

Urban sounds and their hearing through cinema

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse how films can represent urban sound ambiances. Therefore, it takes a closer look at the so called “city sinfonies”, films made between the late silent era and the early sound years. In a second section, it moves forward to contemporary cinema, analysing productions in which the representation of the city area plays a central part. In each of the films cited, and at this point it makes no difference to this analysis which period they come from, it is of our interest to think of the specific part of the cinematic representation given to sound, as far as it is possible to think about how listening to those films can lead the spectator towards a reflexion on how they relate to sounds that surround them in the urban space they live in.

Keywords

Sound. Cinema. City. Ambient Sound. Hearing.

1 Introduction

*This town's so strange
They built it to change
And while we're sleeping all the streets, they
rearrange*
Arcade Fire – *Suburban War*

In a recent paper we criticized the recent conspicuous use of the term soundscape in the analysis of sound in the cinema, although the term soundscape coined by Canadian Murray Schafer was not originally related to film analysis. However, in our view the construction of the sound ambience that is part of the construction of every space represented in any given film, that is, the presence of what in cinema has come to be called sound ambiances, could be the closest thing to the idea that every place can have a representable sound signature. In order to consider this issue, we use as the object of this analysis films that aim to make a more direct representation of the day-to-day life in certain cities, that is, films in which cities themselves play a central part.

Elsewhere we have already commented on a greater or lesser extent on films like the German

Lisbon Story, directed by Wim Wenders, the Uruguayan *Noise*, directed by Marcelo Bertalmío. Now, we will take a look at some “city symphonies”, in the transition from the so-called silent to sound cinema.¹

City symphonies refer to a group of films shot at different production settings, but which are similar regarding the time they were shot and released, below are a few examples: *Berlin: symphony of a great city*, (1927), *Man with a movie camera* (1929), *São Paulo, a Metropolitan Symphony* (1929), *Rien que les heures* (1926). From the above mentioned films, in this paper we will comment on the relationships between sound and images in *Berlin: symphony of a great city*, besides adding three other films which, although less commented upon, bring representations of cities that could easily make them eligible to belong to the group of “symphonies”. These films are *Entuziazm*, by Vertov, shot after his better known *Man with a movie camera*, *World melody*, a film by Walter Ruttmann, also shot after the best known symphony of images and sounds about Berlin² and the later English production *The City*.

2 Sounds from Berlin, Russia and London

Berlin: symphony of a great city still belongs to the so-called silent movie era, which was about to end when the film was shot in 1927. This film shared a common feature with other films from that period in that it had music specifically written to match its images, which was synchronized during screening. Therefore, this is a film transitioning from the silent to the sound cinema world, with secure and pre-established relationships between sounds, in the form of music, and images.

The music by Edmund Meisel described the intention to produce complementarity with the images from the beginning of the film when looking at the sea we hear a melody whose sinuosity seeks to mimic the come and go of waves.³ Likewise, when we are on land, but not in the city, the music tempo that serves as the soundtrack for the train we see speeds up and breaks up so as to represent the sounds of the engine, with the brass section of the orchestra mimicking its whistle. Along the

¹ When we say “the so-called” silent cinema we mean that we join those researchers in cinema sound that see this period as a long laboratory of various attempts at using sound. The beginning of sound cinema, usually dated as 1927, thanks to the first commercial successes of the spoken films in the USA would, therefore, not constitute an isolated moment in history, but rather be the result of a long process of putting together sounds and images, which started with the beginning of cinema itself. This way of understanding the first thirty years of cinema can be found, for example, in the work of North-American author Rick Altman (2004).

² Before making the two city symphonies, German filmmaker Walter Ruttmann was already known for his experimental short films shot in the 1920's, like the *Opus* series, made of four films shot between 1921 and 1924. Continuing with his interest in portraying cities, in the 1930's Ruttmann would also direct the less known documentaries *Stuttgart* (1935) and *Düsseldorf* (1936).

³ Suzana Reck Miranda (2008) describes a similar effect in the music of *Mr. Hulot's Holidays*, by Jacques Tati.

same line, we could comment on the solemn and grand largo tempi presenting the city center or the *crescendo* that joins the opening of factory gates. These representations through music of actions which did not have their corresponding sounds recorded in the images continue throughout the film as, for example, with the whistle blown by the railroad company employee or the sounds of a pile driver in a construction site.

By the end of the film, on the fifth act, the film is divided; music and images develop an even closer relationship. We see a conductor. We see when he hits the baton on the score, signaling viewers he will start conducting. Until this point, a pause appropriately follows these images. Conducting starts in the images, the music starts and we understand that the conductor conducts from the pit the music from a vaudeville show. The lack of plausibility between the sounds produced by the orchestra and the dancers' performance becomes evident, at least to the eyes and ears of this contemporary viewer. Nevertheless, music had invaded images, it becomes justified in the space of action, what had not been the case until then.

Two years after *Berlin: symphony of a great city*, Ruttmann released *World melody*. The first title cards explain that this film is not an ode to a specific city, its purpose was rather to "appeal to fraternity", it was a tribute to the similarities of all peoples, particularly the workers from different countries. At a given moment, one title card describes a kind of statute of the functions

of sounds, telling us that "the sound and music score specially written for the film underlines and reinforces the visual melody." It should be explained here that between 1927 and 1929 sound recording for the cinema took several definitive steps and *World melody*, unlike the previous film contains a series of sounds and some voices attached to the pictures and not just music. The German company Tobis-Klangfilm, which would add the soundtrack to the first German sound films, expanding its services to France and Denmark and even to the incipient Portuguese sound cinema, becoming one of the European alternatives to the world rule of North-American sound recording technologies for the cinema, would be responsible for recording the sound used in *World melody*. Therefore, the sounds of the ships we see on the screen, of hammers used by workers, chains being pulled, factory whistles and other sound manifestations representing work in big cities are added to the original music, this time written by Wolfgang Zeller.

In this regard, *World melody* is as example of the steps that were being taken towards the forms that would soon be put into practice by the sound cinema. Obviously music is still massively present, but noises and speech lines can already be heard. The paced edition of some noises should be highlighted here, the clearest example being that of the hammers in the construction site, mimicking a musical structure with sounds coming from the place where action takes place. Michael Chion comments on the recurrence of

this effect in the first years of the sound cinema, calling this the “X effect” phenomenon, adapting the terms from Pierre Schaeffer’s concrete music, which in that context described precisely the procedure of providing a series of clearly-paced sounds (CHION, 2009, p. 42).

Entuziazm, from 1931, is the first experience Vertov had with sound in the cinema.⁴ If *Man with a movie camera* had become famous due to its representation of Leningrad/Saint Petersburg, containing music to be synchronized with images, just like in the two films by Ruttmann analyzed here, *Entuziazm* is a kind of reedition of the city representation, this time with recorded city sounds. The film representation of the city day-to-day life around the Don River in southern Russia, in the border with Ukraine in the early 1930’s was one of the first sound experiences in Russian cinema. American author Lucy Fischer describes the use of sound in this film as a big sound collage which is, at the same time, a radical attempt to break, for viewers, the naturalist illusion common to sound in cinema (FISCHER, 1985, p. 251). Fischer, a luminary of the feminist theory in cinema, suggests a witty hypothesis on *Entuziazm* by saying that this film, right after *Man with a movie camera*, could be called “Woman with

earphones”. This connection will explain, in a kind of double link, the success of the former to the expenses of the little dissemination of the later: just like the camera would be preponderant in cinema theory when compared to sound equipment, men would also be more commonly analyzed than women. This is a hypothesis that advocates both the role of women and sound.

Fischer refers to the beginning of the film. After the initial title cards, followed by the first of many military parades we will hear during the screening, we see a woman, a telephone operator, wearing the above mentioned earphones and switching cables that we can automatically hear. In an identification game it becomes evident that we share the point of audition⁵ of that character, we hear what she hears. We share with her what gets out of her earphones. What we hear is a Leningrad radio station. The speaker announces that we will listen to a “*Donbass symphony*”, that is, a symphony made of the sounds of the Don River region. In practice, it is a refined exercise of metalanguage: we will hear from the radio and through the ears of the character the sound of the film we are watching. What comes next is not less complex: a conductor getting ready to conduct shows up in the images. And

⁴ When we say “the first experience Vertov had with sound in the cinema” we refer to the fact that the filmmaker who was known for the manifestos that in the 1920’s would define the self-called self-entitled “cine-eye” (*Kino-Glaz*) had, long before that, in 1917, established the so-called Laboratory of Hearing which, among other things, aimed to record city sounds and provide them with a narrative character.

⁵ As defined by Michel Chion in a reference to its better known counterpart in cinema theory, the point of view shot. In Brazil, the point of audition was used, for example, by Suzana Reck Miranda (2007) to analyze the work of Canadian François Girard.

what he starts conducting, following the reasoning from the previous sequence, is the film soundtrack. We can see, from the conductor's gestures that he is even conducting the other sound manifestations we hear, beyond music. When he makes a sign for church bells to enter the soundtrack, we get the first cue that although the presence of music is massive, it will not be long before city sounds and the voices of its inhabitants emerge. In fact, if during the film we do not forget the conductor who is placed at the beginning to conduct whatever we are about to hear, we can understand that the "music" of the film is a union of musical elements and other day-to-day city sounds of that area. As examples of day-to-day sounds we have the bells, a military parade, factory smokestacks, crowd shouting, coal mine sounds, sound from the machines used to extract minerals, sound of trains carrying the product of labor.

On the work conditions of miners during the implementation of Stalin's Five-Year Plan we have what for that time was a surprising direct sound recording made outdoors in which we can hear a coal miner explaining to what extent workers were being forced to produce. Lucy Fischer explains that with *Entuziazm* Vertov was testing the first portable sound recording technology with Russian patent, which with the small-sized recorders tried

to solve the hard task of recording sounds outside studios which would remain a technology hurdle for the cinema until the turn from the 1950's to the 1960's.⁶ Other instances of speech recorded outdoors are the women singing during harvest and an impassioned speech delivered to peasants. What we would like to highlight is the fact that due to the difficulties to achieve satisfactory results with portable recorder, these successful attempts by Vertov to record the speeches of the characters on the locations would still take around three decades to become usual in cinema.

Additionally, in Vertov's film the occasional voice of a narrator can be heard, establishing yet another space for the use of the voice, one that is distinct from the space of action taken up by the lines of those who appear framed by the camera. The voice of the narrator provides us with the more direct information on what we see in the images, although his speech is somehow interrupted, discontinuous, turning it into another example of Vertov's anti-naturalistic montage. Nevertheless, the message is clear when we hear him say: "it happened in Donbassa during the Five-Year Plan, in 1930", or even when he says: "we have run out of coal."

Regarding a series of resources used in the film to achieve this so-called anti-naturalism

6 According to Fisher, these Russian portable recorders were being tested since 1929 in the streets of Moscow. Together with a group of technicians, Vertov would make an attempt to adapt the equipment to his film shootings, making recording tests in Leningrad, in the Ukraine and soon after that going to the Don River area. The Russian context reflects other attempts made all over the world in those years to make direct sound recordings for cinema synchronized with images. Highlights in this context are North-American patents such as *Vitaphone*, *Movietone*, *Photofone*, and the equipment made by the already mentioned German company Tobis-Klang Film and some Brazilian patents, like Sincrocinec by producer Luís de Barros.

in order to make viewers more aware of the manipulation of sounds required to get to the end product of the hearing, Lucy Fischer lists the procedures found in *Entuziazm* such as: sound superimpositions, sound time reversal, abrupt sound cuts, tonal contrasts, mismatch between the distance between sounds and microphone and the distance between the filmed objects and the camera, sound metaphors, among others. The purpose here is not to explain each and every one of these techniques, but in sum we could say that this film complexifies the relationships between sounds and images, which are so often taken for granted by viewers. In this regard, in 1931 *Entuziazm* points more clearly than the other films cited in this paper to a potential complexification of the act of hearing that cinema would describe throughout the 20th century.

The City is a production by the British *General Post Office Film Unit* about the city of London shot in 1939. Therefore, it was made after the transition from silent to sound film, a period in which the films analyzed so far were shot, but its soundtrack bears the mark of the English school of documentaries from the 1930's, where the *General Post Office Film Unit* played a key role. A mixing made almost exclusively by blending music and the voice of an omniscient narrator replaces city sounds. The first person narration is evident from the first sentence that is heard: "This is London, my native village". Additionally,

there is a second voice, also from an expert, a historian we see in his workplace. It is from the plot between these two voices that we will get all the verbal information about the city as we see the city center, factory smokestacks, the outskirts with houses built by the railroad, the ship trade by the Thames, the church towers, the inner workings of the post office. Since there is no recording of the city ambient sounds, instead of the sound representation of its noises, we have the key role played by the voice of a narrator that explains everything we see and of a character who by means of words, from inside the action space, also provides us additional information on the life in the city.

3 Contemporary sounds coming from Tokyo, Switzerland and Latin America

Taking a huge leap and thinking now about the same sound representation of cities in contemporary cinema, in a Catalan production set in Japan, *Map of the sounds of Tokyo*⁷ which resorts to the same device used by Wim Wenders in the 1990's in *Lisbon Story*, namely having as a narrator a character who is a sound engineer in order to make the representation of certain daily sounds of the Japanese capital city takes on a key position. But even before we share the point of audition of the character who works with sound recording, the first thing we hear from the spaces where actions take place is the hustle and bustle

in Japanese and English in a business meeting between Eastern and Western businessmen. At a given moment in this sequence, we have what Michel Chion (1994, p. 132) calls “suspension”. We stop hearing the sounds of actions when one character reveals something in the ear of another character. With the non-spatially justified drop in the ambient sound, viewers understand that something has been interrupted in the representation and that this interruption is key from the narrative point of view. As we learn later, the news was about the death of the daughter of the character who is spoken to.

In the beginning of the film, Ryu enters the scene, a character we will be following. In several scenes we see her with her earphones and the way music is introduced in these scenes seems to show that we are hearing what she is hearing; it is, similarly to the impression given by the operator in Vertov’s film, as if we shared what is coming out of her earphones. This happens because the points where songs are introduced match exactly the moments we see the earphones on her head. The relationship established between the beginning of sounds and the first view of the earphones in images make viewers, we venture to say, wish the same music was also being heard by the character, which would make viewers relate to the character. When the sound engineer character appears, we will also hear from his ears through the earphones, although in these circumstances there is no room for doubt. It is a clearer representation of the point of audition. The voice of the narrator comes

from this same character that at times becomes a key element for viewers to understand the plot. He is the one who talks, always about the Ryu he had known, when he says, for example: “Not a day passes by in which I don’t remember Ryu’s breathing.” It is the central narrative role played by the voice in a film that cares so much for the representation of noises. On top of this interface between the verbal elements of the film and the daily non-verbal sounds this voice also narrates its own admiration for certain noises, as is the case of the sounds produced by the act of slurping instant noodles, a sound which, as a matter of fact, we hear many times during the film.

Other sounds connected to actions we conspicuously hear are those made by chopping fish (Ryu’s day job), squeezing lemons, shoes being put on and off, the sound of water dripping as tombstones are being washed, the sound of bullets being loaded into a gun. It should be pointed out that the condition for such sounds, which are so low in intensity to be clearly heard should always be the careful construction of a silent environment. The representation of such sounds on the screen could not be heard were it otherwise. Therefore, the film that makes low day-to-day noises to be heard is, at the same time, a film that creates silent environments in which low sounds can make themselves heard. The voice of the narrator-sound engineer itself highlights certain moments in which these conditions are present, as is the case in the verbal explanation of the silence of a cemetery in summer, where Ryu and the narrator meet to wash the tombstones of the murdered individuals.

Regarding the music in the *Map of the sounds of Tokyo*, we can mention the presence of Latin rhythms, although these songs are sung in Japanese; the prominent role played by the song *One Dove*, by the English band *Antony and the Johnsons*; the continuous reference made by one of the characters to *Enjoy the silence*, a hit of the 1980's band *Depeche Mode*. Therefore, as a recurrent feature in a certain kind of contemporary Eastern cinema, although we are talking about a Catalan production shot in Japan, the music represents what Denilson Lopes described as a *cross-cultural landscape* when the soundtrack plays an important role in shaping a model of representation that goes beyond the boundaries of national borders (LOPES, 2003).

An instigating case of representation of characters that experience a change in the sound environment they were used to is found in *Home*, a Swiss production directed by Ursula Meier. Next to a house located in what was then a silent rural area there is an abandoned highway. The radio brings the news that the heavy traffic from another road will be detoured to this highway. Soon the rural ambient sound will be replaced by the noise of all passing cars and trucks. Or rather, it submerges due to the greater intensity of the new ambient sound. Closed windows, the radio turned on out loud by the mother, the heavy metal playing in the daughter's earphones, everything becomes a refuge against the ambient sound that is now so much more intense. Between hearing the news that the traffic is about to be open and

the first car actually passing there is a silent construction of suspense in which the family finds itself, until the moment the heavy traffic confirms the expected chaos. The subsequent effort to insulate the house by coating the walls with fiber glass, bricking up windows, and almost completely shutting up the house will succeed for some time and we, viewers, once again experience a silent movie, not very intense in the construction of ambient sounds. However, the isolation which is not only acoustic, but one that also keeps out light and prevents contact with outdoor environments in general becomes unbearable and the characters decide to bring down the insulation scheme they had devised, surrendering to the inexorability of accepting the new sound situation.

The analysis by Angela Prysthon in the paper *Latin American Metropolises in contemporary cinema* is useful for us to think about the representation of cities in recent films. Prysthon talks about the role of cinema in representing Latin metropolises with their "models of peripheral and alternative urbanity" from local adaptations of European parameters, using as a reference the thesis by Beatriz Sarlo (1988 apud PRYSTHON, 2006, p. 255), specifically on Buenos Aires in the 1920's and 1930's. Prysthon says that once the first objective of any city images and sounds reproduced by films, namely make viewers accept fiction as real is accomplished, once the action seems to be taking place in a recognizable place, the representation of large Latin-American cities by today's cinema would right away reveal "a

hybrid, peripheral urbanity, one that is so uniquely cosmopolitan” (PRYSTHON, 2006, p. 256). The active and complex role played by the cinema in portraying these cities becomes evident when we agree that “the visible cities in contemporary Latin-American cinema are not necessarily a reflection of the real world, do not correspond to exact imitations of the real, but often transform the real, change the real” (PRYSTHON, 2006, p. 259). Additionally, in Prysthon’s view in contemporary productions there is a kind of divide between films that try to represent a “fantasy” of a city, in which urban problems faced by people on a daily basis do not show up and the productions that aim to exactly expose such problems. In the case of the former group, Prysthon notes that “it is not Buenos Aires, Santiago, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro that are really at stake in these representations, but rather the images of these cities that fit the average expectations of an urban idealization” (PRYSTHON, 2006, p. 261).

As examples of films whose images and sound bring to the screen these issues related to the cities with which characters relate, Prysthon lists, among others, the Argentinean *Pizza, birra y faso* and *Esperando el mesías*, the Mexican *Temporada de patos*, the Uruguayan *Whisky*, and the Argentinean *Valentín*, the Brazilian *Madame Satã*. Regarding the last two, when looking at the analysis made by Prysthon, we could say that the sounds of these

films propose questions that are of interest to us: in *Valentín*, from the proposal to recreate the Buenos Aires from the late 1960’s and the key role played by costumes, art direction and even, as mentioned by Prysthon, by the pop music played at that time, what can we say about sounds other than music? If it seems right to consider the role of music in reconstruction for the cinema of a given time, could we also consider the role of the other sound elements found in a film? Can we say that the voices, accents, ways of speaking could play a part in helping viewers immerse into the time recreated by the film? Can we assume that ambient noises and sounds that are used have a similar function? Regarding the relationship between music and ambient sound, the film *Madame Satã*, quoted by Prysthon in a way reveals a possible answer: the sambas and old carnival tunes we hear on the background so many times during the film are a central part of the recreation of the Lapa neighborhood in the 1930’s. In an exercise of narrative subtlety, the songs we hear, often under the louder volume of dialogues, inform viewers that these sounds could help create a credible representation of time and space.⁸

4 Final remarks and questions

The reflection on these city sound representations by the cinema therefore shapes the central

8 Still regarding contemporary Argentinean cinema, it is worth recalling the relationship between city and characters in the recent *Sidewalls (Medianeras)*: As explained in the film, *Medianeras*, the original title in Spanish, are the sidewalks of the buildings which have been used as billboards for huge ads. The female character who is a first-person narrator states that people living on the sides of the buildings have a specific way of life.

questions of this paper which cannot be necessarily be answered: are there sounds that are specific to every city, every environment within cities? Could we say today that big cities contain unique sound manifestations? Is there such a thing as Rio de Janeiro sounds? In our view regarding the music that plays on the streets we could give a more straightforward affirmative answer, in certain areas of every city we often hear a certain music genre. An analogous probable answer would possibly take into account the speech, accents. But here we are particularly interested in noises, in the ambient sounds of every place. So, to what extent would the later carry unique features of every space where they manifest themselves? Could it be that, like in the hypothesis set forth in Murray Schafer's work, the sounds of big cities are becoming increasingly uniform because of the presence of the same machines, the same engines in big cities all over the world (SCHAFFER, 1997). To what extent can I say that the sounds I record in Rio de Janeiro are unique to that city? When I record the traffic at Laranjeiras Street, a mix of city sounds and the nature of *Aterro do Flamengo*, when I record the Guanabara Bay heard from Flamengo beach, what in these sounds carries the signature of each place? Do all the recordings I made at home of the first words uttered by my son have and will have the noise of the traffic at Laranjeiras street on the background. To what extent is living with

these sounds something specific to where I live? What is the role played by the recording technical parameters? When I hear the rain recorded from the sitting room window under a digital sound sampling rate of 96Khz at 24 bits, rain sounds unreal to me or, better said, hyper-real.

Recently, in an interview to the author of this paper professor Carolyn Bridesall from the Communication Department at the University of Amsterdam advocated the specificity of sounds of the Dutch capital city, from the way church bells and so many other sound manifestations reverberate through the streets that have a given width, flanked by all the canals, in contact with the building materials of the old buildings. Many sensible people advocate the fact that there is such a thing as Dutch light⁹, Dutch soccer, Dutch beer. Would there be Dutch sounds?

In a series of sound recordings in Glasgow, what is in them that we could call local specificities? The way steps reverberate on the wide and empty streets of the neighborhood where the hotel is located? The hustle and bustle of the pubs? The voice and guitar of the various street singers singing British pop music with a Scottish accent? Within the complexity of sound manifestations in every urban space, what can be considered specific to every particular place and, to make this question less broad, how could the cinema represent the possible specificities?

⁹ A hypothesis presented, for example, in the documentary *Dutch Light*, in which art historians like Ernst van de Wetering state that the flat rural landscape together with light reflection from the countless water surfaces produce a kind of light that is specific to that country.

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URSS: VUFKU, 1929. (68 min.), silent, B&W, 35mm.
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Sons urbanos e suas escutas através do cinema

Resumo

Este trabalho pretende analisar as possibilidades de representação dos ambientes sonoros urbanos pelo cinema. Para tanto, nos detemos, em uma primeira seção, nas chamadas “sinfonias de cidades”, filmes produzidos na passagem do cinema silent para o cinema sonoro. Em um segundo momento, fazemos uma ponte com o cinema contemporâneo, analisando filmes nos quais a representação do espaço de determinadas cidades é central para as respectivas tramas. Em todos os filmes analisados, sendo-nos aqui indiferente a época em que foram produzidos, nos interessa pensar a parte sonora da representação, ao mesmo tempo em que podemos pensar como as escutas de tais filmes podem provocar no espectador uma reflexão sobre o modo com o qual ele se relaciona com os sons que o circundam no cotidiano urbano.

Palavras-chave

Som. Cinema. Cidade. Sons ambientes. Escuta.

Sonidos urbanos y sus escuchas a través del cine

Resumen

Este trabajo pretende analizar las posibilidades de representación de los ambientes sonoros urbanos por medio del cine. Para ello, nos detenemos, en una primera sección, en las llamadas “sinfonías de ciudades”, películas producidas durante el paso del cine silent al cine sonoro. En un segundo momento, hacemos un puente con el cine contemporáneo, analizando las películas en las que la representación del espacio de determinadas ciudades es central para las respectivas tramas. En todas las películas analizadas, teniendo en cuenta que es indiferente para nosotros la época en la cual se las produjeron, nos interesa pensar la parte sonora de la representación, a la vez que podemos pensar cómo las escuchas de esas películas pueden provocar en el espectador una reflexión sobre el modo con el cual él se relaciona con los sonidos que lo circundan en el cotidiano urbano.

Palabras Clave

Sonido. Cine. Ciudad. Sonidos ambientes. Escucha.

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