

Tracking Sounds: Approaches to Audio-visibility

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Abstract

*This paper looks at the possibilities of exploring the relationship between sound and image in such ways that step outside the traditional 'soundtrack' usage as well as the various traditions prevalent within popular culture (the music video for example). What does it mean to interrogate sound through the visual or vice versa? As well as looking at certain canonical texts such as Deleuze or Chion, it will aim to look at the author's own practice in order to answer these questions. In particular, a new work *Via di San Teodoro 8* will be discussed; this film looks at the relationship between sounds/space/location/performance in a specific context: the house of the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi (1905-88) in Rome and the documentation and rediscovery of the sounds of the 'Ondiola' an electronic instrument developed in the late 1940s on which Scelsi improvised his music. This is seen as a form of experimental documentary, one that attempts to develop its narrative clusters exclusively through the relationship of sound and image. It looks at the space of artists' film as one to explore such new relationships between the visual, sound, and music.*

Keywords: Soundtrack, Experimental Music, Art, Film, Sound/Image.

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In this paper I want to look at the relationships between image and sound; between art film and mainstream; between theory and practice. In order to do this I want to focus on a recent piece of my own: a video film entitled *Via di San Teodoro 8*. Music lies at the heart of my own practice as a video maker, and this film takes as its subject the house that belonged to the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi in Rome. Faced with stepping outside the standardized documentary structures and jettisoning dialogue or commentary, I was forced with this film to reflect for myself on the relationships between the visual nature of spaces and the corresponding sonic dimension that both intertwine to form the film's core. I'll return to this later, but first I will examine and lay out three broad issues as a kind of critical topography of what follows: 1) The relation, or critical dialogue even, between video art, sonic art and mainstream or art film. 2) The relationship, sonically and visually, of the articulated field of film, and 3) The structuring of sound in film and its usage and 'reading'.

Taking the first point, we can ask if artists' film still represents a critique of mainstream film? Obviously, issues persist in artist's films, such as the exploration of duration (unfettered by conventions of structure), an embrace of non-narrative, and the investigation of non-theatrical contexts, with each of these aspects pointing to strategies that lie outside conventional cinema. But while the roots of artist's film grows out of the experimental practices of conceptual art, music, performance, media art etc., the schism - the critical distance even - between an artist's film practice and a mainstream one appears less demarcated than it once did. Artists such as Julian Schnabel, Shirin Neshat, Steve McQueen or Sam Taylor Wood have all made the successful jump into mainstream movie-making without necessarily jeopardizing their individual practices while simultaneously bringing a refreshing 'eye' to the process of filmmaking in itself. Many other examples could be made here, but the point is simply that the acerbic critical opposition that once existed between art and cinema is no longer as cut and dried as once perceived. Also, this could be said to operate on another level, where this (almost) exhausted binary opposition between video and film (with the respective mediums being stressed as a differential) is no longer polemically vital. Speaking of this, Michel Chion (1994) has suggested,

[The] question of the nature of the video image brings us to the question of the status – or rather non-status – of the frame in video. In film the frame is important, since it is nothing less than *that beyond which there is darkness*. In video the frame is a much more relative reference. This is because, for one thing, monitors always cut off an undetermined part of the image, and for another, when we look beyond the borders, there is more to see. Since we normally behold the video image in a lighted place, the image does not act as a window through which our attention is channeled.¹

Needless to say, multi-screen video aside, this situation has drastically changed. We could argue that the space of the frame, rather than being undermined by video, has become a shared space with both video and film. Most videos, theatrically shown or otherwise, are now projected, often in the dark and using high quality sophisticated equipment, or else a hard-edged plasma screen is employed. And each now also share the same widescreen format, with high definition edging closer to film quality. This has emphasized a situation of exchange rather than, as Chion and others previously upheld, a polarization of inherent media-specific qualities. Within mainstream cinema, the impact of these changes have been felt, not only in the direction described above, but the influence of experimental film techniques becoming more prevalent in action or special-effect films. This is also, possibly, in response to numerous pressures - from the games Industry even amongst others - to create an *immersive realism*. Therefore, the fast edited action fight places the spectator directly within the action, the distance being totally collapsed. Sound too functions in this way as the spectator can, increasingly in recent releases, 'feel' the sound of the gun cartridges being expended – almost physically – just as much as viewing the resulting bloody carnage.

It could be said, though, that this urge towards immersive realism remains an *instrumental* approach to what started out as a more abstract perceptual investigation and experimentation – and as with any 'industry' techniques it soon becomes a device to be churned out, which is where mainstream cinema becomes a victim of its own clichés (think of the action fights of the Bourne or recent Bond films, or the accompaniment of large scale battle scenes with their obligatory accompaniment of slow, polyrhythmic, tribal drumbeats).

The recent enforced co-habitation of filmmaker and artist through the imposition of the widescreen frame affects both. Interesting things happen when such a framing is refused, even in the sense of reverting back to standard

format as in Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. But what does this shared frame do to approaches to sound? This leads to my second point, the relationship of the sonic and the visual to the articulated field of film. I don't think that Chion's statement, "Video makers often don't know what to do with sound, aside from providing a neutral background of music or a voice"² can any longer apply to video. Obviously, the playing field has changed drastically since these words were written. There is, and has been for some time, a confident relationship between sonic art, or sound works, however we call them now, and video; think of artists like Christian Marclay, Phill Niblock, Ryoji Ikeda and others. Often, it is sound that has brought these artists to the image. This emphasis on sound might recall another of Chion's examples, given here to pinpoint the *zero ground* of film, the frame:

A film without sound, remains a film; a film with no image, or at least without a visual frame for projection, is not a film. Except conceptually: Walter Ruttmann's 1930 limit-case film *Weekend* is an "imageless film" according to its creator, consisting of montage of sounds on an optical soundtrack. Played through the speakers, *Weekend* is nothing other than a radio program, or perhaps a work of concrete music. It becomes a film only with reference to a frame, even if an empty one.³

Ruttmann's piece becomes film, then, only through the use of projection and the empty screen. It's an extreme example, but an interesting one to locate what Chion feels is the essentialist core of film. On the other hand, besides the obvious classics (Bresson, Hitchcock, Godard) Chion bemoans the missed opportunity for filmmakers to really explore sound, despite the possibility of the increased possibilities of a 'superfield' of multitracks made possible with the strides made in Dolby sound: "Ontologically speaking, and historically too, film sound is seen as an add on."⁴ That is, the sound simply enables us to *see* and therefore to *know*.

This brings me to my third point: the structuring of sound in film and its semantic positioning. Chion's concept of the 'superfield' draws attention to the fact that the soundtrack is hybrid: anything from speech, noises, music, etc., etc., as we all know. In terms of thinking about sounds (whether musical or not) this hybrid tracking is susceptible to various formations of linguistic analysis. Whether such (now historical) analyses are formed out of basic indices (allowing for patterns of deduction) or more complex quasi-linguistic formational structures matters not, as they each see film 'structured as a language' or at least analogous to its structuring and formation. These theories have been useful, but only after the fact we might say. We do not, in everyday speech, formulate our sentences according to particular structures in a self-conscious manner, if we are partaking in a particular, socially conditioned lexicon then it is *live*, that is, negotiated in the moment, improvised. This is something that I feel is important to my own practice, and this is not to denigrate the importance of, say, structural or post-structural academia, but it remains just that: academic. Nor is it to deny a filmic grammar, but this is always digested and then *felt*, like the structures of language itself and, likewise, is always there to be contested. A more useful dialectic for sound is one that is allowed to shift across *semantic* listening and *timbre*, the latter being something that escapes any rigid codification. Pierre Schaeffer, the French Musique Concrete pioneer, referred to this as *reduced listening*, that is, a listening that clears itself of cause, effect or meaning, and concentrates of the qualities of sound itself. This might also recall American composer John Cage's (1961) approach to sound:

Hearing sounds which are just sounds immediately sets the theorizing mind to theorize, and the emotions are continually aroused by encounters with nature [...] And sounds when allowed to be themselves, do not require that those who hear them do so unfeelingly. The opposite is what is meant by response ability.

New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shape of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds.⁵

Cage's inclusive approach to sound and noise with its realigned relationship to new means of production has had a lasting influence on experimental filmmaking. Fundamentally Cage's influence has contested what has been bemoaned since the 1970s: that, which has already indicated by Chion, namely, that sound was simply an 'add on', a driver for the narrative, or, even then, one that often goes unacknowledged as an important structural component. Here is Goldmark, Kramer and Leppert (2007), speaking of this in the context of film music:

The fact that the dominant tradition in narrative film overtly subordinates music to image is a reason to theorize about this hierarchy, but it is *not* a reason to reproduce this hierarchy. [...] A film may suppose that it is that it is using music as accent or inflection while actually deploying it as representation without acknowledgement or recognition.⁶

Music or sound's invisibility (unless it is diegetically represented on screen) adds to this sense of it being simply 'realist' ballast. However, it would be a crude filmmaker indeed who didn't realize the supreme interconnectedness between sound/image, the frame, and what we might call the *out-of field*. The latter can be read literally: the off-screen spaces where sound expands space in all directions, but as philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1992) adds as a corrective:

[The *out-of-field*] is not a negation; neither is it sufficient to define it by the non-coincidence between two frames, one visual and the other sound (for example, in Bresson when the sound testifies to what is not seen and 'relays' the visual instead of duplicating it.) The out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is never-the-less perfectly present.⁷

And, later:

In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to 'insist' or 'subsist', a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time.⁸

Deleuze's mapping of this 'elsewhere' with its insistent *presence*, also relates to his appropriation of Bergsonian ideas of unity and wholeness achieved paradoxically through incompleteness, which is particularly relevant to film's sense of flow and duration. This means that the open threads (often worked through the articulation of this out-of-field) that bind self-sufficient units together – the constant play between openness and lack of closure within specific

scenes/shots – produce its potentially provisional unity through their trajectory across the whole:

Framing is the art of choosing the parts of all kinds, which become part of a set. This set is a closed system, relatively and artificially closed. [...] It is an optical system when it is considered in relation to the point of view, to the angle of framing: it is then pragmatically justified or lays claim to a higher justification. Finally, it determines an out-of-field, sometimes in the form of a larger set which extends it, sometimes in the form of a whole into which it is integrated.⁹

If we merge Deleuze's ideas of 'sets' and 'out-of-field' with Chion's 'superfield' we realize more clearly the virtual machinery of film and the binding of sound-image relations, each of which, in turn, form the nature of the sets themselves, together with their synergy in the formation of global content. While personally wanting to resist being subsumed by Deleuze's total 'anti-systematic' system – where one suddenly finds oneself determined by Deleuze's vertiginous terms and frames of reference – the usefulness of these ideas move beyond academic theory to operate potentially as a direct stimulant for practice.

My recent piece *Via di San Teodoro 8* (HD digital video 40' 2010) attempted to address some of these questions around both sound and music and the relationship to the frame. This was fitting, as the actual subject was inherently a musical one: the composer Scelsi. Although, it has to be said that this musicality of subject or content should not be merely a 'given'; it already brings up numerous problems: such as how do we *represent* music on film, and if we do how can we do justice to a composer, his work, and intentions? These questions come with inherited ready-made answers – there is, for example, the legacy of the filmed concert (which has always had a problem with what *really* to do with the image), then there is the 'music video' tradition (which has more in connection with the fashion shoot than really grappling with questions of relation; what we gain in fantasy, we drastically lose with the absence of any critical reflection); and finally, the attempt to get into the creative act in some way (these might be biographical documentaries – Frank Schaeffer's films of Boulez, Carter and Cage might present a recent pinnacle of this genre. But they become a *genre*, as in music films akin to the genre of documentary 'dance videos' of an earlier phase). The question is, what do we do if we want to step out of these modes of representation (for that is what they are) and attempt to do something that remains difficult to pigeon-hole and yet alive to the problems of sound/image. My approach lay rooted in the subject itself, that is the house at Via di San Teodoro, but briefly a word about the previous incumbent, Scelsi.

Giacinto Scelsi (1905 - 1988) was an Italian modernist composer of aristocratic descent who lived and worked in Rome, taking up residence with his sister Isabella at 8 Via di San Teodoro opposite The Forum. Scelsi, in many respects was a controversial composer, who at first worked in a semi-futuristic style (*Rotativa* for 2 pianos and percussion ensemble for example), and later explored dodecaphonic (12 tone) systems but settled into a unique approach to sound using microtonal material deeply indebted to his interest in non-western philosophical traditions. Improvisation was central to this latter phase and he composed his work on an early electronic instrument called the 'ondiola.' The taped improvisations performed on this instrument were given to others in order for them to be translated into traditional notation in order to take their shape as 'pieces.' Scelsi's processes, therefore, ask questions about the relationship of sound to structure, and of composition to improvisation. Deeply mystical, his concern with sound and sounding also related to his choice of domain overlooking the Roman Forum with a sightline of a single palm tree, together with the sights and sounds of that location in the city, which also affected his music. Seldom photographed, he remained an enigmatic figure on the new music scene with a belated success in Germany in the late 1980s where his concern with microtonal drones seemed prophetic of an alternative approach to organizing sound.

The clue to approaching this project was in Scelsi's relationship to the space of the house itself. 'Legend' had it that Scelsi improvised in one room, and some 'artisans' (such was the separation between composing and notating for the composer himself) would translate these improvisations into conventional notation simultaneously in another. Even if apocryphal, this separation of the means of production – of an enunciation within the space of a binary opposition between improvisation and composition – seemed to say something about the relationship of sound to the space. As Gregory Reish (2006) has suggested Scelsi,

Gradually came to understand the 'single' note as an infinitesimal particle of an infinite sonic force, and therefore as limitless world of sound. He began to conceive the timbral, dynamic, microtonal explorations of single notes in his works as 'activations': temporal, bounded projections of an atemporal, unbounded sonic reality. [...] Rejecting the aesthetic premise that sounds must progress to other sounds in order to have any significance, he essentially renounced such conventional techniques as thematic development, melodic variation, contrapuntal elaboration, harmonic progression and cadential resolution.¹⁰

What Reish alludes to here is the fact that composition (or the initial improvisations) for Scelsi, essentially became an act of bringing forth sounds that were already existent, "lying dormant in the universe until activated"¹¹, and that once a sound is there, Scelsi would add nuance, change vibrations, admixtures, etc. But fundamentally, we could also say, that the frame for Scelsi has become more important as a component – in that it is less about the rhetoric of composition, and more the allowable duration of *an event*. This is a proposition that goes back to Aristotle – the notion that the vibrating universe is the ground of all music, which was also prevalent in the 19th century with the Romantics, but also pertinent to avant-gardists even, such as Karlheinz Stockhausen. While this might have seemingly mystical overtones, we can also see it as a philosophical paradox, as Jean-Francois Lyotard did in his late writings. Lyotard (1997), here, writes about general audibility and the 'gesture' of musical composition in relation to this field of audible sound. This is what Lyotard refers to as a "language beneath languages"¹² whereby,

A sound, an isolable tone, an island risen up out of pathos makes itself heard. With the appearance of the audible sound, a promise is made. This sound promises that there will be other sounds. Hence there will be something rather than nothing. [...] Music labours to give birth to what is audible in the inaudible breath. It strives to put it into phrases. Thus does it betray it, by giving it form, and ignore it.¹³

Scelsi, it could be argued, strove in his late work not to betray this 'audibility in the so-called inaudible'. In one sense, form has to be negotiated from the material rather than imposed – in a similar sense to Schaeffer's *reduced listening* – by paying acute attention. It is wrong to suggest that Scelsi's music is formless, rather it should be seen that it is *formed* from the very basic vibratory sonorities it brings into being, rather than importing pre-given notions of form. Like John Cage's music, it is an ecological relation of sounds that is sought rather than the imposition of self-expression.

Coming to the house in Via di San Teodoro, it was sounds in fact that first struck me, despite the visual beauty of the place – ambient sounds: sounds from the street, or even from a computer hub near an archive space. It is tempting to think that one was placed amidst the milieu of sounds that Scelsi himself heard, but of course soundscapes change. The sonic environs of both Rome and the house are clearly different to, say, the 1980s even. But this close, attentive listening seemed important for this film, and to record some aspects of that in relation to the spaces. Scelsi's concern with silence, as mentioned above, could be aligned with Cage's. That old warhorse 4'33" – the so-called silent piece of Cage – was one that was inspirational for this particular project, and for this exercise of listening. Having performed 4'33" on several occasions with my students, it always struck me how this piece essentially frames listening in such a way that might befit visual art rather than music per se. In fact, the dominant experience of this piece, almost no matter what the environment, is *perspectival*, and extremely spatial. We become especially susceptible to a sonic depth-of-field – of sounds near, afar – drones, hums buzzes etc. It is a clear demonstration that, as Lyotard pointed out, the 'gestures' of conventional music-making mask and conceal the extraordinary sonic landscapes that we call 'silence'.

This influenced not only the approach to sound recording in the film but also the approach to visualizing the shots. Static long shots were necessary to focus on the changes within the sonic environment – sometimes extremely subtle. At a basic level – the film is about these conjoined sonic and visual spaces; it moves – though not in any coherent narrative sense – through the spaces of the house, which now contain a museum, an archive, a working office and garden terrace. Each of these spaces feature with their particular sounds. Events, which constitute narrative clusters take place in these spaces: the plants are watered, an envelope packaged, the ondiola instruments are tested and finally played. In this sense the film moves towards its conclusion with an improvisation performed by pianist Oscar Pizzo on the two electronic ondiolas. This performance is housed within both the literal space of the house and the filmic space, rather like by concentric circles, but not until we have witnessed the sounds that surround and precede it. The sound space is expanded: the out-of-field is often in play; with key sounds being heard off-screen, which are rarely 'explained'.

Visually, the video film is interrogative in style, albeit in a static, almost blank way. Spaces are present both empty and inhabited, and this is in line with Deleuze's (1992) commentary on Pasolini, where,

An 'insistent' or 'obsessive framing' which makes the camera await the entry of a character into the frame, wait for him to do and say something and then exit while it continues to frame the space which has once again become empty, once more leaving the scene to its pure and absolute significance as scene [...] In short, the perception-image finds its status, as free indirect subjective, from the moment that it reflects its content in a camera-consciousness which has become autonomous ('cinema of poetry').¹⁴

Deleuze, here, locates the importance of the 'free indirect subjective' – where, akin to its use in language, there is an ambiguity as to the speaking subject position (generally autonomously 'speaking for' or 'speaking through') – and its realization via the persistent interrogation of the camera, which becomes a 'conscious' framing. In *Via di San Teodoro* 8, this occurs with sounds as well as spaces: we could say that the ondiola performance is akin to a character who, as in Deleuze's example, is both present and absent. Interestingly, the sound of the ondiola is prefigured by the computer hum, basically being formed of similar sound waves as the electronic instrument.

How do we film silence? What is the visual equivalent to silence? Cage (1993) was to reply, "nothingtoseeness"¹⁵ Although, it has to be said, there is always something to hear and see, as Cage also stressed. His answer to these questions was the video entitled *One (number 11)*, which simply explored the slow differentials of the play of light from an electric light source. My own response was much less minimal than Cage – to film silence is also, as any filmmaker knows, to record sounds as well. In this, I find an early proponent of sound film theory still to be relevant: the particularly sensitive comments of the Hungarian writer and critic Bela Balazs. In his posthumous *Theory of the Film* (1949) Balazs conjures up – akin to Lyotard – a "language beneath languages":

It is the business of the sound film to reveal for us our acoustic environment, the acoustic landscape in which we live, the speech of things and the intimate whisperings of nature; all that has speech beyond human speech, and speaks to us with the vast conversational powers of life [...] ¹⁶

And elsewhere, on the power of silence:

How do we perceive silence? By hearing nothing? [...] We hear the silence when we can hear the most distant sound or the slightest rustle near us. Silence is when the buzzing of a fly on the windowpane fills the whole room with sound and the ticking of a clock smashes time into fragments with sledgehammer blows. The silence is greatest when we can hear very distant sounds in a very large space. The widest space is our own if we can hear right across it and the noise from the alien world reaches us from beyond its boundaries.¹⁷

Balazs' piece is prophetic of a cinema not yet existent at the time of his writing. Admittedly, many of his examples are pointing to dramatic usage, but taken individually or autonomously they are very resonant of a new approach to film sound. One that takes the physiognomy of objects, both visually and sonically as that which 'faces' us, attempts to speak, not musically but, as Lyotard would have it, 'mutically'. Sounds are not simply assembled as part of the soundtrack but rather *tracked in* and for themselves and represent the other side of objects or material things. This also fuses together Deleuze's notion of the free indirect subjective and Pasolini's radical cinematic poetry. Such poetry – and the idea of a *filmic poetic essay* might be the most pertinent way to describe *Via di san Teodoro* – can

remain a space for radical reflection. By refusing narrative (or at least its standardized forms) and dialogue, by looking for a liminal space between the 'speech of things' and the 'camera consciousness' a quasi-philosophical set of questions emerge – what is the event? What is the subject? It is here that *encounter* rather than conceptual imposition remains important. We search out the event, we don't presume or dramatize its occurrence - it may even be missed. I mentioned the importance of improvisation and, like Scelsi, the relationship between improvising and composing remains an important one for my own practice, and negotiates each of the above issues.

It is clear from the references I have been making, that my film owes a clear debt to cinematic practices and yet its roots come out of a direct involvement with painting and music. I mentioned earlier the shared platform of the artist filmmaker and 'the industry' which is becoming increasingly blurred due to the availability of equipment and processes through digitization. With more artists using HD video as part of their practice, this frame, as I have said, becomes a shared format. But the question is, does this become more restrictive for artists' exploration of new relationships between sound and image? If artists are now increasingly facing the same restrictions through standardization of formats, the highly coded field of the frame, will this result in an increasingly reflex response to the problems, i.e. simply aping the sound-tracking of big budget movies for example (this is already happening both 'self-consciously' as well as 'unconsciously')? This is a danger, but aside from this, one that also creates a potentially new phase for artist's film with many positive exchanges and crossovers, especially in terms of dissemination and distribution. My own film has been realized in different formats, single screen and multi-screen – the latter an installational version of its exploration of space. In my own recent experience, disturbingly, given the choice of multi-screen installations and single screen versions of my own work, most art venues now will choose, without exception, the latter. It is clearly economic but also aesthetic. This raises the spectre of certain historical key issues for artists' film that refuse to go away: time and its usage, perhaps the politics of time and the consumption of the image. It is easier now for a gallery to put on a screening rather than give over space to a video installation; and it is easier to have a cozy 'cinema-like' night rather than ask more awkward questions as to how the relationship between sound and image are to be managed or articulated afresh within a space. But this still lies at the core of the differentiation between mainstream and artists' film practices. It's the latter's tendency to focus on the sub-strata of narrative, to question and deconstruct, to explore duration, and go outside of the rulebook. This is the space of a radical poetry that must carve out its own space and resist what is suffocated by mainstream cinema in its increasingly 'intelligent' approach to technical issues, narrative angles and subject matter.

Notes

¹ Michel Chion, *Audio Vision – sound on screen*, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 164

² Ibid. 163

³ Ibid. p. 143

⁴ Ibid. p. 143

⁵ John Cage, *Silence*, Marion Boyars London, 1961, p. 10

⁶ Goldmark, Kramer, Leppert (eds) *Beyond the Soundtrack – representing music in the cinema*, University of California, 2007, p. 5

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1 – the movement-image*. Athlone press, London, 1992, p.15

⁸ Ibid p. 17

⁹ Ibid.p.18

¹⁰ Gregory N. Reish, 'Una Nota Solo: Giacinto Scelsi and the Genesis of Music on a Single Note' in the *Journal of Musicological Research*, Volume 25, No.2, April-June 2006,p. 157

¹¹ Ibid. p.157

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Music, Mutic' in *Postmodern Fables*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.224

¹³ Ibid, p. 228

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p.75

¹⁵ See John Cage, *Rolywholyover*, Rizzoli Publications, 1993, unpaginated

¹⁶ Bela Belazs, *Theory of the Film: Sound in Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, Elizabeth Weis and John Belton, eds., Columbia university Press, 1985,p.116

¹⁷ Ibid.p.118