location shooting and sound were appropriated by filmmakers, who sought to emulate the kind of immediacy and perceptual realism they seemed to offer. New, increasingly portable technologies enabled greater freedom for the independent filmmakers who were the first to incorporate this new aesthetic into their work. This chapter includes analysis of *David Holzman’s Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969), and *Puzzle of a Downfall Child* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1970). Chapter 3, “New Voices and Personal Sound Effects,” focuses on the years 1970 and 1971 during which directors working on the fringes of the Hollywood studios built upon the sound experiments begun in the 1960s. Films that helped to transfer those sound practices into mainstream productions including *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman, 1970), Monte Hellman’s anti-road movie *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971), *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971), and *THX 1138* (George Lucas, 1971), all of which are discussed in this chapter.

In the book’s second section, “Director Case Studies,” Beck shifts his attention slightly to offer concentrated analyses of the work of three Hollywood directors—Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, and Martin Scorsese. Highlighting the work of these three luminaries of the American filmmaking scene of the 1970s, Beck carries through from the preceding chapters to show how their films brought the sound experimentation of the late 1960s and the independent filmmaking scene into the mainstream. The production of each case study film has been extensively researched, and Beck offers useful insights and detailed close analysis of their uses of sound.

Characterizations of each director’s approach to the use of sound shape the approach of each chapter. Coppola’s studio, American Zoetrope, facilitated a “collective” approach to filmmaking, with sound technicians like Walter Murch and Nat Boxer working collaboratively with the director, resulting in “dynamic experiments” in sound technique (87). Altman’s sound practice is similarly defined as “collaborative,” emphasizing complexly layered sound tracks and a rejection of the dialogue intelligibility central to the Classical Hollywood aesthetic. Finally, Martin Scorsese’s sound work is characterized as “dialectical” (129). Scorsese’s compilation scores of popular music are shown to comment on character subjectivity, in his *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974). Finally, the Bressonian-esque voice-over in

Taxi Driver (1976) is discussed as another method of structuring a complex dialectical relationship to character subjectivity.

The final section of the book, “The Dolby Stereo Era,” is focused on the years 1975-1980. Each chapter in this section discusses the emergence of Dolby Stereo as an industry standard. Chapter 8, “The Sound of Music,” focuses on compilation scores and in films like Hal Ashby’s *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Shampoo* (1975), and *Coming Home* (1978), and concert film *The Last Waltz* (Martin Scorsese, 1978). In Chapter 9, “The Sound of Spectacle,” Beck demonstrates the shift toward what he calls a “new classicism” in Hollywood. Here Beck offers lengthy analyses of the use of sound for spectacle in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977). The popularity of *Star Wars* created the first wave of Dolby Stereo aesthetics in which spectacle was emphasized through the sheer loudness and density of the soundtrack. In a series of observations about the *Star Wars* soundtrack, Beck demonstrates the difference between it and the collaborative sound work that characterized most of the other films he has discussed. Despite its shortcomings, the sound aesthetic established in *Star Wars* remained the standard for Dolby Stereo until the early 1990s. It is at this point, Beck argues, that more carefully constructed soundtracks in the work of directors like Wim Wenders began to utilize the technology to its fullest artistic potential.

Despite making this claim, Beck does note three important exceptions, which he explores in the final chapter, “The Sound of Storytelling.” Beck shows how Dolby Stereo was used to create “hyperrealism” in the soundscape of *Days of Heaven* (Terrence Malick, 1978). *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) is lauded as the “beginning of sound design” because it demonstrated the possibility for collaborative sound design which harnessed the powerful technical specifics of the Dolby system with great benefit to storytelling (207). Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, Beck offers a short coda in which he discusses the third exception, *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980). He argues its importance as the film that “solidified the conceptual resonance between sound and storytelling,” and in which Dolby was effectively used to expand the space of the story beyond the screen and into the auditorium (221).

Thomas Elsaesser (2004) has characterized the American films of the 1970s as emblematic of a “pathos of failure” which had saturated the nation’s popular consciousness in that decade. However, while there has certainly been ample attention paid to American filmmaking in the 1970s, Beck argues that there is still a paucity of critical work that demonstrates the importance of American films of the 1970s to the development of cinema. Beyond the aesthetic changes they introduced, film sound practices of the 1970s served as a site for negotiation of an American identity during a period of flux. Doing away with models of cinematic practice associated with Classical Hollywood style, these approaches to film sound opened new forms of representation, in line with more radical socio-political perspectives (2).

Ultimately, I believe Beck succeeds in his goal of offering a broad re-examination of the practices of film sound in the New American Cinema. While many of the films discussed in the book are relatively standard texts of 1970s American cinema, Beck’s treatment makes for a refreshing re-examination of their importance in American film history. The tensions between the recognisability of these films as standard texts and Beck’s claims that they are “understudied” are softened by an approach which avoids a too-narrow idea of authorship. Since he relies so little on exegesis from other authors’ work, his insights into each film are largely original and done through the lens of sound practice. The research presented is detailed, and provides readers with a wealth of technical information as well as descriptions of the films’ production. This original research is the book’s main strength.

Several inroads are made throughout the book to the question of labour and sound production. The most notable are the comparisons between the collaborative production styles enabled by relaxed union regulations versus the hierarchized labour necessitated by Dolby. In the book's narrative-style historical timeline, the triumph of the Dolby Stereo system figures as a kind of wet-blanket which obfuscated the sound experiments of the 1970s, as those techniques developed were largely incompatible with the technical requirements of Dolby. Beck champions the collaborative production styles of 1970s directors, who worked closely with sound designers and technicians on their films, fostering new approaches to the use of film sound. However, as with most auteur studies, Beck's work is disappointing in he focuses on male creative labour alone. While men's labour is made visible, women's labour still goes unrecognized. Elaine May, Claudia Weill, Barbara Loden, and others, whose work was equally important to the rise of the American independent movie scene in the 1970s, go unmentioned. While the narrative of Altman's *Nashville* (1975) is praised for its unique "non-hierarchical narrative," screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury is mentioned only once. She is treated as a peripheral figure to the development of this film, as one of Altman's most esteemed works.

Similarly, Beck's approach to the role of sound designers like Walter Murch is enthusiastic, if myopic. An interesting counterpoint to Beck's assessment of Murch's contributions can be found in Eric Dienstfrey's recent essay "The Myth of the Speakers," in which Dienstfrey argues that aesthetic innovations often attributed to Murch and Dolby Stereo were in fact only extensions of surround-sound practices already codified by Hollywood in previous decades. Indeed, Dienstfrey goes so far as to suggest that the myths perpetuated by the industry were a tool used by sound designers used to negotiate the value of their labour at a time of industrial instability. The coincidence of these two works, both of which were published in 2016, suggests an ongoing trend in a critical re-examination of film sound practice as both a key to new forms of representation and as creative labour.

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