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Sound and Perception in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982)

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Abstract: This paper discusses the renewal of the conception of film sound and music following the technological advances of the late 1970s. It analyses the ways in which film sound and music freed themselves from traditional uses and became elements to be designed creatively. The soundtrack composed by Vangelis for *Blade Runner* (1982) is exceptional in this regard: produced in parallel to the editing of the film, it forged an intimate connection between sound and image. Through the method of *reduced listening* put forward by Michel Chion in *Audio-Vision* (2019), this paper scrutinizes the specific ways in which sound shapes the perception of the image and narrative in *Blade Runner*. The first part of this paper analyses how sounds come to replace music to characterize moods and atmospheres. Ambient sounds create a concrete, sonically dense diegetic world, while music is associated with an abstract, extra-diegetic world where spectators are designated judges. This contrast is thematically relevant and delineates the struggle between humans and replicants; sound and music are used for their metaphorical implications rather than in an effort for realism. The second part discusses the agency of characters through the sonorousness of their voices and bodies. Intonations, pronunciation, and acousmatic sounds anchor characters' natures as humans or replicants to their bodies. Yet, these bodies are revealed to be mere vessels awaiting definition; in the third part, we explore how sound is used to craft synaesthetic depictions of characters, revealing their existence beyond the human/replicant divide.

Keywords: technological development; sound design; science fiction; sound perception; film editing; blade runner; close analysis

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1. Introduction

If film remains undeniably vococentric[1], contemporary film sound cannot be reduced to the hegemony of the voice. In *Audio-Vision* (Chion 2019), Michel Chion incites us to consider sound as more than a technical add-on, and challenges the conception of film sound as redundant with the image. Through his concept of *added value*, sound gains informative as well as expressive properties that supplement the image. Like film images, sound has undergone technical breakthroughs; in the late 1970s, the arrival of multichannel and surround sound, especially with Dolby Stereo, allowed films to envelop audiences in a 360-degree field of layered sounds[2]. The possibility of creating immersive soundscapes led to the re-evaluation of film sound as an element to be fabricated rather than to be taken as is from sound libraries; each sound became the 'specific version of the story of a sound event' (Altman 1992, p. 34). The growing use of the term 'sound designer' confirms the appreciation of sound as a creative input in film which extends well beyond the matching of the image (Lastra 2008, p. 135).

It is within this period of sonic renewal, or 'New Hollywood' (Beck and Ament 2015, p. 107), that *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott) was produced. With the impulse to create a score integrated into the visuals (Puschak 2017), the Greek musician and composer Evángelos Odysséas Papathanassíou, known as Vangelis, closely worked with editor Terry Rawlings, with whom he had already collaborated with on *Chariots of Fire* (1981, dir. Hugh Hudson). Vangelis composed the entire soundtrack on the Yamaha CS-80 synthesizer, a revolutionary instrument at the time, since it was equipped with 'weighted keys which sensed velocity and aftertouch' (Sigman 2008, p. 70). The other novelty of the time was

the Lexicon 224, which created lasting reverb that gave the film its timbre and its *rubato*[3] feel (McGlynn 2020, p. 6). Mark Mangini, the sound editor of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017, dir. Denis Villeneuve), closely examined the original film's soundtrack in order to produce the sound of the sequel; he remarks:

> Vangelis had made these beautiful musical textures that were much more like sound design. . . You never really knew with this sort of grey area: was it sound design? Was it music? It all built towards a very seamless and cohesive soundtrack. (Moreland 2020)

It is precisely this 'grey area' that this essay seeks to investigate. *Blade Runner*'s soundtrack merges the voice, noises and music into a cohesive acoustic environment that both enhances its science-fiction images, but also resorts to film-noir aesthetics and romantic phrasing. The aim of this essay is to analyse the ways in which these various sonic elements interact with one another and with the image. Rather than focusing on the functions of sound common to all films (such as the spatialization of the voice discussed by Altman in *Moving Lips* (Altman 1980), or the temporalization of the image discussed by Chion in *Audio-Vision*), this essay scrutinizes the specific ways in which the soundtrack shapes the perception of the image and narrative in *Blade Runner*. This emphasis generates a shift from *codal* and *causal* listenings to a form of *reduced* listening[4], where the quality of the sounds themselves becomes the subject of analysis.

The first part focuses on sounds characterizing the diegetic world; it examines how spectators perceive an opposition between an abstract world and a concrete one through the use of ambient sounds. Then, the sonorousness of characters' voices and bodies is considered in relation to the human/ replicant divide. Finally, music expresses associations between the human and non-human, between sound and image.

2. A Divided World

This first part addresses the use of sound and music to define the setting of the diegesis. In one of the earliest essays on the music of Blade Runner, Andrew Stiller contrasts the music of this film with that of *Chariots of Fire*, which was also composed by Vangelis:

> The famous main theme for *Chariots of Fire* is an integral part of the structure of the film as a whole. It functions as a *leitmotiv*. . . recurring at several key moments to pull the whole thing together, and where it appears it is often more prominent in the audience's attention than the visible action. [...] In *Blade Runner*, by contrast, music serves a much more restrained and traditional function, acting simply as an unobtrusive background to help set the mood of each scene. (Stiller 1991, p. 196)

Unlike Stiller, this paper contests that the sound and music in *Blade Runner* are not used to fulfill only traditional functions. However, Stiller's observation of the crucial role played by music and sounds to define spaces and moods can serve as the starting point of this analysis.

2.1. Ambient Soundscapes

The 'traditional' use of sound to define moods in *Blade Runner* is actually a recent development. In classical film, the roles of sound and music were distinct: that of sound was to 'anchor the visual image and to clarify the characters' speaking voices' (Csicsery-Ronay 2011, p. 501), while music, as Stiller proposed, defined moods and spaces. However, with the arrival of New Sound in the late 1970s, sounds came to replace music in its role of atmosphere-setting. The focus shifted from the emotional definitions of a space or event to the microcosm of the event (Chion 2019, p. 110) through slow sonic events and textures that serve as a backdrop rather than as a musical event. This backdrop has 'an almost identifiable origin' (Donnelly 2013, p. 6) in the on-screen image, although with *layering*, most sounds are revealed to be off-screen.

In *Blade Runner*, the city and the sky are characterized by different sonic properties, and are therefore perceived as radically opposed environments. The opening sequence, which showcases a skyline from a camera diegetically placed within a flying car, is dominated by music; only a few sounds of car engines are heard. Later on, when Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) boards a police car, an *arpeggio*[5] going up the chromatic scale mimics the movement of the car rising in the sky, almost covering the humming of the machine (0:09:30). Most scenes set in the sky employ this form of muting of sounds in favor of music; from a narrative perspective, the progression from diegetic sounds to extra-diegetic music is telling: the auditory dimension of the film becomes more asynchronous (and thus abstract) every time we gain distance from the city and its inhabitants.

This contrast between soundscapes is thematically relevant. As Deckard looks at photographs in the intimacy of his home, gentle piano music is playing; he approaches the window, and the lights of the outside world illuminate his face (0:34:31); as he is once again exposed to this outside world, the piano music merges with synthesizer sounds, more apt to capture the tantalizing pull of the futuristic city. From his balcony, he looks down at the streets far below (0:34:36), sounds of flying cars and rain are present in a distant, soft way; the music is low in volume, slow and with powerful reverb. A cut to Priss, a replicant in the street, leads to a growing change in the sonic dimension of the film; her heels make strong sounds on the pavement as she walks. The synchronous folding of papers flying in the street (0:35:25), vapor exiting canalizations, and the asynchronous clinking of empty bottles on the ground (0:35:50) create not only a visual entrapment of Priss within a decrepit street, but also a sonic envelope of unpredictable sounds. The music is louder and the linking of notes is slightly faster, even though the melody remains the same. No obvious contrast is drawn visually between Deckard and Priss; the editing points to narrative continuity or simultaneity rather than leading to a comparison between images, yet Priss' environment appears to be more oppressive and hostile due to the accelerating rhythm and harsh intermittent sounds. Through the layering of sounds and music, the sonic element moves beyond the act of matching the visual element and delineates a contrast between Deckard and Priss' living conditions in a manner seemingly autonomous from the visuals.

Diegetic sounds create a more corporeal and objective world. Through the presence of tactile ambient sounds, Priss is bereft of the protection that Deckard enjoys from his tower, a contrast which would be almost invisible without these sounds. Ambient sounds are thus used to offer a differing perspective within the same city: from his all-encompassing balcony, Deckard is portrayed as blind to the realities of the street. Meanwhile, Priss' violent nature becomes more legitimate, because the threat is more palpable. From this point of view, the role of ambient sounds in crafting the perception of contrasting living conditions in *Blade Runner* is far from traditional. Ambient sounds give shape to the world, its texture and its threats, in a more concrete manner than music: throughout the sequence, the melody remains slow and nostalgic, summoning a film-noir aesthetic rather than commenting on differing spaces.

Such instrumental music serves as a 'wallpaper' for the narrative to unfold (Dahl, quoted in Winters 2012, p. 39). Rather than considering music as a non-diegetic entity granted with an authoritative role on narrative meaning, Ben Winters argues that film music participates in narrative meaning without competing with the visual track: music is extra-diegetic, not fully dependent or independent from the image (ibid, p. 42). Although *added value* shapes our acceptance of the image because it 'engages the very structuring of vision by rigorously framing it' (Chion 2019, p. 6), the narrating properties of the soundtrack depend on the image, and music is used to describe and set atmospheres without imparting 'secret narrative information' (Winters 2012, p. 44). From the observation made about the music in the balcony sequence previously analysed, it would seem that the music made with traditional instruments (such as the piano or the saxophone) serves this descriptive function of 'wallpaper' music in *Blade Runner*.

However, Vangelis' use of these seemingly 'neutral' fillers (in Winters' words) is nothing short of ingenious. The purpose of these 'musicalised narrative spaces' (Winters 2012, p. 48) is twofold: they can imply foreignness, for example by using oriental-sounding scales in the Japanese-dominated city (0:07:02). Their second use is to conjure nostalgia, for example with the 'Love Theme' or 'Memories of Green', where Rachael realizes that her memories are fake. These musical excerpts trigger the aforementioned effects in immediate ways: for example, the atmosphere of the soul is defined with Phrygian tones associated with Egypt (0:45:30). However, this immediate association of such music with Egypt is misleading: this is not due to spectators' knowledge of Egyptian music, but to their memories of movies they have previously watched, which resorted to these sorts of musical fragments or clichés to define a specific country (Strank 2019, p. 209). In other words, the link between the musical signifier and the 'atmospheric' tone signified is only enacted by the knowledge and memories of previous cinematic experiences, i.e., saxophone music conjures up nostalgia because of its conventional use in film noir.

Indeed, film has created strong conventions of realism which override actual experience (Chion 2019, p. 108). Referring to their own memories, which were shaped by film, spectators link sound and atmosphere in an almost automatic manner; however, this link between is anything but natural—it was crafted by cinematic conventions. Spectators are confronted with memories of melodies which do not belong to their experience of life but to their experience of film. The fact that these 'instrumental' musical pieces were composed using synthesizers only furthers the deceit of having an authentic experience. Spectators' experiences of these musical sequences thus emulate the replicant experience; indeed, Rachael (Sean Young) discovers that her childhood memories are implants, and that her photographs are signifiers which seek to forge her conviction in a past which never existed, at least not for her. If these musical pieces act as 'wallpaper' music, they do so while oscillating between the deception and revelation of the crafted cinematic experience, thus instigating a connection between the replicant and spectatorial experiences through sonic memory.

2.2. Mixing in Metaphor

In *Blade Runner*, the role of synthesizer music is different from that of 'instrumental' music. Although Winters' understanding of 'wallpaper music' rightfully draws attention to the descriptive side of film music, he acknowledges the potential reductiveness of his approach:

> While with many films the content of the score could be replaced with no discernible effect… there are a number of scores that would seem to warrant careful interrogation of their thematic relationships. (Winters 2012, p. 45)

Synthesizer music fulfills the purpose of describing the major conflict and themes of *Blade Runner*. The opening sequence is remarkable in this respect, so much so that Chion claims that 'the image comes to float like a poor little fish in this vast acoustic aquarium.' (Chion and Brewster 1991, p. 72)

Two types of sounds can be identified in the opening scene. The first one is a dull repeated sound, like the impact of something crashing on the earth, with deep reverberation. Synchronized sounds are harsh; for instance, lightning sounds like a whip lashing on skin are heard. A car makes its way from the horizon line to the foreground, and its engine noise is spatialized, growing louder as it approaches. A constant low vibration without any visual cause can be heard as the camera advances on the landscape. Nonetheless, because of the previous spatialization of sound by the appearance of the car, this noise seems to be 'naturally coming from what is seen' (Chion 2019, p. 5), like a white noise belonging to the landscape; the constant heavy hum of the city which weighs on the citizens below. On the other hand, the melody is high-pitched, relying on a four-note cell structure where each note is played as if on a single string of a violin, with a *vibrato*[6] (created by the weighted keys of the synthesizer). The first bar starts with a long (*minim*) E followed by a short F crochet going up the chromatic scale, before falling to the submediant C and a dominant B

(Figure 1). This motif is then repeated through the sequence with slight alterations: notes ascend towards higher pitches, and then they fall again down the chromatic scale.



Figure 1. Piano reduction of Vangelis' 'Opening Titles' from *Blade Runner*. Reproduced with permission from McGlynn (2020), *Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture*; published by Goldsmiths Press, (McGlynn 2020), p. 12. No changes made; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ accessed on 7 September 2024).

In this opening sequence, sounds are anthropomorphized to delineate a conflict between sentient beings and the unyielding technological environment. On the one hand, high-pitched notes, because they are perceived as vulnerable (wavering because of *vibrato*), and because of their ascent and descent on the chromatic scale, stand for humans and replicants attempting to live longer, to ascend towards an ideal form of being. On the other hand, the technological world, represented by the 'white noise', remains a constant background which links separate notes together and even represents a necessary point of return: just like the notes on the chromatic scale, replicants return from the 'off-world colonies' to die on earth. The life of men is on the ground, tied to the hellish living conditions which they have created for themselves. This 'Opening Titles' theme therefore foregrounds the opposition between the ground and the sky that was previously established between Deckard and Zhora's soundscapes. Any ascent towards the sky is marked by failure—the last note of the bar mutates into a siren noise, synonymous with danger and death.

Sound and music are used for their metaphorical implications rather than for realism. Whittington underlines that in science fiction, sounds mimic cinematic effects by manifesting more evidently than in classical cinema:

> Whereas classical Hollywood cinema sought to provide sound that was "natural" and "real," invisible in many ways, contemporary sound design engages the codes of the "real," yet also presents aesthetic constructions that are at times self-reflexive and overt in their use of techniques of spectacle. (Whittington 2021, p. 199)

In this opening scene, synchronised sounds such as the roaring column of fire (0:03:16) are subject to these 'aesthetic constructions' (ibid.) In other words, *Blade Runner*'s soundscape is dream-like because it synchronizes images and sounds through isomorphism: sounds describe our perception of an object's movement rather than the acoustic reality of such an object (Chion 2019, p. 121). Chion calls this process 'rendering', whereby recorded sounds 'render the feelings associated with the situation' (ibid, 109), and are therefore more likely to gain figurative and narrative values. The opening scene is thus characterized visually by horizontal movements, as the camera advances on the landscape of the city, with cars going back and forth, and by vertical movements conveyed sonically through rendering. The soundtrack, by implying visuals (in this case, movements alongside a vertical line), thus generates 'a spatial sonic arena wherein sonic elements have mixed into a sensual and psychological field.' (Donnelly 2013, p. 1). Chion calls this extension of the on-screen space to audiences through the soundtrack a 'superfield', which possesses 'a kind of quasi-autonomous existence with relation to the visual field.' (Chion 2019, p. 150) Although Donnelly discusses the 'superfield' in relation to immersive sound technologies (such as the split-six configuration introduced by Walter Murch while working on *Apocalypse Now*), in this sequence it is the sound mixing itself which permits an extension of the on-screen space through sensual and psychological means.

Sounds imply movements, visuals, and specify the relationship between the spectators and the diegesis. Percussions are used as sound effects rather than being integrated into the melody. Relying on the semiotic associations of cymbals, horns and percussion with pageantry, the military and the hunt (Kalinak 1992, p. 13), such instruments conjure visuals, just like horns bring about the beginning of a battle. Cymbals and chiming sounds are played in an ascending *arpeggio*, as if they were unfolding the columns of fire; extra-diegetic music seems to gain power over images, for the sole purpose of unfolding a hellish spectacle in front of the camera's single eye, and behold! An eye appears on the screen (Figure 2; 0:03:49). The spectacle of the city from the sky, presented by the previous shots, is reflected in this eye, subsequently conflating it with that of the spectator. Percussions therefore not only conjure images on the screen, but the spectators themselves. Music brings about the fusion of the spectators' eyes with the camera in a self-reflexive way and, in doing so, that which is technological is anthropomorphised—the camera becomes an eye.



Figure 2. A still from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (0:03:49).

Rather than being positioned as non-diegetic entities, spectators are summoned into the story, not as (diegetic) actors but as extra-diegetic judges: neither fully within reach nor separate from characters, they accompany Deckard and replicants alike. They occupy an in-between position, between diegetic and non-diegetic, but also between organic and technological (as they are merged with the camera). This is why, unlike Deckard in the 'balcony scene' previously analysed, they therefore benefit from an all-encompassing view and can judge in a way that Deckard cannot.

3. Characterizing the Human and Non-Human

Spectators become judges because their position in relation to the diegesis is tied to the camera. Their opinion is informed by a multitude of characters' perspectives, defined through their voices, but also through the sounds their bodies make, which reveal their nature as replicants or human beings.

3.1. The Spatialized Voice

The distributed agency between characters of *Blade Runner* is due to their equal capacity to voice their will to live. However, during test screenings, audiences did not understand the narrative, which led the 1982 version of *Blade Runner* to be released with a film-noir inspired voice-over by Rick Deckard (Whittington 2021, p. 186). This led to the repositioning of Deckard more firmly in the diegesis ibid, p. 173), and other characters seemed to gravitate around him rather than be striving for their own survival. Indeed, Mary-Ann Doane observes that when in competition with a voice-over, the latter, because it is not reducible to the spatio-temporal limitations of the body as well as that of synchronization, 'is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth.' (Doane 1980, p. 42) Deckard's voice-over prompted over-explanation and endowed Deckard with total narrative authority. Rawlings himself laments: 'it's a much more interesting film if you accept it, and work it out yourself.' (Rawlings 2021) Without the voice-over, 'the film distributes authority over the narrative not only among the various characters, but throughout the science-fictional

cityspace and the whole soundtrack.' (Csicsery-Ronay 2011, p. 505) *Blade Runner* is one of the very few films where one can compare the effects of a voice-over-led narrative and one foregrounding Vangelis' music and sound effects; the Director's Cut is perceived as 'lyrical and visceral, rather than detached and analytical' (Whittington 2021, p. 173).

Characters' voices appear as firmly anchored within bodies. Doane notes that film sound creates the illusion of unity by synchronizing a voice with a two-dimensional body, thus creating the hallucination of a 'fully sensory world' (Csicsery-Ronay 2011, p. 45) to hide the material apparatus of film and 'convince the viewer that the image exists independently of the technology which would mark it as fiction' (Altman 1980, p. 70). Film sound thus creates the illusion of the reality of on-screen bodies, and *Blade Runner* takes the corporealization of characters even further: all characters have specific accents, speech impediments or tendencies which are forms of 'vocal corporealizations' (Silverman 1988, p. 61).

Characters' responses to the Voight–Kampff test reveal their human and replicant natures through their sonic qualities. The Voight–Kampff test supposes that by responding to emotionally distressing questions, people's pupils dilate in a way which reveals whether they are replicants or humans. If Mr. Holden and Deckard focus on the eyes of Leon and Rachael, the potential replicants they examine, the sonic qualities of their voices also hint at their nature. When Rachael answers Deckard's questions, she emphasizes hard consonants and her intonation is monotonous: "I'd **t**ake him to the **d**oc**t**or./ I'd **k**ill i**t**" (0:19:07; 0:19:19; emphases added). This exposes the hard, unyielding nature of her replicant manufacturing. On the other hand, Deckard varies intonations in much more conventional ways, his tone decreasing at the end of sentences: "You're watching **t**elevision./ Suddenly you realize / there's a **w**asp/ crawling on your arm." (0:19:15; emphases added) Roy Batty, finally, speaks slowly, in a low volume, while baring his teeth in an animal-like fashion (0:24:43). Each of his words is clearly articulated, and he's immediately perceived as eloquent, the spokesman of the replicant escapees. The revealing nature of the voice is reinforced when Deckard investigates the replicant Zhora: he fabricates his accent and his voice to gain her trust in a way he would not by using his true voice. In *Blade Runner*, characters' perspectives are therefore revealed by giving each voice the chance to tell its truth through semantic means, but also to be true through sonic ones: each voice is deeply anchored in its body and speaks for its character's material existence as a manufactured replicant or a natural-born human.

3.2. The Matter of the Body

Characters in *Blade Runner* are always sonically defined within space. Arguably, the spatialization of the voice is the primary function of film sound (Chion 2019). However, characters are usually defined well before they speak through their bodily qualities, conveyed through synchronous sound. For instance, the first element which characterizes Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) is his hand in close-up; Batty is contorting his fingers, as if cracking his bones instead of his knuckles. The sound of this contortion is one of something hard being bent or broken—like a glacier fissuring. Before we even hear Batty's voice, he is an acousmatic[7] presence pointing to the superhuman strength of his body, and can without a doubt be identified as a replicant. The appearance of a being cannot alone identify someone as a human being or a replicant in *Blade Runner*. Instead, the sounds made by bodies, indicative of the matter they are made of, reveal the nature of the individual more precisely than the image.

If sounds are indicative of characters' natures as replicants or humans, they nonetheless do not determine who individuals are and what they become. This is perceptible when Deckard investigates Leon's bathroom: he moves a transparent plastic shower curtain which makes a friction noise similar to folding paper (0:22:45), different from the smoother sounds usually made by plastic. The sound of the friction between plastic and skin was amplified in post-production to create a more physical, corporeal feel of the different materials, and to emphasize the interplay between these materials. Later on, the same sound is used when he opens a plastic bag to secure evidence (0:23:13). These 'paper-like' sounds are close to the ones made by Gaff when folding origami. Each paper that he folds

could take any shape; it remains undetermined until it is fully folded. Through sound, paper and plastic are put on an equal footing as materials awaiting definition, although one is seemingly 'natural' and the other synthetic. Humans and replicants alike thus have the same capacity to define themselves regardless of their material nature. This point reveals itself to be essential when the replicant Zhora dies: her synthetic body is compared to the transparent plastic jacket she wears over her bare skin; both are simply envelopes containing beings rather than determining entities. Tellingly, Gaff makes a human figure out of cigarette paper (0:23:20) after making a chicken. With the same material, a beast and a man can both be made. Auditive character definitions, whether by the voice or by bodily material sounds, are intersensorial, as they refer to touch, embodiment, and the interplay of materials. In doing so, they point to one's inescapable anchoring in the material world, a curse common to both replicants and humans. However, by merging the synthetic and natural, these same sounds intimate the potential for beings to transcend their material definitions—this explains why Roy Batty evolves from a soldier to a poet.

4. Sound is the New Light

The capacity of characters to evolve into other forms of being is magnified by the interaction of sound and image: sound is not used to achieve acoustic realism, but for its expressive properties which complete the image.

4.1. Synaesthesia

Sound and music express visual elements sonically. In the early stages of the editing process, editor Terry Rawlings and Vangelis would test together some pieces of music and sounds on raw cuts of the film, so that Vangelis could develop the music according to the image, and Rawlings could edit according to the music (Rawlings 2012). This has led to a close alliance between sound effects and cinematic effects, especially lighting. For instance, each car in the sky is visually defined by a halo of light, blinding at its centre, and more diffuse at its edges (Figure 3; 0:15:05). Each car is accompanied by an ascending *arpeggio*; like the halo, the notes of the arpeggio are clear at first, and then reverberate until the sound merges into the white noise of the city (0:15:05). Venture interprets this coming together of light and music as a form of pointillism: 'One minor chord will be sustained using a synthesized string-like sound, and sound effects or single notes are layered over this chord, like points of light in a dark sky.' (Ventura 2010, p. 63) Auditory and visual perceptions are thus merged in a synesthetic manner, so that one simultaneously hears light and sees *arpeggios*.



Figure 3. A still from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (0:15:05).

The privation of sound is also an expressive aesthetic choice. The scene when Deckard kills Zhora is striking for its silence; only ambient sounds remain. Eugenie Brinkema distinguishes silence from near-inaudibility: she argues that silence remains ideal in its necessary failure to create it; it is therefore only discussed in terms of presence and absence. On the other hand, near-inaudibility has aesthetic potential in terms of tension, intensity and forces (Brinkema 2011, p. 213). The scene when Deckard chases Zhora around the city

fits this definition of near-audibility; Deckard lacks auditive embodiment—he is completely silent: he does not scream for people to get out of his way, his feet do not make sounds on the pavement. On the other hand, Zhora still makes footstep noises even when framed behind a bus (0:53:55). Thus, from a sonic point of view, the situation is therefore the opposite of the diegetic hierarchy: although Deckard is the hunter and Zhora the hunted, Deckard is sonically absent, as if his murderous endeavor deprived him of any definition; conversely, Zhora's sounds appear more potent in their persistence, they are firmly anchored in her body through synchrony, thus reasserting her existence that Deckard is desperately trying to end. Brinkema asserts that the regime of near-audibility 'affirms the possibility of the generation of forms that persist.' (ibid, pp. 227–31). In this sequence, Deckard's failure to be sonically present reaffirms Zhora's persisting noises, and thus her vitality as a flesh-and-blood individual, and not simply as a replicant. Consequently, near-audibility generates an increasing anxiety regarding her potential (and eventual) death, because it reveals Zhora's existence as an embodied being.

Music replaces the voice; in a synaesthetic manner, Zhora's interiority is expressed sonically. Deckard screams as he shoots, as if the moment of the chase which had suspended his voice and bodily sounds had ended. The impact of the bullet coincides with the moment when Zhora crashes into the first set of the glass doors of a shopping centre; her body itself, through sounds, seems to be made of glass, breaking as she gets wounded. Visually, Zhora also seems to be made of transparent, breakable textures: she wears a clear jacket, is surrounded by bubbles; the framing makes the identifying of her visible body parts difficult, making all these materials merge into her (Figure 4; 0:55:27).



Figure 4. A still from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* 0:55:27.

Deckard shoots a second time, and Zhora breaks through another set of glass doors; her mouth gaping, synthesizer music starts synchronously, replacing her scream (0:55:21). Zhora's scream becomes a 'screaming point', a point of convergence where the plot of the film is 'consumed and dissipated, in the unthinkableness and instantaneity of the scream…The woman's scream has to do with limitlessness. The scream gobbles up everything into itself' (Chion 1999, pp. 76–79). In the face of death, Zhora's scream is an explosion, expressive of everything that she is and everything that she could be—displayed through the various neon lights reflected by the materials that Zhora is associated with (glass, transparent plastic, bubbles). Visually, she becomes undefined, her movements slowing down and coming to a rest like the mannequins surrounding her in the shop: she dies as an object. However, by synchronizing music with her scream, Zhora dies as a human being; even more so, the music ends with rubato *duets* made of notes descending the chromatic scale, mimicking not only the falling of synthetic snow in the display case, but also Zhora's fall. Face down on the ground, her hands spread around her body, the bullet wounds in the shoulder blades (Figure 5; 0:56:24), Zhora is designated sonically and visually as an angel whose wings were cut off, and whose fall was provoked by Deckard.



Figure 5. A still from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (0:56:24).

4.2. Memory and Repetition

Music is not simply used to communicate a character's immediate feelings, but also a change in their vision of the world. This is the case with the 'Opening Titles' theme, which is reprised at the end of the film through the 'Tears in Rain' sequence, this time describing Batty's feelings as he dies, contrasting with his previous characterizations. Throughout the film, Batty is associated with water: in a fade, his face dissolves into the image of boiling water (1:12:54); later on, a storm detonates as he realizes with annoyance that J.F. Sebastian is watching him (1:15:43). These associations with water underline his superhuman capacities, his anger and the danger he represents for Deckard. However, as he dies, Batty is combined with a softer, more vulnerable form of water: rain. As outlined in the first part of this essay when discussing the melody of the 'Opening Titles', notes fall down the chromatic scale in a way reminiscent of humans failing to ascend to heaven; later on, Zhora becomes a fallen angel in her death. In this scene, notes adopt a new connotation, where they come to mimic the falling of rain on earth; each *arpeggio* ends on a *niente*, a note that fades out, as if simulating the explosion of each raindrop on the ground and its subsequent 'covering' of the surface of the earth. Each high-pitched note of the melody thus corresponds to individual beings and individual raindrops, and each note is linked by a low vibration, an unyielding background noise which could represent the city, the ground, the status quo.

The recourse of a melody previously used leads to the locating of this scene within the wider struggle between heaven and hell, and creates powerful synesthetic associations between the visual and the audible. In Batty's famous 'Tears in Rain' monologue, rain becomes an essentially human object, since it is indistinguishable from tears. Visually, his body seems on the edge of becoming a dark statue dripping with rain, in sharp contrast with the unwavering bright city lights behind him (Figure 6; 1:42:50): by combining simple visuals with this melody, Batty stands for all of humanity indiscriminately fighting against determinism. This passage therefore performs a merging of the body, the voice, and melody by relying on memory. Elissa Marder argues that in *Blade Runner*, Deckard watching a tape of Leon taking the Voight–Kampff test enacts a repetition (as Leon taking this test happens to be the second scene of the film) which reminds audiences that

> what we saw "happening" did not actually "happen" in our presence. . . In the shock of the moment that reminds us of our position as spectators, we arrest the fictional continuity of the film's narrative. (Marder 2012, p. 136)

In the same way as narrative repetition, the musical repetition of the 'Opening Titles' disrupts the illusion of narrative purity. The first use of this song established spectators as judges to an epic conflict, and this new use of the theme marks the crucial moment of decision making: does being born a replicant prevent one from becoming human? If a film is a memory one does not truly live, are the spectators replicants?



Figure 6. A still from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1:42:50).

5. Conclusions

This essay demonstrated the ways in which sounds and music in *Blade Runner* are closely related, if not merged, with images and narrative themes. This necessarily sheds light onto the invaluable role of sound designers and foley artists ever since the late 1970s, which cannot be reduced to synchresis or atmosphere-setting. Indeed, sound "interprets the meaning of the image and makes us see in the image what we would not otherwise see or would see differently" (Chion 2019, p. 53). This is made especially noticeable when comparing the 1982 version of *Blade Runner* and the Director's Cut. That is why Chion encourages a comparative study of audiovisual media; he particularly values the watching of film scenes without sound first, only studying visuals, and then with sound, realising how much more information is obtained about the diegetic situation.

Studying film music through Chion's 'reduced' listening obliges us to consider all sounds, including voices and ambient sounds, as part of the cinematic soundtrack. In *Blade Runner*, reduced listening reveals that characters are not only words and visuals, but sonically embodied beings with unlimited potential, so much so that all beings seem to explode and to synaesthetically merge in the final 'Tears in Rain' scene, and human and non-human terms no longer seem adequate to qualify beings. Only by resorting to reduced listening can film scholarship truly do justice to film as an audiovisual medium.

Furthermore, something must be said of the potential of 'rendered' sounds—these sounds which abandon acoustic realism and instead reflect the feelings associated with the visual event. This form of sound mixing, which emphasizes spectatorial perception, makes it so that 'film is grasped not solely as an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole.' (Coulthard 2013, p. 116) This is especially true in the science-fiction and horror genres, where film has created strong conventions of sonic realism which override our own experience. A compared analysis of rendered sounds in these genres, across films produced in different cultural industries, would probably reveal that what is deemed to be realistic sound differs across screen cultures.

Finally, it could be said that all body genres rely on acousmatic, rendered sounds to create an event which does not appear visually. Violence, more often than not, is heard rather than pictured on film. One could argue that it is because it is acousmatic that violence is so potent: it remains beyond the frame, a constant presence, a threat to the diegetic and extra-diegetic worlds, as we all belong to the 'superfield.' From this point of view, studying the sounds of body genre films could highlight the importance of sonic events in making spectators imagine things much worse than what could ever appear visually.

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Notes

1 All sounds are mixed to guarantee the intelligibility of dialogue.

2 Layered sounds are composed and do not translate one single thing (Davies 2012, p. 92).

3 Rubato is a tempo which marks intervals between notes as a form of interpretation.

4 These three forms of listening are defined by Chion; codal listening is a semantic mode restricted to language, and seeks intelligibility. Causal listening implies determining what produced a sound within a diegesis. Reduced listening focuses on the traits of a sound independent from its cause or its conventional meaning. (Chion 2019, pp. 25–34)

5 Notes which are played successively rather than simultaneously.

6 The note spreads in an uneven way.

7 The cause of the sound is not fully visible on-screen.

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