In his book, "Occult Aesthetics: Synchronization in Sound Film," Kevin J. Donnelly seeks to illuminate the magic of film as an audiovisual medium, with the synchronization of hearing and vision at the heart of this art form. Approaching film as a medium that re-thinks ideas of time and space, Donnelly narrows in on the relationship between sound and image and the obscure workings of the illusory experience of perceiving sound film. In his introduction Donnelly provides a description of the general productive processes of combining image and audio in the genre. Using language accessible to the un-trained reader, Donnelly’s musical discourse can be understood without extensive background information on film production or music production technologies.

Donnelly begins by guiding the reader through his interpretive and analytical process, illuminating the occult aesthetic by analyzing the synchronization of sound and image. Drawing on Sergei Eisenstein’s “Statement on Sound,” Donnelly pits synchrony (meaning the simultaneous action of audio and video) and asynchrony (meaning the lack of concurrence in the separate actions of audio and video) as oppositions against one another, achieving the appearance of synonymity (meaning a perceived singular
entity) through difference. Although many assume music serves as a direct representation of the visual image with which it is partnered, it often does not, but instead exchanges ritualistic impressions with its visual partner under the veil of the occult aesthetic. It is not difficult to read in this introduction resonances with Justin Horton’s own work in “The Unheard Voice in the Sound Film,” where Horton articulates the effect of the disembodied voice—heard yet not sourced visually. Horton says, “this experience can be an unsettling [one] for...filmgoers, for it may simultaneously violate our phenomenological experience of reality while defying the conventional sound-image relations we have been conditioned to expect.” Donnelly uses the occult aesthetic to characterize and unify the synchronization of sound and image, which he dissected through his analysis of production techniques.

Donnelly continues to expand his theoretical underpinnings in the introduction by reinforcing that although the methods of production can vary, cinema is primarily concerned with “producing a composite of sound and image that will be accepted by audiences” (20). The common result: the conventional character of fluent synchronization in which the audience is not prompted to distinguish between sound and image, but rather to perceive of them as one. Delving into the occult of synchronization’s opposition, Donnelly establishes an understanding of asynchrony by neatly contrasting it with synchrony. As synchronization’s counterpart, Donnelly argues, non-synchronized methods entail a different temporal relationship between the recording of sound and that of the image. And yet, they all produce the same pair of illusions: embodiment—the illusion that the body seen onscreen is the source of the voice emanating from the soundtrack—and simultaneity, the illusion that the filming of the image and the recording of the voice occurred concomitantly and in the same space. Drawing awareness to the treatment of time and space as a suspension, or an unnatural manipulation, Donnelly uses the introductory chapter to establish his topic at both the conceptual and analytical level. Donnelly then proceeds to address the psychological processes that promote the occult aesthetic in the technical processes of synchronization.

In Chapter Two, “Synchronization: The McGurk Effect and Beyond,” Donnelly addresses popular ways of perceiving sound film, then suggests ulterior modes of perception to develop the reader’s range of thought on the subject. Delving into the psy-

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chological processes of perceiving sound film, Donnelly deviates from the approachable tone of the introductory chapter and moves in directions that are somewhat difficult to follow. Although he clearly strives to simplify the concepts he incorporates, addressing only those which apply directly to his theory, the language in this section is somewhat complex. For example, The McGurk Effect exploits the influence that sound and vision can have on one another. Turning to additional scholars on this phenomenon aids in explaining Donnelly’s own conclusions.

Consider the work of Jay Moody, who argues that “the well-known McGurk Effect is the phenomenon of altered phonetic perception induced by the simultaneous experience of conflicting auditory and visual information.”

Demonstrating this interaction of stimuli in perception and cognition, the McGurk Effect confirms the presence of psychological processes in perceiving sound film (25). Perception of sound and perception of vision are linked, and so the perception of images can change the perception of sounds. William Johnson suggests that sound is just as important as vision in cinema when he says, “sound is ontologically equal to the image.”

In describing the basic methods of relating image with sound, Donnelly himself draws upon Eisenstein’s levels of synchronization: Natural, Metric, Rhythmic, Melodic, and Tonal. Donnelly’s greatest success in this section is his writing style, as he strives to develop readers’ understanding rather than cater to the difficulty of his concept through sophisticated language and jargon. For example, in his description of the Metric level, Donnelly incorporates film production terms in brackets and provides useful endnotes that are easily referenced.

While he takes care to present his theoretical material clearly, Donnelly’s handling of historical context is somewhat elusive. Although touching briefly on the methods used in early sound film, Donnelly fails to provide much historical background on the early sound era. In Chapter Three, titled “Sound Montage,” he does, however, address the various methods of applying sound to film that came out of the early sound film days. The early sound era, according to Michael Slowick, “was a period of experimentation in which filmmakers offered multiple solutions to the new problem of how to incorporate music into a film featuring extensive dialogue.”

Leading up to this period, producers required the presence of full orchestras and vocalists on set during filming, making for a very temperamental and expensive filmmaking process. In the formative years of cinema, music and dialogue were rarely used together. Non-diegetic music

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5 William Johnson, “Film Sound”, Film Quarterly 39, no.2: 64.

dominated the early sound era in which the sound perceived and the sound’s source were disconnected, and yet various technological innovations began to emerge at this time alongside postproduction experimentation.

As I already mentioned, Donnelly fails to discuss the early sound era to a satisfactory extent, and so I found Michael Slowick’s examples useful in establishing a historical context for understanding the methods Donnelly suggests were used coming out of silent film. Michael Slowick provides a chronology useful for understanding the background to Donnelly’s explorations of technology. In August of 1926 Warner Bros premiered “Don Juan,” the first feature-length film to have a synchronized score. As one of the earliest sound films, Warner Bros.’ “The Singing Fool” in 1928 was likely the most influential piece of the early sound-film era. This movie made Hollywood realize the potential for profit that sound film possessed. Slowick argues that “The Singing Fool” used character-oriented motifs, and rerecording to create its nearly continuous score. The example of this sound film marks the beginning of various post-production techniques that Donnelly later illuminates in Chapter Seven of his book, “‘Pre’ and ‘Post’ Sound.”

In the following section, I will be addressing some of these techniques, including pre-synching, tracking, pre-fitting, lip-synching, and voice dubbing. Pre-synching involves adding images to pre-existing music or sound. This process requires cutting images to correspond to the soundtrack or staging events onscreen to correspond with existing sound recordings. Donnelly suggests that pre-synching is a more integrated method than voice dubbing. That said, the process can be extremely tedious and expensive and evokes less anticipation than post-synching. Donnelly continues to elaborate that, from the early days of sound film, “tracking” has been used to add library music to film footage during postproduction. “Tracking” refers to the adding of images to pre-existing music. The amount of editing (cutting, realigning) required to maintain the illusion achieved by proper synchronization can be extensive. In other cases, the film can be shot according to existing music and can be cut to synch together in postproduction. Pre-fitting is a process where existing recordings are integrated and visual sequences filmed to fit them while they are played back. This method, often used in music videos, relies heavily on the actor’s ability to synchronize with the sound. Pre-fitting is one of the few cases in which music may dominate over images, which are rendered secondary, staged, and cut to synch with the music (163).

Deviating from the former techniques discussed, lip-synching, the fourth term discussed by Donnelly, refers to the matching of screen actions to preexisting sounds,
while dubbed dialogue replaces an original voice with another. Voice dubbing across different languages creates a discrepancy in the illusion of unity, making the viewer aware of the disconnect between sound and image. Although disjunction caused from out-of-sync images and sound initially disrupts one’s perception of a given film, most viewers overcome these discrepancies in order to maintain the illusion of unity central to the cinematic experience.

While these five processes strive to create the illusion of unity, Donnelly emphasizes the difference created when each inorganically combines two separate components. Consistent with his overarching concept of the occult, Donnelly stresses the importance of the gap between sound and image as a defining aspect. The size of the gap can change how a film is perceived—too large a gap, for example, can disrupt the synchronization and thereby the illusion of unity. In Chapter Eight, “Wild Track Asynchrony,” Donnelly considers sound and image as separate entities, two components functioning together in apparent singularity, while their value lies in their independence from one another. When sound and image drift apart, their asynchronic exchange can achieve a stronger affect. This disjunction may, however, threaten the level of cohesion in cinema, while also serving an artistic purpose, as Donnelly effectively explains in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Three, Donnelly applies Montage Theory to the gaps between shots of film—the figurative “black holes” that suspend the film outside of time and space. The theory contends that black holes allow for deep emotional and aesthetic perceptions by providing the grounds for an alarming conjunction of conflicting elements. In his work, Methods of Montage, Eisenstein distinguishes between metric and rhythmic montage. He also contrasts tonal montage with over-tonal montage and how each communicates the emotion of the film. The most effective form, intellectual montage, juxtaposes different effects to create a new impression of aspects of the film. Eisenstein’s theories have greatly influenced the study of sound film and guide Donnelly in his analysis of its ambiguities. Indeed, it is Eisenstein who underpins Donnelly’s discussion of the performance mode, a mode associated with the ‘real’ that attempts to bind the image seen with the sounds heard, where images appear to confirm the production of simultaneous sounds. This contrasts with lip-synching and playback modes that refer more to

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8 Ibid, 155.  
9 Ibid, 156.  
10 Ibid, 49.  
11Sergei Eisenstein, Methods of Montage (New York: 1929), 72-79.
fantasy, often used in musicals and other theatrical types of films. Donnelly promotes the various treatments of synchronization as the means by which genre-specific effects are achieved.

I enjoyed Donnelly’s treatment of the various techniques within the genre or style in which they most commonly appear. This organization provides accessible contexts for the reader. Furthermore, Donnelly illuminates how technical elements contribute to the broader characteristics of each genre he examines and why each method of joining audio and visual is used. With advancements from lantern shows, music theatre, opera, and early direct film, electronic synchronization simplifies the process of combining sound and image. Holly Rogers confirms Donnelly’s own insights, arguing that, “at a material level the technology was able simultaneously to digest and project music and image; when received, this duality was situated in the intermedial space between music, sculpture, painting, drama, and film,” celebrating the audiovisual’s ability to transcend the spatial and temporal limitations of singular art forms.\(^1\) Considering more recent technologies, computer software can produce sounds and images according to received footage. This process still relies on the conventions of early sound film, however, some digital technology allows for footage to be cut to correspond with music. The central issue in all processes mentioned by Donnelly lies in finding the corresponding synchronization points and stylistic intricacies of each aesthetic, to maintain the transparent texture desired by mainstream cinema. According to Donnelly, most moviemaking follows the conventions for synchronization outlined in his text, but some genres, such as avant-garde film, that deal with experimental filmmaking, employ asynchrony to achieve a different aesthetic.

Chapter Four of Donnelly’s book focuses on the overall theme of the work: “Occult Aesthetics.” This section of the text is particularly interesting and provocative, as Donnelly delves into the occult or the unapparent. Donnelly discusses the connotations of the occult to exemplify the aesthetic of joining sound and image. The impact that film has because of its illusory audiovisual elements relies on aspects hidden from the viewer. As Peter Brooks suggests, the occult relates to the realm which is seemingly denied to us, but which we must agree to because it is the realm of meaning and value.\(^2\) Donnelly certainly argues that the occult refers to the behind-the-scenes processes at work beyond observation, alluding to a magical element and a ritualistic underpinning, much like the illusion of synonymy between sound and image, and the marriage of the two according to their synchronization points.

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In Chapter Five, “Isomorphic Cadences,” Donnelly pins down what he argues is one of the more discernible processes at work in sound film: the use of cadences. As in music, sound film uses cadences to relay the progression of events to the audience, and often to mark the conclusion of a passage.\textsuperscript{14} Articulating film with music, Donnelly argues, illustrates the structural and formulaic similarities between narrative film and musical scores. In both, artistic cadences have the capacity to be both functional and profound, responsible for both conjunction and the timeless/spaceless suspension between disjunctions. Like his comparison between film and musical scores, Donnelly includes multiple dimensions in his analysis.

Throughout his text, Donnelly employs binaries as literary devices to explore the relationship between the visual and audio in sound film. Placing unfamiliar elements in contrast with one another successfully provides an internal context through which to understand them. Using binaries such as proximity and distance, order and chaos, safety and uncertainty, Donnelly helps the reader understand his terms without requiring background knowledge. Working with the tangible, Donnelly provides excerpts of music from soundtracks and pictures, making his book itself a sort of literary compilation of audiovisual elements. Donnelly demonstrates a vast understanding of his material, making pop culture references to \textit{Star Wars}, and other popular film series converted from literature and classical music. These references, partnered with his conversational voice, make ambiguous and potentially foreign concepts approachable.

Donnelly struggles the most with pinning down aspects of sound film that he himself defines as obscure and even unknowable, such as the psychological compensation for the gaps between voice and image present in overdubbing. Although reading this book did leave me feeling somewhat unsatisfied concerning this subject, I applaud Donnelly for his graceful handling of much of what appeared to be difficult and elusive material. He does dedicate an entire chapter to the occult aesthetic, explaining his approach and admitting to the impossibility of achieving guaranteed knowledge through the application of theory. And indeed, the synching process, although approached methodically, even scientifically, is just as reliant on belief as is the occult aesthetic. Overall, Donnelly structures his text well, introducing terms and concepts in the initial chapter and developing them in the following sections. The distribution of topics throughout the book is non-linear, which may create difficulty for some readers, although Donnelly successfully references himself at various points in the text to provide clarity. Indeed, in his closing chapter Donnelly draws together his findings and his musings with elegance, summarizing an interesting and provocative read. Despite some minor short-

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
comings, Donnelly manages to write from a well-informed perspective that results in an impressive contribution to the scholarly literature.

For further reading:


Spring, Katherine. "‘To Sustain Illusion is All That is Necessary’: The Authenticity of Song Performance in Early American Sound Cinema." *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 285-299.


William Johnson, “Film Sound”, *Film Quarterly* 39, no.2 (1986): 64.