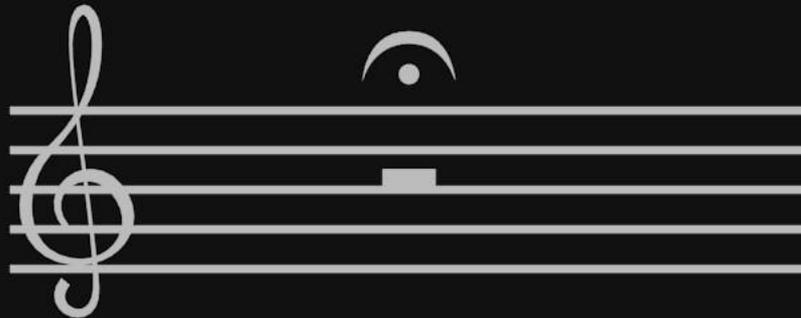


# HARTS

# & Minds



The Sound(track) of Silence: Hearing  
Things in Dada Film

Elizabeth Benjamin

HARTS & Minds: The Journal of  
Humanities and Arts

Vol. 1, No. 4 (Spring 2014)

[www.harts-minds.co.uk/sound-silence](http://www.harts-minds.co.uk/sound-silence)

Article © HARTS & Minds  
Image © Elizabeth Benjamin

# THE SOUND(TRACK) OF SILENCE: HEARING THINGS IN DADA FILM

*Elizabeth Benjamin*

## **Abstract**

Appearing just before the advent of talkies, Dada film sits on the cusp of the sound revolution. Quintessentially experimental, this genre is also often viewed as nonsense, as roll after roll of asemic imagery. Yet these films were neither meaningless nor silent, embracing a multifaceted relationship with narrative and incorporating noise, sound and music in a plethora of guises. How are we to understand sound when what we see is disrupted? How do we interpret the visual if what we hear is partial, displaced, or even missing? How should we compare the unrepeatably, original experience with the contemporary? Dada film uniquely exploits these gaps to the present day and it is this manipulation that creates the works' continuing ability to frustrate and intrigue.

This article will analyse the collection of Dada works on Re:Vair's *Dada Cinéma*, interrogating the relationship that these films have with sound and silence, as well as with each other. The article will analyse the films in a progression from sound to silence, beginning with Clair and Picabia's *Entr'acte* (1924) and Léger and Murphy's *Le Ballet mécanique* (1924), with their purpose-written scores, moving through Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926) and Richter's *Filmstudie* (1926) and *Vormittagsspuk* (1927), all of which have accompanying music on the DVD, yet none of which exactly matches the original, to Man Ray's *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921-1924) and Eggeling's *Symphonie diagonale* (1921-1924), all of which have always been silent. Through a synthesis of these analyses the article will propose a re-reading of Dada film, exploring the relationship between silent film and sound to posit the notion of a soundtrack of silence.

**Key Words:** Dada, Experimental cinema, Music, Silent film, Modernism

\*\*\*\*\*

And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
Within the sound of silence

*Simon and Garfunkel*

The enduring impression of Dada cinema is one of farce: short episodes that bombard the spectator with juxtapositions of unrelated imagery and special effect. In addition to this, it is often conceived of as silent film; something that contributes to its status as a simple extension of abstract art. Yet noise was a central tenet of Dada, from sound compositions to simultaneous poetry, and the movement's raucous events were known from its cabaret beginnings. It is thus inconceivable that the movement's film output would keep quiet, even given the technological constraints of the time. This erroneous perception is therefore one that must be contested.

The body of Dada film is small (and chronologically disputed), and can thus be productively analysed as a broader whole while incorporating detailed textual analysis. A consequence of the relatively contained nature of Dada film is that a significant portion of it has been carried along technologically advancing media, as illustrated by the Centre Pompidou's 2005 centralisation of eight core Dada films on their *Dada Cinéma* DVD (itself an update of the VHS edition).<sup>1</sup> This DVD allows us to refute accusations of the anachronous

nature of the label ‘Dada film’, not least because the films are based on a definition of the medium by the central Dada adherent Hans Richter, who listed them as unified by their ‘hunting of the subject’.<sup>2</sup> Despite both Richter’s and the Centre Pompidou’s grouping of this particular eight, the films have not been analysed as a set; nor have they been analysed specifically in relation to their varying level of soundtrack. This article will address these gaps, considering the films as chapters in a wider Dada cinematic whole (as ‘chosen’ by the Centre Pompidou). The article will additionally address the lack of multi-sensory consideration, and, to a lesser extent, the process of preservation and (re)presentation of the films and their soundtracks. Michaud writes that ‘[t]he cinematic universe of Dada is a crossroads of iconic subversion and abstraction, formal geometry and corporal eroticism, bathed in a general indifference to “making sense” – unless it is making sense of its own deconstruction’.<sup>3</sup> We will assess the effects of this assault on sense and the senses on the viewer’s experience, as well as its relationship with film more widely.

This article will analyse the collection of Dada works on Re:Voir’s *Dada Cinéma*, interrogating the relationship that these films have with sound and silence, as well as with each other, to posit the notion of a soundtrack of silence. The article will analyse the films in a progression from sound to silence. It will begin with René Clair and Francis Picabia’s *Entr’acte* [Interval] (1924) and Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy’s *Le Ballet mécanique* [The Mechanical Ballet] (1924); films that had purpose-written scores, even if these did not always make it to the original screening. We will then assess the musical middle ground through Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia* [Leave Me Alone] (1926), and Richter’s *Filmstudie* [Film Study] (1926) and *Vormittagsspuk* [Ghosts Before Breakfast] (1927), all of which have accompanying music on the DVD, yet either initially had a spontaneous, live, musical montage (in the case of the former), or the original music was lost and replaced with an alternative (in the case of the latter two). The final section will explore three films that never had sound attached to them: Man Ray’s *Le Retour à la raison* [The Return to Reason] (1923), Richter’s *Rhythmus 21* [Rhythm 21] (1921-1924) and Viking Eggeling’s *Symphonie diagonale* [Diagonal Symphony] (1921-1924).

### Orchestrating Silence

Our first two films, *Entr’acte* and *Le Ballet mécanique*, to the greatest extent survive to the present day in the form in which their creators intended. Both have custom-written scores that accompany them on the DVD, creating a fairly level playing field on which to assess their creative objectives. Robert Orledge describes *Entr’acte* as ‘the first true collaboration between music and the art of the cinema’.<sup>4</sup> In contrast with the successful ‘alignment’ of film and music in *Entr’acte*, *Ballet mécanique*’s custom-designed score came up against a number of problems that meant it made its premiere in silence. The music, though written for the film, not only was not ready in time for the first performance, but also ended up being fifty per cent too long.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, *Ballet mécanique*’s current status is similar enough to the original to permit us to define it as authentic in terms of musical motifs and impressions, as a condensed representation of the original.<sup>6</sup> And underneath *Entr’acte*’s musical problems or triumphs, there lies the case of the film itself, which has been argued to have several different versions.<sup>7</sup> This highlights the concrete yet problematic nature of the DVD archive as ‘official’ historical rendering.

Both films immediately contain allusions to music, and also to dance, through their titles: *Ballet mécanique*’s explicit reference to classical dance sets the viewer up to expect human characters; *Entr’acte*’s translation as ‘interval’, as well as its creation as a real interval in the ballet *Relâche*, places it squarely within the realms of musical performance. In both cases, however, these titles are humorous decoys: *Ballet mécanique* deconstructs human motion through its insistence on a machine aesthetic, and *Entr’acte* is by no means an interval in the

traditional sense. The setting up and deception of the audience makes it clear from the outset that these films intend to create spectacle, ‘conceived as a total performance that was meant to attack the viewers’ conventions and values’.<sup>8</sup> This notion of the aggressive undermining of normalcy is enhanced by the films’ varying neurotic soundtracks.

Beyond connotations of musicality through both title and filmic content, *Ballet mécanique*’s composer, George Antheil, implied that the idea for the project came from him:

I announced to the press that I was working on a new piece, to be called *Ballet Mécanique*. I said that I also sought a motion-picture accompaniment to this piece. The newspapers and art magazines seemed only too happy to publish this request, which interested a young American cameraman, Dudley Murphy.<sup>9</sup>

From the outset this film revolves around music, something that is particularly notable in the composer’s designation of the film as ‘accompaniment to [his] piece’. This takes on an ironic tone in the context of original appearance, as both film and music premiered alone.

*Entr’acte* also experienced difficulties with sonic accompaniment, despite the success of the completion of the soundtrack itself. In addition to the actual presence of a scored soundtrack for *Entr’acte* (written by Erik Satie) the writers had hoped that the audience would react in their usual way to Dada events; that is, with outrage and protest:

Picabia intended to use the interval murmur of the theatre audience as background noise for this (silent) film, but they all fell silent, as though the sight of his extraordinary cortège had taken their breath away. Picabia, enraged, shouted at the audience “Talk, can’t you, talk!” Nobody did.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did the film not incite the usual reactions to Dada events, but also through this silence the audience defied Picabia’s claim that *Entr’acte* ‘respects nothing except the desire to burst out laughing’,<sup>11</sup> a reaction intrinsically linked to a physical, bodily sound that was expressed by the creators – but denied by the spectators – of the film. Picabia’s and Satie’s failed intentions for their work illustrate a comic contradiction between expectation of scandal and surprising audience receptivity. We might posit that through having every possible element available at the screening, the audience had a complete enough experience to not feel the need to riot or heckle the spectacle.

Music in ‘silent’ film can be considered as a level of abstract diagesis, maintaining a position on the cusp of the out-of-field. The difference made on the viewing of the films without and with their accompaniment is considerable, as sound is an integral part of our perception of the world around us. *Ballet mécanique*’s soundtrack is entirely percussive, which fits with the nature of the film’s panic-inducing flickering; something that is compounded with the use of clashing tonality and rhythm. The sound is additionally mechanically produced in the case of several instruments (for example, player pianos and aeroplane propellers), dehumanising all aspects of the work. *Entr’acte*’s music, though arguably more ‘human’ than *Ballet mécanique* through the use of non-automatic instruments, also focuses on an obsessively rhythmic approach,<sup>12</sup> which is inherently and inevitably transferred to a certain tactility. This is not only done through rhythm, but also through pitch. For example, a sequence on a rollercoaster is accompanied by a motif in several different instruments that oscillates around pairs of notes. This creates a multitude of alarm-like sounds as the film races to its fastest point. Ted Perry notes that *Entr’acte* was designed to provoke a kinaesthetic response.<sup>13</sup> The exploration of music and tactility particularly foregrounds the necessity of multiple senses to compose the perception and interpretation of reality. While the

visual is often privileged, Dada films distort our reliance on vision to encourage the incorporation of other means of perception as well as unusual combinations of these senses.

*Entr'acte*'s score was designed by Satie to fit precisely with the timing and action of the film. As such, it is the most musically designed film of our set. Despite this, the film itself is presented on the DVD in a way that differs from the original screening; the DVD soundtrack is static through being a recording, whereas the original would have been a live ensemble performance. The score is comprised of ten named musical sections,<sup>14</sup> each based on repetition of a particular motif. An advantage of this compositional technique specific to its live use is that variable repetition could be built into the performance to suit the visuals; something that is evident in discrepancies between the score and the DVD version. According to Orledge, Satie had 'discovered the ideal medium for his technique of composing in short juxtaposed contrasting techniques',<sup>15</sup> and we can liken this to the changing shots of a film. In the case of *Entr'acte*, the soundtrack is also suited to the ludic repetition and contrast of the unusual and varied content of the work. Additionally, we might argue that Orledge's statement that '[h]ere development was redundant, virtuosity distracting, and the invention of ideas and textures paramount'<sup>16</sup> is equally applicable to the aims not only of Clair and Picabia's film, but also to our more abstract, more silent Dada films.

Beyond the use of musical sound in these films and its implicit and explicit relations with our perception of the work as a whole, both films incorporate a certain visual musicality that is not immediately evident, but that would have been common at the time in mainstream cinema. *Ballet mécanique* uses on-screen blankness to present a sense of visual silence, something that renders the blackness of the frame claustrophobic. In contrast the rapid flitting back and forth between objects can be compared with Michel Chion's analysis of the refrain-shot. Chion describes a technique in early film in which a short refrain-shot of a sound-creating object (a machine, an alarm or a bell, for instance) would be alternated with a shot of those meant to be perceiving the sound.<sup>17</sup> *Ballet mécanique*'s use of human actors refuses this notion of the people as hearing through the use of characters who appear oblivious to the auditory content of the film: one woman repetitively maintains her task and another is focused on the very visual act of moving black frames over her face while changing facial expression. And of course in terms of narrative, both women are oblivious to the sounds and imagery that make up the rest of the film. Thus the alternating of sets of images creates the effect of the repeated refrain-shot, while lacking the semantic link between implied sound and listener.

An important aspect of *Ballet mécanique* as viewed with its contemporary soundtrack is the use of a siren wailing, which punctuates the film on five to six occasions.<sup>18</sup> The siren adds an exaggerated element of indeterminate pitch to the already nonhuman orchestra, thus contributing to the ambiguity of the ensemble as well as our inability to relate to the sounds. The contemporary viewer cannot know at what points the siren was originally intended to be heard, lending a certain sense of doubt to its meaning, as well as an inherent artificiality to the finished product. The alarm sound on the DVD can be made to correspond with a progression of images in the film. The first outburst aligns with a swinging pendulum and a swinging woman. The second accompanies shifting kitchenware filmed with a kaleidoscopic use of mirrors and prisms. The third compounds the first two in terms of content and motion, combining a swinging pendulum with mirroric reflections. The fourth becomes more abstract, aligning with an unidentified up-and-down motion, a shadow sliding up a slide, pumping machinery, and kaleidoscopic pumping machinery. The final instance combines swinging and alternating kitchenware, and shortly afterwards kitchenware and numbers. The effect that the addition of sound has in this case is a build-up of panic: the rapidly changing imagery and manic percussive wall of sound compound with the sonic remanence of the sound of the siren. Thus contrary to the notion of the humans that are oblivious to the sounds, here we have a sound that has not been matched with a visual alarm, and instead is simply used to build upon

a general sense of panic. This is ironically pointed out by the use of swinging metal cooking funnels whose motion makes them look like bells, but which no longer align with the alarm-like sound of the siren.

Something that is immediately broken down, then, by Dada cinema, is our assumption that the works with the greatest correspondence between sound and visuals will give us the most detailed meaning. We have seen through *Entr'acte* and *Ballet mécanique* that even if sounds are designed to correspond with the visual frame, an insistence on narrative incongruity instantly renders this simply another layer of ludic abstraction. In both cases the overriding impression is that of repetition, rather than any specific correlation between sound and visuals, giving a sense of displaced consistency in the presentation of chaos. Furthermore while both *Entr'acte* and *Ballet mécanique* possess written, preserved scores, their presentation on the DVD inevitably differs from the original conditions of screening, as well as persevering as the concrete, unchanging archived version. We will now see how replacement soundtracks can interact with a film, and the difference between reactions to a score that we know not to be custom-made and to purpose written soundtracks.

### **Musical Mismatch and Mysterious Mimesis**

Our next set of films have musical accompaniment in the format in which the contemporary spectator views them, yet all differ from their original form. Richter's *Filmstudie* was originally scored by Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, yet the music that complements the DVD version is an excerpt from Darius Milhaud's *La Création du monde* (1923).<sup>19</sup> The original music of *Vormittagsspuk*, like that of *Filmstudie*, has not survived to the present day: the original soundtrack by Paul Hindemith was destroyed by the Nazis, and has subsequently been replaced with 'a Bavarian fanfare, followed by African percussion'.<sup>20</sup> For the DVD both of these film soundtracks were compiled by Cécile Starr with Richter himself. Finally, *Emak Bakia* (Man Ray) was originally silent with improvised accompaniment, and the current-day soundtrack was put together by Jacques Guillot from a montage of music from Man Ray's personal record collection.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, this musical mismatch raises a conflict for the contemporary viewer between continuing to view the film in its silent form and integrating the (new) soundtrack into the complete filmic experience. As we saw with *Ballet mécanique*, adaptation to these changes quickly reveals new relationships with the filmic image, raising questions concerning the extension, diminution or augmentation of authorial control through time and media.

The soundtrack to *Filmstudie* has an added level of particularity in terms of the contemporary viewer, in that it has become distorted and crackly.<sup>22</sup> It is unclear if this is due to recording conditions at the time, or whether it has occurred through transfer between media. Though presumably not deliberate, this warping of sound is fitting with the style of the swirling shapes and superimposed imagery. The half-shut status of eyes, both floating and false, and on real faces, seems to respond to this sluggish waning of energy. In contrast with this initial mood, there is a markedly more upbeat section in the middle which corresponds with a greater focus on geometric shapes and less on 'real' imagery. This is a visual contrast that would be evident without the music, but the addition serves to push the sense of contrast to a logical extremity. The film ends with a repetition of the beginning, a perfect cadence, and the word 'aus' ('out'). This ending is reminiscent of *Entr'acte*, whose musical structure locks in with the ending of the action of the film, and which includes a frame marked 'fin'.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast with the secondary auditory effects produced by age and/or inter-media transfer, we can note a number of instances of visual noise within *Filmstudie*. The geometrically focused middle section mentioned above has an insistent rhythm reminiscent of *Ballet mécanique*, which even without musical accompaniment would create a tactile sense of metre. In addition, the cues given by the black and white lines and spaces present a gentle

association with the monochrome divisions of a musical score. More abstractly, during the sections of swirling objects that begin and end the film, we become aware of an imagined associative rhythm created between the swirling objects and the music. The slow rhythm of the music with the lazy revolutions of the objects provokes an unconscious alignment, exacerbated by the circular motion effected by the shape of the melody, which is arranged in lines that descend and return upon themselves in a gentle curve. The fact that this non-diagetic alignment is entirely imaginary highlights the nature of the viewer as perpetually programmed to 'fill in the gaps' when noting discrepancies in their perceptive field.

Though *Vormittagsspuk* does not give any indication of musicality through its title, the film was created for the 1928 International Music Festival in Baden Baden, and its original Hindemith soundtrack was played by an orchestra in the theatre pit.<sup>24</sup> As Richter himself noted, 'As we were still in the blessed days of silent films, the film music was performed according to a roll of paper that unrolled in front of the conductor's music-stand at the same speed of the film'.<sup>25</sup> We can assume, then, that the original score was designed, like Satie's score to *Entr'acte*, to synchronise to some extent with the action of the film. Even without the addition of sound, *Vormittagsspuk* is very suited to musical accompaniment through its extensive use of unnatural techniques such as reverse motion, giving it a ludic sense of rhythm. Richter writes on his use of flying bowler hats that 'In playing with them, in letting them do what they want, suddenly a kind of rhythm developed which became a kind of political satire'.<sup>26</sup> The multiplication of visual effects produces a feeling of crowding, and through this, visual noise. An additional layer of implicit sound is created by the film's structuring around a clock. This clock would have the viewer believe that the film's action takes place within ten minutes (the film is actually three and a half), and within this short space we are made aware of its proximity to twelve,<sup>27</sup> at which we might expect the longest chime of the temporal cycle. However, instead of chiming, the clock splits into a blank screen: a visual silence reminiscent of the blankness created in *Ballet mécanique*, something that lends a chilling note to the final screen that the broken timepiece reveals ('Ende').

Although an initial analysis of the later music applied to *Vormittagsspuk* by Richter himself does not reveal a great deal of correspondence between the new soundtrack and the film, further investigation highlights a certain shared symmetry. The music is arranged episodically, two segments of Bavarian music around a middle-section of African drumming. As the film is also constructed in this bookend fashion, we are inclined to associate the triumphant Bavarian fanfare music with the initial destruction, and the reconstruction (through reverse shot) of the rebelling objects. The centre section of African drumming corresponds with some rhythmic actions, for example marching people who disappear behind – or, as the filmic effect would have the audience believe, *into* – a lamppost. Through this, mundane but natural human activities are foregrounded as such, and the rebellion of habitually inanimate objects is celebrated. Though this sense of symmetry is not particularly well synchronised to the contemporary spectator, a general correspondence can be noted. We will see this level of correspondence in *Emak Bakia*'s musical episodes, which can be prescribed associative marker points, but which were not synchronised with the scored precision of films such as *Entr'acte*. We can see this as a layer of consistency between Man Ray's original screening and Guillot's replacement, as well as indicative of intention in Richter's case, since he chose music that he felt matched the effect of the original. We can suggest that with improvements in audiovisual technology at the time of reconstruction (the 1960s), Richter's timings were also deliberate.

*Emak Bakia*'s music was constructed from a montage of Man Ray's personal record collection. The music can be likened to the film in that its defining feature is its episodic structure rather than it matching any particular on-screen event. This additionally aligns *Emak Bakia* with *Vormittagsspuk*, with its sense of creating a mood rather than concrete

associations. At *Emak Bakia*'s original screening a pianist provided sound accompaniment at the instruction of Man Ray, as well as there being a phonograph present on which a selection of jazz, again provided by the artist, was played.<sup>28</sup> Notably the musical section delivered by the orchestra, Oscar Straus's 'Merry Widow Waltz' survives, in the form of a later recording, to the present day as accompaniment to the section of the film focused on collars, perhaps because Man Ray specified this piece in his memoir description. In terms of the jazz music, while the filmmaker mentions 'a popular jazz tune by the Django Reinhardt guitarists',<sup>29</sup> we lack evidence as to what extent the jazz numbers (and especially the piano accompaniment) differ between versions of the film. However, the apparent spontaneity of both the improvised music and the modern-day selection becomes distinctly more personal and intentional through this continuity.

In an ironic conformity with mainstream cinema of the time, *Emak Bakia* contains a single intertitle: 'la raison de cette extravagance' ['the reason for this extravagance']. The decision to include such a narrative marker distinguishes the film from the others in the Centre Pompidou set, serving to gently remind us of Dada's ability to defy the conventional by maintaining just enough of a link to truly undermine tradition. This is particularly effective given the content of the intertitle, which claims to be able to explain other parts of the film, yet does nothing of the sort. Notably, Man Ray commented that '[t]his was to reassure the spectator [...] to let him think there would be an explanation of the previous disconnected images'.<sup>30</sup> Chion describes the role of the intertitle in general as providing 'elastic speech'<sup>31</sup> in that it allows for the implication of much more content than it conveys. Additionally, Chion claims that the intertitle has a distancing effect in that it 'situates the film as smarter than the characters and comments on their immediate reactions'.<sup>32</sup> We might say that *Emak Bakia*'s intertitle responds to both of these purposes, in that it allows for multiple assumptions about its own meaning, while placing itself as knowing the answer to its own riddle. However, this is revealed to be a ludic mockery of the filmic process, as the intertitle simply provides a false start to an explanation that never occurs; an anti-narrative of sorts.

The intertitle corresponds with an important musical change in the contemporary version: the varying jazz music that has been playing up to this point comes to an abrupt, yet logical, musical close and the intertitle takes place in silence. We might say that this point represents an incidence not just of elastic speech but also elastic music: the sudden silence leaves an auditory remanence that will affect the way we interpret the intertitular content. Furthermore, as the new scene opens, the jazz is replaced by a section of music that falls more demonstrably in a 'classical' style.<sup>33</sup> This change is notable to the contemporary viewer: although all the film's content might be considered old-fashioned – the special effects no longer seem extraordinary, equipment seems outdated – a juxtaposition takes place at this point that is made particularly clear by the use of sound. Jazz music, a contemporary of early cinema, is used with the majority of the film's cinematic effects; when the post-intertitle scene opens with classical music (Straus), the action has taken a more narrative turn (as if it has taken its cue from the intertitle and become reason-able), showing a motorcar transporting a smartly dressed man. The poignancy of this sensible mode is pinpointed by the breakdown of 'normal' content, as the action devolves into Dada playfulness once more.

Our analysis of this mid-point in correspondence between music and the moving image has mirrored and contrasted that of the purpose-built soundtrack in that we have a continuing conflict between the silent version and the integration of silent sound, with the additional alternative of the later constructed soundtrack, which brings with it complexities of authentic replacement of the original. Given that the contemporary audience is usually specialist, to what extent can we define or create analogous parts, based either in original, unknown intentions, and the later intentions of the individuals compiling the surviving soundtrack? The varying involvement of the artists with these constructions allows us to transfer a certain level

of integrity to the later audiovisual interaction, but maintains a tension for analysis within an awareness of the problematics of this presentation. Contrary to the planned-out score that adds only more confusion, the later-applied musical montages can create a false sense of gap-filling. We will now further contrast both of these levels of accompaniment with our final set of films to assess the effect of total lack of sound in film.

### **(Black and) White Noise**

The remaining three films of the *Dada Cinéma* collection – *Le Retour à la raison* (Man Ray), *Rhythmus 21* (Richter), and *Symphonie diagonale* (Eggeling) – are our logically ‘most silent’, as well as our most abstract.<sup>34</sup> While the latter two explicitly reference musical terms in their titles, all three are, and always have been, without soundtrack. It is notable that this silence is carried through to the current status, since a large part of our ‘sound’ film soundtracks are replacements of silenced originals. Clearly the decision has been made to maintain a continuity of integrated sound or complete silence. We cannot, however, argue that these films are devoid of sound: a plethora of visual stimuli lead us to simply experience it in a different way. Chion notes that ‘In the silent cinema, instead of sound for sound, spectators were given an image for a sound’.<sup>35</sup> This section will analyse the weight of this claim in relation to our fully silent films, assessing their implicit referencing of noise, sound and music against our ‘louder’ films, as well as their place within the collection.

Although *Le Retour à la raison* neither has music nor references sound in its title, the content of the film itself very strongly references multiple senses. This is evident right from its construction:

On some strips I sprinkled salt and pepper, like a cook preparing a roast, on other strips I threw pins and thumbtacks at random; then I turned on the white light for a second or two, as I had done for my Rayographs.<sup>36</sup>

This quotation not only evokes the sense of touch (from the sprinkling of rough-edged objects), smell (through the use of the word ‘roast’) and taste (through the allegorical comparison with the preparation of a meal), but also creates a sense of sound in the scattering of hard objects onto the surface of the film strip.<sup>37</sup> Many of these senses are transferred to the viewing process through their creation of visual noise, particularly the salt-and-pepper sequences, which provide an image of white noise (a source of irritation for many contemporary viewers). This evocation of crowding gives a visual overload transferable across the senses, especially through the intrinsic linking of white noise with both sight and sound. *Le Retour*’s visual crowding also shares aspects with one of our sound films, *Ballet mécanique*, through the constant bombarding of the spectator with highly varying imagery. Which of these is more disturbing for the viewer? We have established that *Ballet mécanique*’s mania is reinforced by panic-inducing music. In contrast, the flickering imagery of *Le Retour* is that of confusion (despite its titular claims of being ‘the return to reason’). To exacerbate this confusion, the use of ‘white noise’ imagery provokes us to see patterns and shapes in the aleatoric scattering of fragments.

The fragmented and disconnected feel given by the juxtaposition of imagery is additionally instructive when considered in the context of *Le Retour*’s original screening at the Dada event ‘La Soirée du Cœur à Barbe’, where the film broke several times. This not only introduced additional edges for the viewer through cuts, but was also a source of appreciation for Man Ray, who wrote that the breaking ‘may have induced the public to imagine that there was much more to the film, and that they had missed the import of the *Return to Reason*’.<sup>38</sup> From a sensory perspective, this implied content adds to our notion of implied sound; we are allowed, if not provoked, to fill in the gaps ourselves, as we saw with the strange visual-

auditory alignment in *Filmstudie*. Additionally at this original screening fighting broke out in the periods during which the film was broken: combined with the darkness in the room, this would have created visual silence in contrast with the scuffling of live noise. Furthermore this marks an increase in sound from the periods of functioning screening. It is notable that Richter's *Rhythmus 21* was screened at the same event as *Le Retour*. As Richter was a more experienced filmmaker, his film is not known to have broken, yet has the background of this raucous Dada event as accompaniment. This further contrasts these two silent films with *Entr'acte*'s 'respectfully' silent audience, who added little, if any, soundtrack of their own, and whose contemporary audience likely continues this undesired response in the context of propriety.

We can note an important level of artistic intention in the work of Richter and Eggeling if we consider that both artists studied musical composition,<sup>39</sup> which inevitably, and deliberately, came across in their work. Richter claimed that 'I want to paint [...] according to principles like those in music, with long and short note values'.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps more so than in *Filmstudie*, because this film is only made up of series of geometric imagery, *Rhythmus 21* presents a tangibly musical expression (beyond its explicit intention in its title). Malcolm Turvey writes that 'As a result of his contact with the musician Ferruccio Busoni and his long-standing interest in rhythm, Richter began to employ counterpoint as a musical analogy for the type of balanced abstract form he was seeking to develop'.<sup>41</sup> More specifically in relation to Richter's own work, and particularly in *Rhythmus 21*, Turvey notes that 'the film is primarily concerned with bringing its individual figures into interdependent relationships in the way that counterpoint creates relationships between separate melodic lines'.<sup>42</sup>

*Rhythmus 21* takes as its titular description one of the most fundamental parts of music, rhythm, in a move that aligns the structural integrity of the filmic image and the musical pulse. This gives a sense of musicality that is incredibly subtle yet strongly felt by the viewer. Richter notes that he became interested in filmmaking through being drawn by 'the possibility of orchestrating time as I had orchestrated form'.<sup>43</sup> This use of vocabulary is immediately instructive through the auditory analogy of 'orchestrating'. In a similar way to the use of orchestration to provide a particular arrangement of a musical work, Richter arranged his imagery in geometric rhythms that mimic musicality effectively. Continuing his analogy of orchestration, he notes that in *Rhythmus 21* 'I made my paper rectangles and squares grow and disappear, jump and slide in well-articulated time-spaces and planned rhythms'.<sup>44</sup> We can contrast this precision control with *Le Retour*'s scattered rhythm, created by the chance positioning of objects through their sprinkling onto the film strip, versus the more rigid speed of projection of the end product. Instructively, Man Ray admitted that 'I had no idea what this would give on the screen',<sup>45</sup> continuing the ambiguity of correspondence between the senses foregrounded in all of our Dada films. Something that further links these latter two films despite this difference in deliberation of planning for the contemporary viewer is that the continuing preservation through the digital rendering of *Rhythmus 21* includes a lot of (unintended) visual white noise, mimicking the snow-like analogy of the salt and pepper sequences of *Le Retour*, as well as the crackly sound of *Filmstudie*.

*Symphonie diagonale* is, like *Rhythmus 21*, completely silent, and yet likewise makes several references to music and musicality, again most explicitly through its title. Not only did Eggeling work along some of the same rhythmic principles as Richter (as well as actually working with him), but the film also contains a plethora of musical analogies through its developing shapes. Line forms appear and disappear that resemble varyingly stylised musical staves, piano keys or strings, valves and pedals, and what could be interpreted as a rudimentary rendering of the visualisation of sound waves. Not only do these shapes and symbols carry semantic weight, but they are also reminiscent of the synesthetic works of Wassily Kandinsky, and while lacking the latter's use of colour, they mimic his use of line

(especially in Kandinsky's black-and-white compositions) to the extent that they benefit musically from the association. This alignment is particularly strong because of lack of explanation, whether it is through words, narrative or auditory matching. Most importantly perhaps, the use of these shapes, the way in which they move and develop across the screen, and the specific rhythm to which they are tied, maintain a level of tactile musicality that we also saw in *Rhythmus 21*. We might argue that these two films create this effect much more successfully than their louder counterparts that we have assessed here, in that their concentrated form is not dependent on sound to be multisensory.

The build-up of visual noise in these three (entirely) silent films shares a number of characteristics with the visuals of our audibly noisier films. The musicality created through incessant rhythm in *Rhythmus 21* and *Symphonie Diagonale* is similar to that created by *Ballet mécanique*. This flickering is compounded in both cases by a rhythm within the frames themselves, most notably in the latter's filming of machinery. The use of shapes associated with music, such as staves, keys and strings, are also used in films like *Emak Bakia*, which shows dancing legs, a torso section of a person strumming a banjo, and a revolving scroll of a string instrument. Notably Richter referred to his drawings for his early abstract films as 'like instruments'.<sup>46</sup> we might argue, through our analysis of this full set of films, that this attitude is carried across Dada cinema more widely. The manipulation of objects and imagery to produce particular effect, especially that of (implicit) sound, is very similar to that of the plethoric means of producing sounds on actual musical instruments.

### Conclusion

Chion wrote that in silent film, between the orchestra pit and the cinematic screen, 'there existed a poetic distance, an irreducible gap that allowed filmgoers to continue their aural dreaming of the screen's music without ever confusing that with its stylised embodiment'.<sup>47</sup> We have seen through the texts analysed here that Dada film exploits and manipulates this gap, through an extended destruction of filmic narrative. Through the abstract and the ludic, its content already confuses the spectator's sense of filmic reality. This puts the audience in a unique position of association, through snapshots of identifiable objects, as well as through the pareidolic imposition of unrecognisable juxtaposition. Spectators of the time would be expecting visual and auditory cues, especially with the use of photoplay music, and Dada either gave them none, or a collection that amounted only to more confusion; something that would have been particularly highlighted by the single use of the intertitle in *Emak Bakia*. The relationship initiated by Chion's depiction of the silents, and manipulated by Dada film, is notably complicated further with the contemporary experience of the film. With the advent of talkies almost a century in the past, today's audience expects sound, and yet a specialist audience would be aware that any DVD soundtracks are artificial, so any desire to assimilate them as 'part of the film' is questionable; something that renders the remaining silent films yet more disconcerting. However, breaking down implicit sound, the live soundtrack, the recorded post-production application and the relationship between all of these aspects, has allowed us to view the DVD collection as a kind of heterogeneous whole, a continually varied experience of the 'poetic distance' between the sight and sound.

We have seen that these films employ an extensive use of special effects that invoke not only a level of implicit sound, but also implications of the other senses, a certain tactility unique to the Dada style more broadly. As Walter Benjamin noted,

In the hands of the Dadaists the work of art, from being a sight that seduced the eye or a sound that persuaded the ear, became a bullet. It flew towards the viewer, striking him down. It assumed a tactile quality.<sup>48</sup>

In this paper we have marked a ‘progression’ from sound to silence in Dada film, assessing the effects of this varying inclusion of sound from its original screening to a contemporary presentation and thus differing perception of it. The most structured scoring in the original films does not always render an accurate modern reconstruction, as demonstrated by *Entr’acte* and *Le Ballet mécanique*. A lack of original sound does not entirely prevent the production of an approximation of the original effect, as shown through *Filmstudie*, *Vormittagsspuk* and *Emak Bakia*. And perhaps most instructively, we have discovered that not only are the sound films not necessarily more lucid than the truly silent *Rhythmus 21*, *Symphonie diagonale* and *Le Retour à la raison*, through simply adding an extra layer of anti-narrative, but also that these films have a marked relationship with each other through the *implicit*. As a collection, then, they work to distort perception in such a way that the senses are levelled, and that we can no longer use associative assumptions of any individual sense to decrypt Dada film. Furthermore, the films perform a levelling of sound and silence suited to creative interpretations of dominant structures, both in the world of film, and in the world outside of the cinematic lens.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dada Cinéma* (Re:Voir and the Centre Pompidou: 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In film notes to *Dada Cinéma*, p.22.

<sup>3</sup> In film notes to *Dada Cinéma*, p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.244.

<sup>5</sup> Instructively, this piece went on to become an independent musical work.

<sup>6</sup> The precise editing work enacted on this score will not be covered here, but considered in a more general sense of its effect on the filmic whole.

<sup>7</sup> The details of the multiple versions of *Entr’acte* are particularly well set out by Ted Perry, in his edited volume *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press), pp.60-84.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf E. Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Kuenzli (ed.), p.33.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), p.198.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Kuenzli (ed.), p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Musically speaking, the score to *Entr’acte* also maintains a constant sense of tension through its use of a multitude of different keys and time signatures, as well as within each key rarely, if ever, settling on the tonic note or chord. For a more detailed analysis of Satie’s score, see: Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies 1895-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.167-185.

<sup>13</sup> Perry (ed.), p.75.

<sup>14</sup> Instructively, the names of these sections align to some degree with the ideas of photoplay music which, although not used here, would have been common at the time.

<sup>15</sup> Orledge, p.240.

<sup>16</sup> Orledge, p.243.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.5.

<sup>18</sup> The ‘sixth’ is rendered ambiguous by a short hiatus that does not quite break with our auditory memory of the fifth, leading to a likely perception of the two as one instance of the same alarm.

<sup>19</sup> See: Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005), p.412.

<sup>20</sup> In film notes to *Dada Cinéma*, p.21.

<sup>21</sup> Similarities will show that this was informed by the original screening conditions.

<sup>22</sup> It is particularly appropriate to place *Filmstudie* and *Emak Bakia* in the same section, since their original screenings took place at the same event. See Kuenzli (ed.), p.6.

<sup>23</sup> Notably *Entr’acte*’s ‘fin’ frame is broken through both visually and musically.

<sup>24</sup> See: Herman G. Weinberg in Stephen Foster (ed.), *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), p.131.

<sup>25</sup> Richter, p.198.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Foster (ed.), p.132.

- <sup>27</sup> Marion Von Hofacker notes that to the audience of the day, this particular time was also indicative of danger. See: Foster (ed.), p.133.
- <sup>28</sup> Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp.272-273.
- <sup>29</sup> Man Ray, p.273.
- <sup>30</sup> Man Ray, p.272.
- <sup>31</sup> Chion, p.11.
- <sup>32</sup> We might note that this usage draws into question whether the Dada thought it was smarter than conventional society, or whether this is a self-depreciative reference to the movement's ludic and nonsensical nature. Members often declared that 'Dada means nothing'. Chion, p.15.
- <sup>33</sup> Although Straus's music was relatively contemporary to these films (1907), we might argue that it being pre-Dada is enough of a contrast to be included in the many traditions that the movement rejected.
- <sup>34</sup> Since the creators of latter two of these films worked so closely together, it is worth analysing them as a pair.
- <sup>35</sup> Chion, p.5.
- <sup>36</sup> Man Ray, p.260.
- <sup>37</sup> Tangentially, this scattering can be seen to pre-empt the prepared pianos of John Cage et al., which give sounds a crunchy edge.
- <sup>38</sup> Man Ray, p.262.
- <sup>39</sup> See: Bernd Finkeldey in Foster (ed.), p. 94.
- <sup>40</sup> Cited by Justin Hoffmann in Foster (ed.), p.74.
- <sup>41</sup> Malcolm Turvey, *The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920s* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011), p.30.
- <sup>42</sup> Turvey, p.31.
- <sup>43</sup> Richter, p.197.
- <sup>44</sup> Cited in Foster (ed.), p.79.
- <sup>45</sup> Man Ray, p.260.
- <sup>46</sup> Cited in Turvey, p.41.
- <sup>47</sup> Chion, p.10.
- <sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008), p.32. Italics added.

## Bibliography

### Books

- Benjamin, Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. by J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).
- Chion, Michel, *Film, a Sound Art*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- Dickerman, Leah, ed., *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005).
- Foster, Stephen, ed., *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- Kuenzli, Rudolf E., ed., *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996).
- Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (London: Penguin, 2012).
- Marks, Martin Miller, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies 1895-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Orledge, Robert, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- Perry, Ted, ed., *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press).
- Richter, Hans, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965).

Turvey, Malcolm, *The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920s* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011).

### **Film**

*Dada Cinéma* (Re:Voir and the Centre Pompidou, 2005) [on DVD]:

'Rhythmus 21', Hans Richter (1921-1924)

'Symphonie diagonale', Viking Eggeling (1921-1924)

'Le Retour à la raison', Man Ray (1923)

'Entr'acte', René Clair and Francis Picabia (1924)

'Le Ballet mécanique', Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy (1926)

'Filmstudie', Hans Richter (1926)

'Emak Bakia', Man Ray (1926)

'Vormittagsspuk (Ghosts Before Breakfast)', Hans Richter (1926)

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Biography**

**Elizabeth Benjamin** is a doctoral candidate in Modern Languages at the University of Birmingham, where she also completed her Master's in Cultural Inquiry and Undergraduate degree in French Studies and Music. Her research investigates the European Avant-Garde and its relationship with identity, specifically the links between Dada and French Existentialism. Her thesis is entitled *The Authenticity of Ambiguity: Dada and Existentialism*.