

# Cinematic Polyphony in Lucrecia Martel's Cinema: The Musicality of Narrative Film in *The Headless Woman*

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**ABSTRACT.** This article provides a brief overview on the concept of musicality in fiction cinema language, understanding the comparative analysis of both art forms and considering cinema as a potentially musical construction. Furthermore, the examination of polyphonic musical textures and its methodical application in the formal analysis of Lucrecia Martel's cinema (namely in her 2008 film *The Headless Woman*) provides a new perspective on the aesthetic values of the Argentinian filmmaker's work with sound and image, which unveils other forms of assuming fiction film narration.

Initially, a brief consideration on the old concept of 'Pure Cinema', which many European avant-garde filmmakers from the beginning of the 20th century elaborated as a way to conceive cinema's authentic language, places the musical form as the closest and purest in relation to cinema. These ideas enlighten the first clues to understand the musicality embedded in the film medium. Filmmakers like Germaine Dulac and later scholars and thinkers will address the problematic of musical forms and cinema language, namely in regard to three elements: movement, rhythm and time. During the analysis of both art forms, these three concepts seem to emerge as the linking areas of both universes, as the defining characteristics of cinema's potential analogy with music that both film scholars and film creators cannot deny.

**KEYWORDS:**

polyphony, musicality, pure cinema, Lucrecia Martel, film rhythm, sound design.

Subsequently, these innate features that connect music and cinema forms, expand themselves even more by thoroughly conceiving cinema as a multiverse with intertwined musical structures that gear the whole cinematic experience. For instance, musical textures, which in musicology define the quantity and form (quality) in which several instruments/voices are composed simultaneously, serves as a valid example to propose alternative ways to define cinematic structures. In this case, polyphonic musical texture, described as the pluralistic and non-hierarchised composition of intertwined melodic and harmonic voices, is suggested to understand an important dimension of the cinema

language in the films of the Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel. Notably the film *The Headless Woman* presents a visual, sonic, and general cinematic form that uses analogue ideas to the ones in polyphonic music. The article then approaches the proposal of a visual, and furthermore *cinematic polyphony*, by analysing the essential elements of this kind of musical concept, focusing mainly on the counterpoint between visuals and sounds, the interplay between dialogues, noises and other layers of the soundtracks, and the multiplicity of visual systems that coexist in the same shot or scene, which bring altogether a comprehensive cinematic experience that resembles more the principles of musical composition than those of any other art form.

## Introduction

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

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

Lucrecia Martel's filmography, which becomes part of the so-called 'Nuevo Cine Argentino' (New Argentinian Cinema), stands out by the profound interaction of image and sound, and has been used as an example of how sound can have supremacy or equally narrative value in film language. Her stories usually involve multiple characters and female protagonists, and are often dealing with family deconstruction, social clashes, and femininity in Argentinian society. The polyphonic realm of her film language could be easily noticed in the way the soundscapes are treated as a choral symphony of dialogues, ambiances and noises that interact and merge with each other simultaneously; but moreover, this polyphonic aspect can be taken beyond the sonic world into the relation of sound and image in every scene, the multi-layered imagery of her shots, and at a greater scale, to the way storylines, characters, spaces, and symbols interact with each other. Finally, polyphonic characteristics can be deduced from the way Martel envisions the screenwriting and the socio-political dimensions of the themes her films deal with. I will focus mainly on her latest film *The Headless Woman* (2008), whose narrative departs from the intimate level of her protagonist, to the complexity of the family she belongs to, and in a bolder level of analysis, to the encounter of two social statuses in the northern region of Argentina, which paradoxically becomes also a simultaneous chant of voices. However, polyphony and musicality as such will remain always the main path to discover these different dimensions of her cinematic world from a purely formal methodology.

## Musicality in fiction film: music for the eyes

### Pure cinema

Many avant-garde artists from the beginning of the 20th century were searching for 'absolute' languages that could be ideal and spiritual, and not being at the service of second purposes by the representation of other realities or appearances. Wassily Kandinsky considered that one of the keys to this theoretical approach was the study of the language of music, which he considered would be the ultimate spiritual and purest art form. Later, other artists such as Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and particularly Germaine Dulac brought these approaches to the realm of cinematic language. The fact that cinema is the only visual art that has the privilege of using time and movement, they thought it could have the potential to achieve this absolute *purity* of language and be even closer to music than painting.

Henri Chomette was the first one to use the term "pure cinema" when he declared: The cinema is not limited to the representative mode. It can create, and has already created a sort of rhythm. Thanks to this rhythm the cinema can draw fresh strength from

itself which, forgoing the logic of facts and the reality of objects, may beget a series of unknown visions, inconceivable outside the union of lens and film. Intrinsic cinema, or if you prefer, pure cinema – because it is separated from every other element, whether dramatic or documentary<sup>1</sup> (Beyle & d'Hugues 1999: 33).

It is important to notice the use of the word *rhythm*, which of course refers implicitly to the musical notion. Music provided their works with the creative freedom, spirituality and truthfulness of the film medium, but at the same time it proposed strict rules for composition that should not be disregarded. On top of that, most of their films were titled after musical terms: *fugue*, *opus*, *orchestra*, *counterpoint*, *symphony*, and so on. Applying these rules to the creation of film images is what interests us the most in the search for a cinema musicality.

The importance of her legacy might lie in the fact that her approach to a *Visual Symphony*, as she called it, can be conceived in the usual images of narrative filmmaking: human characters interacting, movement in real places, locations, light and shadow interacting with objects and bodies. “The integral film that we are all dreaming of composing is a visual symphony made of rhythmic images, which only the sensation of an artist can coordinate and cast onto the screen ... There is the symphony, pure music. Why wouldn't the cinema also have its own symphony?”<sup>2</sup> (Williams 2014: 141).

### Rhythm, movement and time

Film theorist Noël Burch has contributed important elements to the considerations of film's musical potential in his book *Theory of Film Practice*. Although with some discretion on whether it is accurate to fully apply musical patterns and structures into film creation, he considered the importance of thinking about other aspects of the filmic formality rather than the over-saturated attention to story, plot, and screen-writing:

The contemporary film narrative is gradually liberating itself from the constraints of the literary or pseudo-literary forms that played a large part in bringing about the 'zero point of cinematic style' that reigned supreme during the 1930s and 1940s and still remains in a position of some strength today. It is only through systematic and thorough exploration of the structural possibilities inherent in the cinematic parameters I have been describing that film will be liberated from the old narrative forms and develop new 'open' forms that will have more in common with the formal strategies of post-Debussyan music than with those of the pre-Joycean novel (Burch 1969: 15).

1 Henri Chomette, as quoted in Claude Beyle and Philippe d'Hugues. *The Forgotten Names of French Cinema*. Editions du Cerf. Paris, 1999, p. 33.

2 Germaine Dulac, as quoted in Tami Williams. *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations*. University of Illinois Press, p. 128.

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

For Burch, the notion of musical rhythm in film is highly debatable due to the fact that cinema rhythm is not only the repetition of shots at a certain duration, but that it is affected by a huge array of other variables implicit in the film form (Burch 1969: 67). Kulezic-Wilson, on the same topic, considering rhythm and the duration of shots but from a more optimistic point of view, argues that:

the aspect of duration would not only include the measure of length but would have to consider the influence of the spatial/visual elements on the perception of temporality. Depending on the content, composition, framing, camera movement of the shot and its ‘density’, two shots of the same length might be perceived as being different in duration (Kulezic-Wilson 2015: 38).

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

Time, apart from being the soul to define rhythm and its patterns, is undoubtedly one of the main aspects that make cinema stand out from other arts. Quoting in general terms the ideas of Tarkovsky, the art of cinema might be the art of *sculpting in time*. Time is also the key aspect of music, the ground where music finds a real shape, and the element that is subjectively transformed when music shapes time with sounds. Moreover, both art forms are perceived in a delimited amount of time, where time itself is manipulated to affect the spectators’ reaction.

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

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

## Film polyphony

### Music polyphony

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

Apart from polyphonic, it is also possible to identify other musical textures such as monophonic, homophonic, biphonic and homorhythmic. What interests us here is the identification of the polyphonic notion, the *choral* web of musical lines as opposed to the monophonic texture where only one instrument's melody is heard (see Fig. 1 and 2).



**Duos from Cantata 80.4**  
LET VOICE SOLO PARTS ALWAYS PREDOMINATE

J. S. Bach [arr. P. Iaqqg] BWV 80.4  
Aria for Soprano and Bc "Komm in"  
arr. for String Duos: Violin or Viola with Cello, Violin with Viola

$\text{♩} = 52$

1 Violin for Soprano Solo Duo with Viola or Cello

1 Viola for Soprano Solo Duo with Cello

2 Viola for Bc Duo with Violin

2 Violoncello for Bc Duo with Violin or Viola

Vln. 1

Vla.

Vla.

Vc.

Figure 2. Example of a score for a polyphonic texture<sup>4</sup>

It is noteworthy to observe from this last example of a polyphonic score (Fig. 2) how the composition starts with only two voices and as time progresses it becomes more complex and *thicker* when the other instruments join the melody, creating a particular sense of rhythm and movement. In music theory, these multiple voices acquire certain labels depending on their role inside the composition (primary melody, secondary melody, supporting melody, static support, harmonic support, etc.). Interestingly enough, there is a huge resemblance of these categories of polyphonic voices with some aspects of film narration. For instance, the relations and simultaneous development of main characters and secondary characters, as well as the multiple storylines, central and secondary images and metaphors, not to mention the hierarchy of sound and images, or the different layers of soundscapes, dialogues and music.

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

4 Score excerpt: Bach, J. S. (1727–31, rev. 1744–47). Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott [4nd Movement: Aria (soprano): Komm in mein Herzenhaus (B minor)]. Arrangement and transcription for strings by Peter Lang (2015).

be strengthened by musical concepts such as rhythm, melodic and harmonic relations between the multiple tracks or *voices* it has, and how they are intertwined. Moreover, the very same conception of film soundtrack as the mixing and weave of multiple tracks (dialogues, ambiances, incidental noises, music, sound effects) is the perfect groundwork for implementing polyphonic schemes. For instance, how *thick* or *dense* the musical texture of a film soundtrack is, might amplify certain expressive or dramatic elements of the film itself. Similarly, the range of sounds (not only including the volume/dynamics, but also the pitch and timbre) and their rhythmic relation to each other could set up many different sonic textures and provide important contributions to cinema storytelling.

### Visual polyphony

Considering the complexity of voices and the multiple layers involved at the core of the polyphonic concept, visual polyphony could resemble an eclectic and somewhat *baroque* visual design where several voices of apparently equal relevance coexist in the same image.<sup>5</sup> Several types of images from different styles would come to mind when trying to think of a polyphonic imagery, but since our interest resides in the filmic image, we must then reconsider visual appreciations in relation with movement and time.

When the dimensions of movement, and consequently the transformation of time, are considered in the capture and projection of moving images, the multi-layered factors of an image increase by a considerable amount. Not only is the filmic image being confronted by the multiple visual elements that might coexist inside the frame, but also by the consideration of each element's movement or stasis, and the latent appearance or disappearance of elements. Moreover, the complexity of this situation increases when aspects of camera movement and editing are taken into account.

Therefore, moving-image polyphony should be thought in relation with the multiple variables of visuals, both as static images and in relation with movement and time, interpreting them as the various *voices* or *instruments* of the whole visual symphony. The harmonic assemble of these elements could result in both simple and extremely complex visual systems that might resemble the polyphonic texture of a musical piece. When the dimensions of movement, and consequently the transformation of time, are considered in the capture and projection of moving images, the multi-layered factors of an image increase by a considerable amount. Not only the filmic image is being confronted by the multiple visual elements that might coexist inside the frame, but also by the consideration of each element's movement or stasis, and the latent appearance or disappearance

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

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We might think of several examples for this kind of polyphonic cinema with arguably different aesthetic approaches and outcomes. For instance, French filmmaker Jacques Tati, whose understanding of visual architecture is remarkable, could be a good example of polyphonic imagery in film. The opening scenes of his 1967 film *Playtime*, depicts an apparently normal routine in the interior of a business building. Two nuns walk and guide us to a wide shot of one of the corridors where, after a while, a complex arrangement of movements, characters and situations unfold, creating a unique type of visual humour. Furthermore, the way image composition, lines, squares, movement and characters are depicted, resembles the polyphonic notion, especially if we consider that none of these elements seem to gain more importance than others, they all take part as instruments coming in and out of a symphony: A seated couple look at the two nuns passing by, a rhythmical arrangement of chairs and workspaces, three people with dark clothes are positioned symmetrically against a rather clear-grey background, workers and businessmen enter and exit the frame forcing our eyes to make internal montage of situations, sporadic interactions between some of the characters, all of it happening at the same time in a simultaneous orchestration of image and movements, not to mention the rhythmical usage of sound design, where distant conversations, steps, and occasional noises play an important role in the musical feeling of the scene (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Opening scene from Tati's *Playtime* (1967)

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

In order to do this, we will have to draw from our silent film experience an example of polyphonic montage, where shot is linked to shot not merely through one indication-movement, or light values, or stage in the exposition of the plot, or the like – but through a simultaneous advance of a multiple series of lines, each maintaining an independent compositional course and each contributing to the total compositional course of the sequence (Eisenstein 1942: 75).

Danijela Kulezic-Wilson analyses Eisenstein's film *The Old and the New* (1934) in relation to his use of polyphonic montage, highlighting that not only the polyphonic aspect of his cinema is reduced to the formality of the images but also to the complexity of its conceptual and emotional effects, an attribute of polyphonic film language that will also be seen in Lucrecia Martel's films: "For Eisenstein, polyphonic montage is a means of combining constructive elements of a composition's whole, not only those that are part of the image but also conceptual and affective ones. For instance, in the 'procession sequence' in his film *The Old and the New* (1934) he identifies polyphonic 'lines of the heat', 'line of growing ecstasy', lines of male and female voices (the faces of male and female singers), the lines of those who are kneeling along with the lines of those who are crawling. In this, 'the general course of the montage was an uninterrupted interweaving of these diverse themes into one unified movement. Each montage-piece had a double responsibility – to build the total line as well as to continue the movement within each of the contributory themes'" (Kulezic-Wilson 2015).

In an attempt to grasp true film language, not only should image be taken into consideration while devising the formality of its creation, sound should also play an important role. Since the attributes of film sound are much more similar in form to the ones in music, the relation of sound and image and its appropriate blending into the orchestration of a polyphonic cinema would deliver a comprehensive ground for unfolding cinema's true musicality.

## Musicality in Lucrecia Martel's films

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

In *The Headless Woman*, while Veronica drives her car in the countryside, she hits something on the road; cheerful rock-style music is being played on the radio. The music never stops. The dramatic situation of the car accident is contrasted with the on-going music inside the car. Both rhythms collide in one shot, the austere and dramatic situation of Veronica, who does not know what to do, and the cheerful music that also makes us aware of the present time unfolding. Time is explored here by the use of diegetic music, and by the colliding of visual and sound movements.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most musical elements of her films is the use of dialogues, which, apart from fulfilling the habitual mission of information delivery and plot development, obtain a distinctive melodic and rhythmic attribute through acting, *mise-en-scène*, and editing. In this topic we should also value her choice of naturalistic and organic dialogue deliveries, which make use of the musicality embedded in Spanish language, and also of the accent and the specificities of the speech habits in the Salta region. Regarding the musical quality of her film's characters, Lucrecia Martel says:

That is the key. First, because we are musical animals/instruments, we produce sounds with a huge array of modulations... I think that is an extraordinary thing. Furthermore, speech has this double capability to be articulated as language and sound. And in the realm of being sound, between breathing, rhythm, air, tones, volume, high and low pitches, there is processes... With sound you can create things, effects. Not only with senses... For me, all the structures of orality seem quite close when I try to think the structures of the audio-visual tale. Things like drifting, slowing down, the repetition, forcing a topic, the unintelligible, the return to a topic.<sup>7</sup>

Of course when Martel mentions *drifting, forcing or returning to a topic, slowing down* and so on, she is indeed talking about musical qualities of the speech and the way they can be achieved in cinema, and these properties are intrinsically related with rhythm.

6 See *La Mujer sin Cabeza (The Headless Woman)*, (2008) from 04:22 to 06:07.

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

In Martel's films, rhythm unfolds from the organic method of actors' performances, where the rather modest composition of shots carries us to a state of uncertainty. Her films are not recognised for their extravagant use of fast editing or visual effects to carry on the rhythmic patterns, but from the observation of a reality that nonetheless is absolutely constructed from fictional paradigms. Time is manipulated to its most expressive extents, as in the subjective feeling of musical tempo, rhythm, and dynamics. The heavy air breathing of *La Ciénaga* accounts for multiple interpretations of the passage of time: Are the scenes long or is it just the feeling of stasis and decadence? How much time is narrated along the film and how is our relation with its temporality?

### Visual and sonic polyphony in *The Headless Woman*

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

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

Nevertheless, cinematic polyphony in Martel's works is not limited only to the realm of sound design. Visual polyphony, and moreover the confabulation of image and sound polyphonic elements, creates what sums up for a more comprehensive film polyphonic texture. The austere and carefully designed shots of *The Headless Woman* serve as starting point to discover the polyphonic aspects of its visual universe. Although the film does not make use of fancy camera movements or extremely complex cinematography devices, the cleverness of its framing added to the simple but powerful sense of cinema montage, creates the right tools to immerse us in the skin of the protagonist. Starting from the fact that some of the shots deliberately leave Veronica's head out of frame (see Fig. 4), creating a metaphoric game with the title of the movie and telling us a lot about the main character's state of mind. Similar visual tools are employed, such as the calculated choices of focus points, the spatial depth of a shot, and most importantly, the consideration on what is left inside and outside of the frame. In this film, life spills over and out of the frame and denounces the dynamics of the situations that happen off-screen. This last factor is highly strengthened by the relation of sound and image.

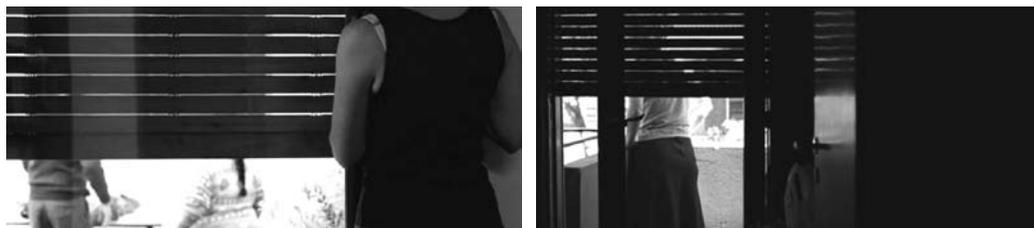


Figure 4. Headless shots in *The Headless Woman* (2008)

Polyphonic imagery is usually found in *The Headless Woman* when the mise-en-scène makes use of multiple layers of action, opening the opportunity to construct complex image compositions in which the several image layers coexist. This technique is convenient to explore the multiplicity of actions, but also to suggest the underlying tensions that otherwise would come upfront too quickly, or be hidden on a flat *monophonic* surface. In Fig. 5 and 6 we can analyse the interwoven lines of imagery that play simultaneously in a shot. Shapes, lines, reflections, blurriness, objects and human bodies participate in these compositions.



Figure 5a. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2008)



Figure 5b. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2008)



Figure 6. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2008)

The interweaving of both image and sound polyphonic elements is what represents one of the most interesting features in Lucrecia Martel's films. In *The Headless Woman*, the image design is thought in terms of its dialogue with sound, the fact that out of frame, shallow depth of field, or deep space framing techniques are used is not a mere display of photographic style, but a tool to leave an open space for sound instrumentation to play a role in the whole cinematic symphony (see Fig. 7 and 8).

One of the main characteristics of polyphonic texture in music is that the multiple voices of the composition have little or no hierarchy patterns among themselves, as opposed to, for instance, the homophonic texture.<sup>8</sup> Polyphonic compositions construct

<sup>8</sup> In music, the homophonic texture is the most commonly used by popular music. It does use a multiplicity of instruments at the same time, but its hierarchical structure prioritises only one main melodic voice, while the other instruments serve as harmonic or rhythmical bases.



Figure 7. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2008)



Figure 8. Shot from *The Headless Woman* (2008)

both melodic and harmonic lines in a system where the aesthetic appreciation of music is based on the counterpoints and the multiplicity of voices that converse with each other.

Polyphonic music doesn't prioritise one voice over the others, instead it leaves the possibility for multiples voices to perform different roles of melody and harmony, and to be able to interact and weave without subordinating the prominence of each one. Likewise, in *The Headless Woman* the supremacy of visual narrative loses its power when the behaviour of the visual conception is one of a musical instrument that forms part of a big orchestra. However, the discussion here should not be taken in favour of the narrative supremacy of sound design, but in the consideration of all these elements as equal (yet with different aesthetic qualities) voices in the overall construction of cinema language.

The polyphonic dimension of this film could be envisioned in a similar graphic as Eisenstein's polyphonic montage, or as a *film full score* (resembling the symphonic musical *full score* used by the director). A more complex level of polyphony is achieved in the scene where Veronica and her sister meet their mother. The scene develops as the three of them watch an old home-made video of Veronica's wedding. The sound of the video is heard while the women's voices also interact and almost compose a soundtrack for the video. Camera work focuses mostly on close ups, leaving us with a sense of no-ubiquity

which fits perfectly well with Veronica's emotional state. The images of the video are clearly seen only at the beginning, afterwards its presence is only perceived through the indistinctive sound of the TV. Instead, it is the women's faces what we are exposed to, and even when the TV is in the frame the depth of field privileges Veronica, leaving the video images out of focus. The multilayer qualities of this scene go beyond the simple relations of sound and image if we also consider the time implications and meta-language issues of the situation: Mother and daughters are watching a concrete representation of their individual and collective memories, the scene's expressive layers range from the sounds of the video and its image, to the timing of the scene itself with its own audio-visual layers, and moreover with the implications of the act of remembering, which at this point of the story is quite a complex task for Veronica. All of these elements coexist and sing at a certain rhythm, creating a harmonic composition of cinematic polyphony (see *The Headless Woman*, 2008, from 32:38 to 35:28).

### Martel's musicality and narrative cinema

The polyphonic aspects of Martel's cinema can be analysed at a greater level about its implications in the actual process of storytelling of fiction film, and in the unique dramaturgy structure that Martel uses. With these considerations we would be approaching a relevant scope of the study of musicality in film, where it not only serves the superfluous desires for formality and film style creation, but also the realisation that it actually has as much potential as the thorough analysis of plots and dramatic constructions in movie making screenwriting.

In *The Headless Woman*, the multiple layers of movement, actions, images and sound address the dramatic constructions of its characters conflicts. Veronica's intimate struggle is highlighted by the way the throbbing universe that surrounds her is presented, sometimes accusing her, suffocating her, sometimes just denouncing her loneliness and the dilemma of her situation. Whenever polyphonic strategies are used in the film's scenes, they fulfil a narrative or conceptual task: the constant murmur of a family, which feels like a living organism constantly breathing around Veronica's static and numb presence; the haunting existence of other lower class families, apparently secondary characters that interrupt the flow of Veronica's family status; the multiple levels of conversation that only draws attention to Veronica's silence, suggesting the imminence of the secrets kept inside her mind; the hidden truths that become apparent not through direct dialogues, but with the understanding of visual and sonic subtexts (in this aspect polyphony has a big role by condensing the multiplicity of information and bringing up new conceptual elements that would only come alive with the woven texture of its audio-visual

voices); and the somewhat anti-climatic structure of his screenwriting, intensified by the fact that most of this multiple characters and dramatic lines continue their flow towards and over the end of the film, as if they were ethereal or eternal repetitions of melodies.

In his appreciation of polyphonic use of sound design in Lucrecia Martel's films, film scholar Dominique Russell declares that Martel's films' "use of sound is almost orchestral, as polyphonic as her narratives"<sup>9</sup> (Russell 2008). Although Russell's appreciation is undoubtedly accurate in terms of describing the nature of her films soundscapes, I would suggest to transform the sentence for the purposes of this discussion, and say that 'the narrative construction in Lucrecia Martel's films is as polyphonic as the sound design of her films.'

*The Headless Woman* is a film that basically deals with a contrasting reality of two different social classes in the Northern region of Argentina (Salta). This aspect could be seen in the film as the disparity of upper class families that usually come from the capital or big cities, and lower class families that come from more rural and indigenous ancestry. The insinuation of Veronica hitting a lower class kid with her car and then running away represents no small complexity in the social and personal aspect of the film. Some of these truths are constantly hidden from the spectator, and the film situates itself in a rather subjective narration of Veronica's struggling and the universe that surrounds her. The film never takes a denouncing position, neither does it try to depict evil or good intentions in regards to this clash of social structures.

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

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

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

## Conclusion

A brief revision of experimental cinema and comparative studies reveals important similarities in the intrinsic aspects of both film and music: the manipulation of time, the sense of movement and the concept of rhythm accounts for a multiplicity of expressive tools that cinema could make use of. Therefore, it is a duty of both filmmakers and film studies researchers to explore the implications of musical formalities in the conception and perception of cinema language.

It seems quite accurate to make use of complex and abstract musical concepts in the attempt to describe Lucrecia Martel's cinema due to the fact that her film style does not respond to classical Hollywood conventions, and moreover when considering the extremely expressive use of both sound and image design to tell her stories. Although some critics have raised awareness about her unique understanding of sound design, not much has been said regarding the undoubtedly musical properties of her cinema, which range from the compositional mixing of soundscapes, to the rhythm of the *mise-en-scène*, and the efficient way in which image and sound create a musical amalgam that is extremely hard to express in verbal terms. Polyphonic texture represents an accurate way to define some aspects of Martel's cinema language, especially in regard to her images, voices, dialogues, spaces and shapes, and its simultaneous manifestation throughout the film, offers an important point of view about the responsibilities of image and sound design in the musicality of a narrative film. Furthermore, the whole structure of the film's macro rhythm responds much more to musical configurations than to screenwriting ones.

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

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## Kinematografinė polifonija Lucrecia'os Martel kine: pasakojimo muzikalumas filme „Moteris be galvos“

SANTRAUKA. Remiantis muzikos ir kino meno formų lyginamąja analize ir teiginiu, kad kinas potencialiai yra „muzikinė struktūra“, šiame straipsnyje trumpai apžvelgiamas meninio filmo kalbos muzikalumas. Polifoninės muzikos faktūra ir metodiškas jos panaudojimas Lucrecia'os Martel filme „Moteris be galvos“ (2008) atskleidžia naują argentiniečių režisierės darbo su garsu ir vaizdu estetinių vertybių perspektyvą bei kitas naratyvo formas.

Straipsnyje trumpai aptariama „grynojo kino“ nuostata, kuria daugelis Europos avangardistų kino meistrų XX a. pradžioje grindė autentiškos kino kalbos paieškas. Čia muzikinė forma tampa arčiausiu ir gryniausiu kino giminaičiu. Šios nuostatos leidžia apčiuopti kino meno prigimtinį muzikalumą. Kino režisieriai (pvz., Germaine Dulac) bei vėlesni tyrėjai ir mąstytojai analizavo muzikinės formos ir kino kalbos klausimus remdamiesi trimis elementais: judėjimu, ritmu ir laiku. Abiejų meno formų analizėje šie trys parametrai išskyla kaip jungiantys elementai, apibrėžiantys būdinguosius potencialios kino ir muzikos analogijos bruožus.

Šie prigimtiniai muziką ir kiną jungiantys bruožai dar prasiplečia kiną suvokiant kaip daugialypį reiškinį, persmelktą muzikinių struktūrų analogijų, jungiančių visą kinematografinį patyrimą; pavyzdžiui, muzikinės faktūros analogija yra tinkama kalbant apie kinematografinės struktūras. Šiuo atveju polifoninės muzikos faktūra, kaip pluralistinė ir nehierarchinė sistema, jungianti melodinius ir harmoninius balsus, gali būti laikoma argentiniečių režisierės Lucrecia'os Martel kinematografinės kalbos atitikmeniu. Filme „Moteris be galvos“ išryškėjusios vizualinės, garsinės ir bendrosios kinematografinės raiškos formos atitinka polifoninės muzikos parametrus.

Analizuojant tokius aspektus kaip vaizdo ir garso kontrapunktas, dialogų, triukšmo ir kitų garso takelio elementų sąveika, taip pat vizualinių sistemų daugiasluoksniškumas, vizualinis ir kinematografinis šio patyrimo polifoniškumas, labiausiai priartėjama prie muzikinės kompozicijos analogijų.

### REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:

polifonija, muzikalumas, grynasis kinas, Lucrecia Martel, filmo ritmas, garso dizainas.