

When Sound is Enough

- Masha Tupitsyn -



La Ciénaga, 2001

In the manifesto, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, the filmmaker Robert Bresson insists that sound should never defer to image: "While music flattens a surface, makes it into an image, sound lends space, relief." In this series of films, sound is sight and sound is vision. Sound gives us somewhere new to go and something new to encounter. From Derek Jarman's all-tonal *Blue*, which asks us to "pray to be released from image," to Isiah Medina's *88:88*, where sound expresses new modes of being and thinking, these four works ask us to confront the way in which movies, as they currently exist, can no longer show us what we need to know about the world we live in. Through the politics of

listening, each film employs sound as a new way of engaging with cinema in the 21st century.

In 1993, while suffering partial blindness due to HIV, the late British filmmaker Derek Jarman made his metaphysical, all-tonal masterpiece, *Blue*. The film presents a static-shot of blue. Vision is divested of ocular sight and visual action, radiating an ontology of color and vision--the color in, not outside, the eye. *Blue* is precisely the exquisite and intimate sonority one gets when one has been "released from image." Jarman described his film this way: "Because there are no images in *Blue*, you can be as free as you like...People see all sorts of things they don't see on screen." Color and voice come together to form a new way of looking through intimate listening.

Made the same year as *Blue*, Michael Auder's 55-min analog video, *Voyage to the Center* features a soundtrack of anonymous phone conversations centered around love, sex, and sexuality. Auder sets the audio-track to images of brightly-colored "holiday" retreat. The commerce of generic, maudlin leisure creates a striking contrast to the intimate and mundane phone calls. Human voices carry, reverberate, and sonically travel while the sedate, dreamy vacation pics remain static and fixed, taking us. It's the uncanny, indeterminateness of telephonic communication--not escapist voyage--that transports us. Like Jarman's *Blue*, we are not simply located in the material geography of our physical bodies, but live in the affective geographies and technologies of listening.

Lucrecia Martel's 2001 film debut, *La Ciénaga*, is a kind of feminist re-imagining of Luis Buñuel's 1972 *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. Where Buñuel continually disrupts the bourgeois dinner with absurd antics between his screen players, Martel constructs her narrative of Argentine bourgeois decay using a highly sophisticated and unsettling approach to on and off-screen sound. At certain moments, strange sonic tremors and unexpected jolts are delivered. Sound rattles the visual narrative. Sound tells the real story. "That noise is killing me," one female character says at one point, hands over her ears.

An example of film as philosophy, Isiah Medina's 2015 visionary debut, *88:88*, demonstrates what is truly possible with new technology, both for life and for cinema. *88:88*'s visual collages and recurring trains of thought, work with and against the film's audio track in intimate and jarring ways in order to create new patterns of thought, unity, and

subjectivity. The film's many tonal registers, textures, voices, and volumes illuminates what it really means to live and love in global financial capitalism.

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