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Cox, Geoffrey

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GEOFFREY COX

# Listen to Nice

## ABSTRACT

*In describing Humphrey Jennings' wartime documentary propaganda film, Listen to Britain (1942), a film with an overtly poetic sensibility and dominantly musical soundtrack, John Corner asserts that 'through listening to Britain, we are enabled to properly look at it' (2002: 306). This idea of sound leading our attention to the images has underpinned much of the collaborative work between composer and sound designer, Geoffrey Cox, and documentary filmmaker, Keith Marley. It is in this context that the article will analyse an extract of A Film About Nice (Marley and Cox 2010), a contemporary re-imagining of Jean Vigo's silent documentary, À propos de Nice (1930). Reference will be made throughout to the historical context, and the filmic and theoretical influences that have informed the way music and creative sound design have been used to place emphasis on hearing a place, as much as seeing it.*

## KEYWORDS

documentary  
Jean Vigo  
Humphrey Jennings  
Lindsay Anderson  
musique concrète  
sound  
music  
Nice  
city symphony

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2009 I travelled to Nice, the capital of the Côte d'Azur in southern France, with my collaborator Keith Marley of Liverpool John Moores University to make a documentary film. Our initial inspiration came from the City Symphony filmmakers of the early 20th century. Artists such as Walter Ruttmann, Dziga Vertov and Jean Vigo created beguiling vignettes of everyday activity in some of Europe's major cities. Their desire was not to present 'facts' about a specific place but to capture the rhythm and mood of everyday life and use the expressive capabilities of the editing process

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to invigorate and bring alive the footage they had captured. Key examples of the genre include Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) and significantly, Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930). By contemporary documentary standards (ironically far more conservative), their use of daring allegorical and surreal image juxtaposition, and very rapid editing and filmic effects (mirroring, slow motion etc.), is highly experimental. Though these films place some importance on composed musical scores to enhance and help give coherence to their largely non-narrative, montage approach to the editing and structure of the films, technological limitations prevented the use of any location or dubbed sound. They are in common parlance, silent movies. Our aim therefore was to not only adopt a similarly radical approach to the visual element but to also apply it to the use of location sound, as an expansion of the city symphony idea and as a further way of representing the atmosphere of a location. We wanted to show how one can hear, as well as see a place.

The decision to choose Nice as our location was directly related to Vigo's film about the place. Some eighty years later, what would we find – how different would it be? We had no intention that our film would be in any sense a re-make of *À propos de Nice*, rather a contemporary re-imagining of his work, adopting some of his aesthetic approach with the important addition of the use of location sound. Our method was straightforward: over a period of five days we filmed and recorded sound around the city and in nearby countryside. We did this with only a very rough idea of how the finished film would be structured. Keith Marley had already visited Nice once before and knew of some of the key locations used in Vigo's film (the train station, the old town, the beach, the *Cours Saleya* and the *Promenade des Anglais*), locations we decided to visit again, not only because of Vigo but because they are iconic locations of the city. We made no attempt to 'get to know' the city other than from a visitor's viewpoint, and in my case a first-time one. Though it could be argued that this might lead to a superficial 'document', a tourist's gaze if you like, our thinking was that this approach is just as valid as any other, not only from an artistic point of view but also in terms of revealing something about the city. Like the city 'symphonists' before us, our aim was to capture an impression of the city, to use sound and image in creative ways to get below the surface, to show rather than tell, to be unashamedly poetic; to entertain.

## A RECREATED WORLD

Central to Jean Vigo's approach was his notion of the *point de vue documenté* (the documented point of view), to capture life unawares by secretly filming everyday street life. In essence, this was a resurrection of Vertov's 'kino-eye' (Salles Gomes 1971 [1957]: 72), 'a special form of cinematic observation that could penetrate the essence of actual events'. This was made possible since 'the cinematic eye was better than the human eye [...] because it had the technological ability to transform reality'

(Barsam 1992: 70). Speaking at the second screening of *À propos de Nice* in Paris in 1930, Vigo commented that 'conscious posing or acting cannot be tolerated. Unless the character is taken unawares by the camera, the *documentary* value of this kind of cinema is impossible to attain' (Salles Gomes 1971: 72). Our approach did not involve secret filming or hidden cameras (a potentially unethical idea today), however, the ubiquitous public use of video cameras, in western society at least, renders them almost 'invisible' and apart from a few rare occasions, we were largely ignored and we did not detect any 'conscious posing or acting'. Recording with audio equipment only is much more discreet, leading to potential charges of eavesdropping. However whilst recording and in the editing process, I was always conscious not to 'home in' on individuals but to seek out atmosphere and ambience or more abstracted sonic gestures, which was of itself, an aesthetic choice.

Vigo's attitude towards Nice, a town he had been 'obliged' to live in for two years for health reasons, can be described as ambivalent at best, according to Boris Kaufman, the cameraman on the project (and younger brother of Vertov) (Kaufman 1996 [1949]: 84). Vigo himself said in 1930 that 'in this film, the description of a whole town begging from sheer laziness, we are spectators at the trial of a particular world' and that it gives an impression of 'gross pleasures [...] grotesque existence, of flesh and of death' (Kaufman 1996 [1949]: 83–4). Thus *À propos de Nice* is filled with 'bitterness and irony' (p. 82) and is generally seen as having 'a hard edge of social criticism' (Barsam 1992: 61). We did not go to Nice to seek out a similar sensibility (or indeed any other), preferring a more observational approach working from the premise 'that meaning should be generated directly from the organisation of the visual and auditory material, rather than this material being subordinated to something prior or extrinsic' (Vaughan 1999: xv). However, once there we found it impossible to ignore, for example, the large number of street beggars and the obvious disparity between them and the large 'rich' tourist population, the 'gross pleasures' of the latter (on densely packed beaches for example) or the attempt of the local population to 'exploit' the tourists in financial terms. These aspects thus inevitably became part of the film though by no means exclusively so or always as unambivalently as Vigo presented them. A crucial example of this was the preponderance of street musicians and entertainers that form a key part (especially sonically) of the seventh 'movement' of *A Film About Nice*, 'Le cirque nocturne', upon which this article concentrates. These entertainers provided a vibrant and colourful backdrop to nightly city life whilst at the same time adding a certain tension, since often their primary motive was to persuade otherwise disinterested diners and promenaders to part with their money. Even here though there was great variation ranging from a classical pianist in a city square playing Liszt with seemingly little attempt to take money (a hat simply rested on the top of the piano), to musicians 'serenading' eaters somewhat intrusively at a table on the *Cours Saleya*, and a sorrowful figure leaning against a lamp post 'singing' into a plastic cup 'microphone' that he would then hold out to passers-by for their alms.

This rich intertexture of musical sound, augmented by piped shop music and trams (with their bells and surprisingly musical tram stop announcements), and the more usual city street soundscape of traffic, conversational hubbub and pedestrian footfall, provided a dense and complex sound-world upon which to draw when constructing the soundtrack. Broadly, the approach to employing these different sound elements (and *only* location sound was used), was not to distinguish between them in terms of 'music' and 'noise' or to be overly concerned with whether they were deployed synchronously or asynchronously (though the latter tends to dominate), but to orchestrate them together, and with the images, as 'so much imagistic raw material' (Grierson 1933–4: 110) to create a 'transfigured reality' in a 'recreated world' (p. 109). For example, in a straightforwardly unambiguous gesture, a short melodramatic and agitated minor key passage from the street-pianist is re-used on several occasions to accompany the 'singing' beggar, and others, in deliberately poignant counterpoint. However, the passage is layered with artificial reverberation (a rare use of sonic processing in the film), whilst the dense network of layered street sounds is lowered in volume and a child's anguished cry or an emergency vehicle's siren, recorded at other times, is layered into the mix. The whole process creates brief but quite surreal sonic 'oases', 'transfigured realities', in which to take in the apparent plight of the individuals shown. These moments pass by quite quickly though, as if one were walking the streets taking in the sights and sounds, and the intention is not to be too heavy handed (and indeed, to reflect actual experience, at least from a subjective viewpoint). The fluid ambiguity of a night-time's sojourn pervades the whole of 'Le cirque nocturne', so just prior to the second time one hears the pianist's Liszt quotation, some jazz piano recorded earlier in the day whilst sitting outside a café (the music was on the radio) is heard over images of diners in the *Cours Saleya*. This almost imperceptibly 'morphs' into the Liszt, which replaces it and then suddenly one sees the pianist for the first time, fully synchronised with the music. The link between the two musics is as much purely sonic as musical in the traditional sense – the timbral and gestural similarities more important than notions of harmony and melody. Overall therefore this is an overtly poetic approach in the sense of poetry as a 'fusion between style and content, between the thing said and the way of saying it, that makes the two inseparable and at the same time creates something new' (Sussex 1969:12). This quotation refers to the work of Lindsay Anderson who, in turn, had described filmmaker, Humphrey Jennings as 'the only real poet the British cinema has yet produced' (Anderson 1961–2 [1954]: 1), both of whom were strong influences on *A Film About Nice* so it is to Jennings and later Anderson, that we must now turn.

### A SYMPHONY OF SOUND

Beyond the immediate starting point of Vigo's *À propos de Nice*, a further crucial influence on *A Film About Nice* is the British documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s, itself influenced by the City Symphonists

via the movement's founder, John Grierson. Dai Vaughan has described the work of one of the key figures of the movement, Humphrey Jennings, director of *Listen to Britain* (1942), as 'raising the everyday image to quasi-symbolic status through the use of juxtaposition, both of image with image and of image with sound, to create a rich web of connotation and nuance' (Vaughan 1999: xv). It is no coincidence that the title of this article is a play on words of Jennings' film and Vaughan's analysis is one that could potentially apply to *A Film About Nice* and especially 'Le cirque nocturne'. In *Listen to Britain*, a morale raising wartime propaganda film, Jennings:

created a symphony of sound, evocatively blending all kinds of music, the natural sounds of the city, the man-made sounds of factory and city streets, the official (Big Ben, the BBC, the RAF Band) and the unofficial (children dancing in the playground, 'Music while you work' train sing-songs).

(Aldgate and Richards 1994: 226)

By celebrating this sonic 'richness and diversity' (Aldgate and Richards 1994: 226) of Great Britain, Jennings is showing us what is worth defending and that we have the 'strength and purpose' (p. 226) to do so. Importantly though he shows rather than tells. Along with anthropologist, Tom Harrisson and poet and sociologist, Charles Madge, Jennings had founded the Mass Observation movement in 1937 (see Hubble 2010), 'a research organisation studying the social habits of the natives of England' (Harrisson 1982: 234) and amongst many other locations, had begun observing people's responses in the cinema. Notably, in 1939, they garnered opinion on one of the first wartime propaganda films, *The Lion Has Wings*. Though generally favourable, there was strong criticism of the commentary: 'it was all propaganda [...] you get enough of that in the newsreels' and 'I think it is un-British to shove propaganda down your throat like that' (p. 237). This tendency was rife as official documentaries took over from newsreels with their 'compulsive necessity to keep talking in the pictures' (p. 241) 'as if nobody can see anything or understand anything for themselves' (p. 239). Thus it is notable that *Listen to Britain* has no commentary or even any obvious narrative and so allows the audience to 'understand it for themselves'. It is far more powerful and evocative as a result, the emotional and intellectual engagement of the audience necessarily that much deeper: the montage of images and sounds really does give a *sense* of what is at stake by showing rather than telling and the film stays in the mind long after it has ended.

Kathleen Raine has also suggested that the Mass Observation movement strongly influenced Jennings' creative work in the poetic sense, producing an 'imagery of precise and objective realism, gathered from the daily human [...] scene' and 'informed with a content not only supremely imaginative, but infused with the imagination of the collective mind [...] a listening to the dreaming [...] of a nation or a world, itself unaware of the purport of its own fantasies' (Aldgate and Richards 1994: 221–2). This chimes with Paul C. Ray's contention that Mass Observation

1. Even *Listen to Britain* was strongly criticised by fellow filmmakers at the time for being the 'rarest piece of fiddling since the days of Nero' and 'a figment of the romantic imagination of Mass Observation', though was generally very well received by audiences (Aldgate and Richards 1994: 222–3). In essence there is no golden age of the poetic documentary, only isolated works of significance.

'tried to recover the imagination that had produced the objects and images of the real world' (p. 221). The strongly poetic style employed by Jennings also certainly has influences from his involvement with the British documentary movement of the 1930s founded by John Grierson whose desire to portray 'ordinary events as poetic acts' is seen by John Roberts as serving 'the need to culturally legitimate documentary films as distinct from commercial cinema' (Hubble 2010: 84). However, after the audio-visual experiments of *Night Mail* (Watt and Wright 1936) and especially *Coal Face* (Cavalcanti 1935), Grierson later admitted (with some regret) that after 'great promise of very high development of the poetic documentary' they had 'deviated from the poetic line', having 'got caught up in social propaganda' (Sussex 1975: 79, see also p. 180). It is hard to avoid noticing that the vast majority of mainstream documentary films today exhibit the verbal diarrhea Harrison describes above, combined with the dominance of an apparently unmediated observational or expository approach, as opposed to a 'transfigured', poetic one. There seems to be a loss of collective nerve when it comes to allowing an audience to 'understand it for themselves' and certainly *A Film About Nice* consciously follows in the footsteps of *Listen to Britain* in standing against this approach.<sup>1</sup>

*A Film About Nice* draws heavily on both the idea of transfigured observation and a poetic 'fusion between style and content', and especially on Jennings' ability to evoke through showing. One of the features of *Listen to Britain* is the way that on-screen music overlaps scenes and becomes detached from its original visual source (and hence taking on the role more of a musical score). This is often combined with a similar treatment of the everyday sounds of machines, human activity and radio broadcasts. A stark contrast is also sometimes drawn between the nature of the sonic and visual. An example is a two-minute sequence in which we initially see a countryside scene of some schoolchildren dancing and clapping to a nursery rhyme accompanied by an unseen piano. This cuts to scenes of troops driving tanks and heavy military vehicles through a picturesque village (with young children looking on); the children's music is still playing but is drowned out by the roar of the vehicles. This din continues over wider shots of vehicles on the open road followed by dense urban views from a train but now the spoken and musical strains of the BBC's *Music While You Work* radio programme have been introduced as the engine roars fade. A cut to a close-up of a spinning wheel (linked to the idea of the spinning wheels of the train we have just been on) brings us into a sewing factory shop floor where the radio programme is 'revealed' to be playing from the Tannoy. We hear and see the rhythmic motion of the sewing machines in close-up, in sympathy with the rhythms of the music. As a new dance tune strikes up on the radio, the women workers then join in, a rousing chorus rising above the noise of the machines. The correspondences and contrasts between sound and image both 'vertically' and 'horizontally', across this sequence (and many others) is ingenious yet also very smooth as we move effortlessly from one contrasting scene to the next, largely achieved though the manipulation of sound (Corner 2002: 359–361). The use of the street pianist's music in 'Le cirque nocturne',

as described above, is a good example of the way Jennings' approach to sound has been influential in *A Film About Nice*. A further example comes towards the end of this movement. As we see people walking down the *Promenade des Anglais* the sounds of street ambience (actually made up of several layers of similar material), is suddenly augmented by some conga-like drumming and the soft din of crashing waves. The rapid whine of a passing scooter (recorded earlier in the day) acts as an articulation of an edit to a darkened beach where we see the pounding surf, the drummer playing, and hear footsteps crunching on the pebbly beach (also recorded earlier). As the rhythms of the drums and waves continue, the strains of an accordion fade in and become more animated and seem almost to be performing a duet with the drums. But something is not quite right and as the drums fade out and the accordion strikes a resounding dominant chord, a reverberant piano chord chimes in, ominously, but in harmony with the accordion, turning its dominant chord into a somewhat discordant, minor tonic. As this happens, the image cuts to the forlorn figure of the 'singing' beggar described above. All this occurs after one has seen the pianist so it is intended that the viewer will comprehend where this chord has come from. The accordion player was also recorded and filmed earlier in neighbouring streets but we never see him in these or earlier scenes. However, the rather generic French tourist music he is playing makes sense within the context of the film and as with Jennings, this music, which is used elsewhere in the film too, takes on the occasional role of pseudo film score. Towards the end of the film the accordionist does finally make a brief 'cameo appearance'. The direct harmonic musical correspondence between two quite different sources is something that Jennings and McAllister were also fond of, notably in a segue between performances by Flanagan and Allen and Dame Myra Hess in *Listen to Britain*.

## NOISE: MUSIC

A further dimension of the sound palette in *A Film About Nice* is the relatively abstract use of sonic gestures to articulate certain edit points, as in the use of the scooter recording described above. One can liken these gestures to those employed in *musique concrète* in which Pierre Schaeffer argued for the creative use of recorded sounds from the everyday environment disassociated from their source and meaning. These 'sound objects' were to be used in such a way as to attempt to give them the same abstract quality as musical notes and connections between them to be made based purely on their timbral and gestural qualities. So, the timbral impact of the scooter sonority is just as important, if not more so, than its meaning. In this case the sound acts as a slight jolt to the listening/viewing sensibility as we move from one scene to the next but also helps to smooth that change. A similar scooter sound is used in earlier movements of the film in two brief 'comic' moments as a close-up of a pigeon ('La nouvelle ville') and later a slow, small-wheeled bicycle is seen crossing the screen ('La plage'); so the sound begins to take on a 'musical' motivic character. Of course

the scooter sound also makes sense in these contexts as not only is it a familiar timbre of French cities, but the scenes it sounds in could easily have featured such a passing vehicle (and in the case of the bicycle shot, the sound is actually synchronous but from a source unseen on the road behind – a moment of serendipity). In this sense the soundtrack bears a closer relationship to soundscape composition, a development of *musique concrète* initiated by Luc Ferrari (who called it ‘anecdotal music’, Ferrari in Caux 2012: 129) in which musical works were made up of environmental recordings where their source and meaning was deliberately retained and a narrative and social discourse encouraged (for example, Ferrari’s *Hétérozygote*, 1963–4). It is interesting to note that this happened once Ferrari, who was working with Schaeffer at the time, left the confines of the studio and began walking the streets of Paris with a microphone (Ferrari in Caux 2012: 129–31), something I was similarly doing in Nice. Thus the idea of the soundtrack to *A Film About Nice* being an ‘anecdotal’ composition in itself, is not at all far-fetched and though yet to be realised, a plan was formed early to turn it into such.

A further, more abstract example of the employment of sound ‘objects’ is the use of the sounds of various tram doors slamming in ‘La vie de café’. Here the somewhat aggressive gestures are used to articulate rapid edits between seated café diners and squatting beggars, begging from nearby pavements. The scooter sound is also used here but in a more menacing way (it is pitched down giving it a darker hue). For the most part the sounds here are more disassociated from their source and it is debatable as to whether they can be identified by the listener, but their timbre is nevertheless redolent of the city. In this more abstracted world, the harsher and abrupt sound objects act not only as so much editing ‘glue’ but importantly, to point up the stark contrast between the life-situations of the individuals depicted. This of course takes us back to Vigo again with his view of Nice as a ‘whole town begging from sheer laziness’, though it was more our intention to make a simple contrast between those more or less fortunate (and their immediate physical proximity) than to cast aspersions about laziness (or indeed decadency).

The use of quite abstracted industrial sounds is evident in the work of Humphrey Jennings too in *Listen to Britain* (for example, a close up of a tree branch backed by the harsh sounds from an industrial plant of the previous scenes) and as William Sansom has noted, his films not only use sound structurally rather than simply as background but that the films as a whole resemble musical compositions with their reliance on ‘the swelling-dying, theme and repeat-theme’ (Aldgate and Richards 1994: 226). Jennings also provided additional photography for Alberto Cavalcanti’s eleven minute impressionistic depiction of the coal industry, *Coal Face*, described as an ‘experiment in sound’ in the Film Society programme of 1935 (Aitken 2008: 48). What is especially notable about this film in sonic terms is that there is ‘no actuality sound at all – all machine noises are produced by an orchestra, with a consequent distortion in both tone and volume’ (Corner 1996: 57). The modernist, ‘dissonant and highly percussive score’, was written by Benjamin Britten (leading the following year

to further collaboration with W. H. Auden on the more famous, *Night Mail*) and ‘fits perfectly with the visuals offered’ (Corner 1996: 60). The fascinating thing is that the orchestra itself consisted not only of an array of unusual percussion instruments but everyday and industrial objects used to emulate the apparent sounds of the images depicted, scored alongside a piano, choir and voice-over (Reed 1999: 76). Referring to very similar techniques Britten used for some sequences in *Night Mail*, Donald Mitchell suggests he is ‘imagining a kind of *musique concrète*’ and makes the crucial observation that ‘because the sound effect[s were] musically conceived, [were] in fact *composed*, there is none of the customary friction between the two worlds of sound – “noise” and music – that make up the soundtracks of most films’ (Mitchell 1981: 83). Grierson himself sardonically remarked that when he was in Cannes:

invited by Jean Cocteau, to hear this amazing new world of *musique concrète*, [presumably some time in the late 1940s / early 50s] I laughed if I did not sneer because it’s something we’d been all playing with a long time before, maybe twelve years [...]. We’d Britten and all sorts of people involved (Sussex 1975: 207).<sup>2</sup>

2. Grierson has also spoken of Walter Leigh’s title music for the GPO Film Unit’s *6.30 Collection* (Watt and Anstey 1934) being orchestrated for an ensemble made up of everyday objects and a trumpet (Grierson 1934: 216).

The lineage of the Futurists through Cage, Schaeffer and the post-war avant-garde of Nono, Stockhausen and Berio, to present day noise artists, has lead to ‘the musicalisation of noise [today being] grist to the mill’ (Chanan 2007: 119). It is still relatively rare in film soundtracks, however, despite the ‘signal experiments’ of Vertov’s *Enthusiasm* and *Coalface*, and the famous work of sound designers such as Walter Murch and less well-known figures as Fernando Pérez; ‘the link [to the avant-garde] has been lost’ (Chanan 2007: 125). Though I would balk at calling what Marley and myself attempted in *A Film About Nice* some kind of ‘missing link’, my background in the modernist musical avant-garde has certainly allowed such linkages to be a natural outcoming. Hence, when Chanan describes the soundtrack to Pérez’s Cuban documentary, *Suite Habana* (2003), as refusing ‘the hierarchical relations between voices, music, noises and silence that governs the soundscape of narrative fiction’ (Chanan 2007: 119), this ‘lack of friction’ between the worlds of noise and music could be taken as a *central tenet* of *A Film About Nice*, as well as applying to films like *Listen to Britain*.

## POETIC REALISM

Despite the highly poetic style and reliance on the technical and creative skills of Jennings’ editor, Stewart McAllister, Vaughan has pointed out that films such as *Listen to Britain* have a link to later observational methods, ‘namely [in] an insistence on the priority of the given’ (Vaughan 1999: xv). A further strong influence on *A Film About Nice* is Lindsay Anderson in his 1950s documentarian phase. One of Jennings’ great advocates (Anderson 1961–2 [1954]), he forms a link between the artifice of Jennings and a more transparent aesthetic that came to dominate

3. This was probably also partly determined by the technical difficulty of recording synchronous location sound even in the mid 1950s, especially on the limited budget they enjoyed.

after the war. Influenced by the 'neutral' observational styles of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, the Free Cinema movement of the 1950s he helped to co-found, strove for realism but a *poetic* realism in their work, especially Anderson (exemplified in his film on Covent Garden Market, *Every Day Except Christmas*, 1957). But Anderson also emphasised the aesthetic imperative of all artists, by declaring that 'the first duty of the artist is not to interpret, nor to propagandise but to create' (Sussex 1969: 10), and that it is 'creative interpretation' that distinguishes documentary from mere journalism. For Anderson, all his work, 'even when it has been very realistic, has struggled for a poetic quality – for larger implications than the surface realities may suggest. I think the most important challenge is to go beyond pure naturalism into poetry' (Sussex 1969: 12). This is also why he admired Jennings of all the British documentarians, who he saw as, as much 'stimulated by the purely aesthetic potentialities of the medium as by its propagandist power' (Hill 1986: 128).

In terms of sound, Anderson was clearly influenced by Jennings' bold creativity, but again is more grounded in the real world. This provides another link to *A Film About Nice*, a film that is equally concerned with observation and an 'insistence on the priority of the given' but is unabashed about the 'creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson 1933: 8), especially sonic actuality. In some ways the treatment of sound in *A Film About Nice* falls between Jennings and Anderson in that the sonic resources are firmly rooted in a single recognised location (as in *Every Day Except Christmas*) but are treated in a very fluid way, freely moving between synchronicity and asynchronicity, as Jennings does in *Listen to Britain*. *Every Day Except Christmas* is a film chronicling a working 'day' in Covent Garden Market from dusk to the following morning and though sometimes synchronous sound is used, much is a 'creative assembly of noises recorded separately: sounds of the market and of the busy streets, snatches of conversation and of song, the music of the streets and Daniel Paris's score' (Sussex 1969: 36).<sup>3</sup> Sometimes this 'creative assembly' is explicit (as in the slightly surreal soundscape of the café scene) but elsewhere the sounds almost appear to be synchronously derived as in many of the scenes where the workers are preparing the market to open. This parallels the approach in *A Film About Nice* as has been described, such as the use of the scooter sound, the sounds of footsteps on the beach and numerous other subtle examples that probably go unnoticed by the listener; a pseudo-real sonic environment is created but a subtle one, slightly detached from actuality, as compared for example to Hollywood sound replacement techniques that place emphasis on ultra-synchronicity and (hyper)reality. Similarly, the visual and aural patterns in *Every Day Except Christmas*, 'continue to unfold endlessly out of each other, referring backwards and forwards, creating a larger harmony out of an infinite number of minor inflections and variations' (Sussex 1969: 36), an analysis that could easily apply to *A Film About Nice*. The way the street-performed accordion or piano music described above appears and re-appears as 'pseudo-score' (and occasionally interacting with each other), with different implications on the visual element, and then finally in synchronicity with its performers, is a good example.

## A WINDOW OR A MIRROR?

If documentary is treated as an aesthetic project in this way, as much if not more so than a journalistic one, important questions to do with objectivity, truthfulness, faithful representation and 'reality', inevitably arise. This is especially pertinent with regards to sound with its potentially greater evocative power compared to the image. As Chanan points out with regard to music in documentary: 'it isn't factual, or neutral or even limited to the descriptive, but [...] emotive, expressive and associative. It therefore inevitably functions as a form of commentary, sometimes all the more insidious for not declaring itself as such' (Chanan 2007: 117). Given the way I have described the blurring of on-screen music with the music soundtrack, and the use of other location sounds with a musical sensibility in some of the films discussed, this concern can, in these circumstances, apply to the whole of a documentary soundtrack, not just music. Indeed, the sonic palette in *Listen to Britain* is deliberately designed as propaganda, to raise morale, to show Britons as cheerful but resolute. In *Every Day Except Christmas*, it is used to eulogise and possibly romanticise the working man and woman, and in *A Film About Nice*, to point up the divide between rich and poor. As Bill Nichols has pointed out, the stylistic reflexivities of such films 'draw attention to their own patterns so consistently that they evolve into a poetic [...] mode of presentation, loosening the linkage to a historical referent in favour of more internally generated foci' (Nichols 1991: 70). In other words, the self-evident artifice of such films draws attention to itself as much as the apparent documentary content. This argument forms part of Nichols' categorisation of documentary film into four main types: expository (where the telling of information is paramount), observational (where the filmmaker is a detached observer), interactive (where they observe but also become actively involved with the subject) and reflexive (where devices of all the other modes can be used but where their assumption of unproblematic realism is challenged) (Nichols 1991: 33). In this context, as has already been alluded to, *A Film About Nice* is observational but employs a poetic approach to actuality and the use of audio is especially reflexive.

Whilst the arguments over notions of reality and truthfulness in documentary and film generally have been very well rehearsed over many decades, it is worth a very brief outline of them in order to address potential charges of misrepresentation in the more reflexive, aesthetic approach discussed. The more journalistic forms of observational documentary apparently adhere to André Bazin's 1950s idea of film as a 'window on the world'. According to Bazin, film above all the plastic arts, owing to its photographic basis, enables a transfer of 'the reality from the thing to its representation' (Bazin in Nagib and Mello 2009: xvi). He emphasised deep focus, long takes, static shots and a static camera to this end – all common techniques in observational documentaries (and *A Film About Nice*). This 'naïve' idea was later challenged by numerous theories in the 1960s and especially 1970s dominated perhaps by social constructivism that holds that all representations are culturally coded: 'they do not reflect

any external, inherent, or “transcendent” realities, but are contingent on convention, human perception, history, and social experience’ (Elsaesser 2009: 6). Thus issues of race, gender, class, (and hence power hierarchies) as well as personal identity and subjectivity, become all important. Vaughan has said that documentary film is inevitably a construction, the editor allowing ‘the film to take on the form to which it seems to aspire’ and that it is always distinguished from reality, because it is ‘about something’ (Vaughan 1999: 21), but he despairs that for some this has led to the conclusion that ‘since fiction is narrative, anything that partakes of narrative must be fiction’ (Vaughan 1999: xvii). The film image is thus not so much a window of truth but a mirror of potential lies. However, this challenge to indexicality has in more recent times been challenged itself as critics of constructivism cry ‘there must be such a thing as material reality [!]’ that can to some extent be represented (Elsaesser 2009: 7). Vaughan has pointed out that ‘all events, at least in human affairs, are *events perceived by* somebody’ but that documentary filmmakers attempt to ‘prevent their own perceptions from intervening between the viewer and the pro-filmic’ (Vaughan 1999: 57). Jay Ruby on the other hand, says in an argument for self-reflexivity, that documentary filmmakers have a duty ‘*not* to be objective’ since they are essentially ‘interpreters of the world’ (Ruby 2005 [1977]: 45). I would like to argue that the observational documentary does have the possibility to achieve some kind of ‘reality effect’ but in the process, films like *Listen to Britain* and *A Film About Nice* emphasise the poetic, artistic approach as that not only satisfies Anderson’s idea that the artist’s first duty is to create but can engage an audience on an aesthetic and sensorial level. This can be greatly enhanced, even engendered by a concentration on the creative treatment of sound and music which, as Corner says, allows:

feelings and ideas [to] become condensed upon objects, bodies and places, modified by the physical itself whilst at the same time as the physical itself is perceived within the developing thematics. Such a dialectics, at once sensual and intellectual, referentially committed yet often possessed of a dream-like potential for the indirectly suggestive and associative, is central to the documentary as an aesthetic project.

(Corner 2003: 97, see also Cox 2011)

Moving beyond sensual and aesthetic concerns and returning to the notion of honest representation, this process of transcending ‘naturalness’ has a greater capacity to ‘[...] “penetrate the reality of its particular world” since as Brecht has said “realism [doesn’t] show what things really ‘look like’ but how they really are”’ (Anderson in Sussex 1969: 12). It is not a truly objective reality however but a partly subjective one, that nevertheless is more about showing than telling, so allows the audience their own subjective interpretation. The legacy of constructivism cannot be ignored – we know there are limitations of all kinds in representation so any return to earlier ‘naiveties’ of approach can only be done in a knowing way and with an awareness of those limitations (Nichols 1991: 63).

This seems to be a more transparent approach to me than an apparently observational/factual one that purports to be objective but is in fact mired in the perceptions of the filmmaker (and numerous other ‘constructions’) ‘intervening between the viewer and the pro-filmic’. Chanan’s insidious manipulation of sound is only so if it is not clearly self-reflexive.

## SENSUALITY

One of the important considerations when constructing the soundtrack to ‘Le cirque nocturne’ was the simple idea of providing sensual pleasure for the listener. This is a concern that predates any involvement with composing soundtracks, to my work as a ‘pure’ music composer and has continued with that involving sound combined with images. Though somewhat at odds with the modernist aesthetic out of which my practice partially grew, my earlier background as a popular musician has always ensured a certain hedonistic abandon. So the combination of street music and other sounds is always predicated on the fact that it should make some kind of ‘musical sense’ and that it should be an enjoyable listen in its own right, enjoyable by my own aesthetic preferences that is. In practice, what this means is that editing decisions were made on this basis so if a certain sonic or visual edit did not satisfy these requirements, a new one needed to be found. A good example occurs around the middle of ‘Le cirque nocturne’ as synchronous sound and image show the pianist finishing the Liszt; a tram bell tolls as he strikes the final chord and we see a tram go by in the background, whilst some soca music recorded at an outdoor concert gradually fades in. A dreamy synthesizer-based tram jingle intones, obviously linked to the tram but as we are not on the tram, then is clearly disembodied from it, and yet its harmonies compliment the soca. As the scene changes to two rather odd dancing Michael Jackson impersonators, this music seems to almost accompany them but in fact completely replaces Jackson’s actual music that is playing on their ghetto blaster. The music fades suddenly as we cut to the ‘singing’ beggar for the first time and is replaced by a re-occurrence of an ominous rolling piano chord. However, as the beggar wails and the piano becomes more animated, the soca music fades back up, heralded by a burst of the beach conga-player, and this time is in harmony with the piano. The whole sequence only lasts about a minute and is continually overlaid with ambient street noise so the overall effect is very subtle, yet the attention to detail and concern for a kind of musical coherence is paramount. By and large the soundtrack was composed first in this movement, to allow the sonic element to genuinely lead the way, to form the structure, though the relationship between sound and image editing was still very fluid and interrelated as it is throughout the film. A parallel has already been drawn with Jennings’ structural use of sound in *Listen to Britain* and the general musicality of his approach to filmic construction; the influence is explicit here.

Andy Birtwistle points out that ‘the common conception of film as a binary construct of sound and image precludes engagement with the trans-sensory or inter-sensory experience of cinema’ (Birtwistle 2010: 19) and,

I would argue, with the conception of many filmmakers in the first place. One of the features that marks out all the films discussed here is the way that ‘trans-sensory experience’ seems to form their very bedrock from conception and in the case of *A Film About Nice*, was also intrinsic to the process of actually constructing it in the edit suite. The experience of wandering through the streets of Nice on a summer night is generally pleasurable and full of musical interest so lent itself very well to the treatment described, but it also presented moments of tension and disquiet, of the sense that not everything was quite as relaxed and benign as appeared on the surface. These moments of discord and brooding dis-harmony are of course themselves rich pickings from an artistic point of view, though I was careful not to overdo this element for the sake of artistic interest; I am still ‘referentially committed’. Thomas Elsaesser has noted that the post-structuralist theoretical emphasis prevalent today is centred more on the sensorial, physicality, and the body in relation to film rather than questions of signification (Elsaesser 2009: 7) whilst Birtwistle suggests there is an ‘increased interest in perception, embodiment and the senses [...] seen by some as part of a broader “affective turn” [...] as opposed to the “linguistic turn” of the 1960s’ (Birtwistle 2010: 6), ‘affective’ in the sense of how film affects us sensually rather than cognitively (this relates strongly to Corner’s idea of the ‘dream-like potential for the indirectly suggestive and associative’ nature of film sound). Birtwistle also makes the interesting point that the almost unthinking way we ‘formulate sounds in terms of the objects or events perceived as their source’ problematises notions of signification as it ‘limits, to issues of representation, the ways in which we might come to terms with these sounds, whilst simultaneously ascribing to them a secondary status’ (Birtwistle 2010: 5). So the visceral use of timbres more or less abstracted from their source in the manner of Schaeffer’s *musique concrète* or Ferrari’s anecdotal music, or the purely sensual pleasure derived from musical interplay, both techniques employed in *A Film About Nice*, seem to have no place within this kind of thinking. One wonders how much this affects the way filmmakers themselves conceive of their films, especially within the realm of documentary production.

As long ago as 1929 in a discussion on the then new phenomenon of ‘sound film’, Vsevolod Pudovkin considered it ‘false to consider sound merely as a mechanical device enabling us to enhance the naturalness of the image’ (Pudovkin 1935: 155), asking instead that ‘the rich deeps of meaning potential in sound film creatively handled be discovered and plumbed’ (p. 165). I would concur with Vaughan that all documentary is to some extent a construct; this must be acknowledged both theoretically and practically so the creative manipulation of image and especially sound can achieve some kind of ‘reality effect’. In the process I would emphasise the poetic approach as that can satisfy the artist’s creative imperative whilst at the same time engage an audience on an aesthetic and sensorial level. This can be greatly enhanced, if not engendered by a concentration on the evocative power of sound and music. And as Lindsay Anderson said,

this process of transcending ‘naturalness’ has a greater capacity to ‘penetrate the reality of its particular world’.

The artist lies  
For the improvement of truth. Believe him.  
(Charles Tomlinson)

‘Le cirque nocturne’ can be viewed and listened to at: <https://vimeo.com/52739751>

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## CONTRIBUTOR'S DETAILS

Geoffrey Cox studied Music at Liverpool Community College, and then at The University of Huddersfield, graduating with a first degree in Music in 1999 and a Ph.D. in Composition in 2007, which explores the use of contemporary musical borrowing practices. He is a composer of both acoustic and electronic music in a variety of genres from avant-garde to more popular styles. Since the mid-2000s his interest in filmmaking, image editing and working with visual images in a musical context, has come to the fore in a number of solo projects and collaborations with Keith Marley of Liverpool John Moores University. Notable film production credits include: *Introducing W. C. Lowry* (Marley and Cox 2000), *You Are Not I* (Marley and Cox 2001), *Cider Makers* (Marley and Cox 2007), *No Escape* (Cox 2009) and *A Film About Nice* (Marley and Cox 2010). The soundtrack to *A Film About Nice* won Best Sound Design / Editing in the Shorts category at The Maverick Movie Awards 2012 (<http://www.maverickmovieawards.com/shorts2012.html>). He is currently working on a film about The Colne Valley Tree Society of West Yorkshire, UK called *Tree People* to be released in 2014.

Contact: [g.m.cox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:g.m.cox@hud.ac.uk)

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