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The lights dim, the screen darkens and all around is pitch black and anticipation. That divine moment of expectation, the threshold between the worlds of the real and the cinematic, is lacerated by a screech, a scream, a shriek of such agonising intensity that all possibility of comfortable, distanced spectation is shattered. Initially it does not sound human but more like the terrifying sharp rasp of metal on metal. Long and drawn out, it gathers emotion as it fades to a whimper, and suddenly there is no doubting its origin. It is a woman’s scream, seemingly of terror, pain, anger, frustration and resignation all balled up together. The picture kicks in before there is time to process this heartrending intrusion. Opening titles intercut with images of huge metal containers piled high at a dock. The camera follows a young woman, Roslyn (Nadine Garner), flecks of blood speckling her sky-blue kimono as she wanders through a metal labyrinth of cargo containers. The camera leaps forward to face her as she walks, leading her deeper in. Fleeting shots of a road are accompanied by the brutal sound of an engine pushed to its limits. Reaching the heart of the maze Roslyn stops and sits. Wide-eyed and smiling enigmatically, she slowly lifts her face to stare at the sky. The camera pauses a moment on her face before we are unceremoniously dumped in the passenger seat of a car racing at its limits through deserted outer-suburban streets.

The sounds and images of *Metal Skin* (Geoffrey Wright, 1994) remained with me for many days after first viewing, and would return unbidden like waking nightmares at intervals in the months following. After much reflection and repeated viewings (albeit only on video as the film screened for precisely one week in Brisbane) it seems to me now that the noise of these first moments, both aural and visual, offers some clues to what is a complex and difficult film. That noise may also provide an insight in to director Geoffrey Wright’s worldview and work as a filmmaker, and, in turn, has much to say about the preoccupations of Australian film in the 1990s.
In traditional communication and information theory, noise is the demon Other, an unwelcome disruption in the passage of information. Noise is “anything that is added to the signal between its transmission and reception that is not intended by the source…anything that makes the intended signal harder to decode accurately” (1). It is in Michel Serres’ formulation, the “third man” in dialogue who is always assumed, and whom interlocutors continually struggle to exclude (2). Noise is simultaneously a condition and a by-product of the act of communication; it represents the ever present possibility of disruption, interruption, misunderstanding. In sonic or musical terms noise is cacophony, dissonance; as Peter Bailey observes, “In any hierarchy of sounds it comes bottom, the vertical opposite of the most articulate and intelligible of sounds, those of speech and language and their aesthetic translation into music. In the official record such expressions ‘make sense’, whereas noise is nonsense” (3). For economists, noise is an arbitrary element, both a barrier to the pursuit of wealth and a basis for speculation, “an arbitrary element. noise is information that hasn’t arrived yet” (4).

For Mick (Jeremy Sims) and his mate Kev (Ben Mendelsohn) in David Caesar’s Idiot Box (1996), as for Hando (Russell Crowe) and his gang of skinheads in Geoffrey Wright’s Romper Stomper (1992), or Dazey (Ben Mendelsohn) and Joe (Aden Young) in Wright’s Metal Skin (1994) and all those like them starved of (useful) information and excluded from the circuit – the information poor – their only option, their only point of intervention in the loop, is to make noise, to disrupt, to discomfort, to become Serres’ “third man”, “the prosopopoeia of noise” (5).

The scream which opens Metal Skin is noise-as-framing device. Michel Chion, theorist of film sound, describes such sound in which the originating cause is not seen, as “acousmatic”. Such sound or voice “creates a mystery of the nature of its source, its properties and its powers, given that causal listening [defined by Chion as listening to a sound in order to gain information about its cause or source] cannot supply complete information about the sound’s nature and the events taking place” (6). The source of the scream in Metal Skin is never made apparent as it is never repeated with visual accompaniment. This unrevealed source, in Chion’s terms, is the acousmêtre, a character “whose relationship to the screen [and, by implication, to the viewer] involves a specific kind of ambiguity and oscillation” which may be defined as “neither inside nor outside the image”:
It is not inside, because the image of the voice’s source — the body, the mouth — is not included. Nor is it outside, since it is not clearly positioned offscreen in an imaginary “wing”, like a master of ceremonies or a witness, and it is implicated in the action, constantly about to be a part of it (7).

Its appearance evokes the constant threat of disruption, creating the expectation of its imminen return and acting as an ever present reminder of the viewer’s ambiguous relationship to the screen image, questioning identification while simultaneously transgressing and reinforcing distance. But while the subsequent images and story appear to indicate that the scream is Roslyn’s, the expectation or desire for confirmation is never directly satisfied. As a result, the scream itself and the intention of its acousmêtre is extra-filmic, its function to shock the viewe from their complacency and draw them through the rim, the screen/meniscus, through to the abject world which Wright’s characters inhabit.

In his previous film Romper Stomper Wright employs a visual technique to draw the viewer in to the fringe world of his skinhead characters. The film opens with the camera/viewer moving at speed at street level, sharing the point of view of a teenager sitting on a skateboard, laughinh and talking animatedly with his companions in Vietnamese. A subtitle places the action at Footscray Station, Melbourne, as the skateboard/camera descends a ramp in to the subway between platforms. As the skateboard/camera moves underground the image decelerates to emphasise the threat and other-worldliness of the environment in to which the teenagers have descended, and in slow motion the camera passes the leering faces of the skinhead gang. The board’s motion is abruptly halted by the cherry-red booted foot of Hando, the leader of the gang. Wright reverts to normal speed as Hando tells the terrified teenager “This is not your country”, and the gang proceed to beat up the hapless Vietnamese. The pre-credit sequence ends with the on-screen naming of the main skinhead characters Hando and Davey (Daniel Pollock), before another as yet unnamed skinhead yells “Fuck off!” directly in to the camera. Immediately in these scenes Wright has introduced the key themes of the film, and signposted the controversial and problematic issue of spectatorial identification which recurs throughout the remainder of the film and which forms the basis of much of the virulent criticism he and th film received. It is this key question of audience positioning which the acousmatic scream that opens Metal Skin reiterates, and which the film never satisfactorily resolves.
The scream’s capacity to disconcert the viewer, to catch the unwary off-guard almost before they have had a chance to settle comfortably in the darkness, is compounded by the lack of an accompanying image of any kind. It begins and ends before the titles appear or the first image flickers on the screen. “Synchresis” (8) is denied; the viewer is forced to speculate about its meaning and intent without an immediate visual reference point. The scream frames the film, but imperfectly since its origin and meaning are never definitively resolved. The questions recur in every sound and every frame, but answers are endlessly deferred. The denial of any simple resolution (which could easily be achieved by repeating the scream at a later point with accompanying, explanatory images) means that the viewer must continue to hold simultaneously a number of possible interpretations of its meaning and intent, all of which offer slightly different frames for and angles of engagement with the film that follows.

In his discussion of the relationships between sound and image, Michel Chion refers to “materializing sound indices” which assist the viewer to make sense of and take meaning from the soundtrack. “The materializing sound indices” he writes, “are the sound’s details that cause us to ‘feel’ the material conditions of the sound’s source, and refer to the concrete process of the sound’s production” (9). In *Metal Skin* we are given no direct additional information about the scream, or any indication of where it originates. We must hold the sound and the question of its origin together, and allow them to accompany the experience of viewing which follows. In the process the unconscious primacy ascribed to the image as the main conveyor of meaning is disrupted. We are encouraged to consider how the soundtrack transforms perception. We are reminded that film does not only address or occupy the eye, and that what is not seen or represented is as important as what the image contains.
Rowan Woods’ film *The Boys* (1997) operates on the same premise. In *Metal Skin* it is that acousmatic scream and the frantic editing of shots which indicate that the film cannot be fully comprehended simply by concentrating on the content of the image. *The Boys* is marked by a reluctance to depict or represent key events, be it the pivotal sex crime which marks the end point of one of the film’s temporalities and the beginning of the other, or Brett’s experiences in prison, or the incident which led to his original incarceration. In not depicting these events, the film is encouraging the viewer not only to imagine them, but to consider what else has been omitted, and how these omissions affect the ways in which we think about the environment the film’s characters inhabit, and the crime which Brett and his brothers ultimately, inevitably, commit. The title sequence of *The Boys* alerts the viewer to the significance of omission and commission: a series of shots depict mundane, everyday things normally taken for granted and not considered worthy of representation: an air conditioning unit high on a wall, a light fitting, water dripping in a plughole – all parts of the *background noise* of daily life. It is the very familiarity or banality of these sights and sounds which disconcerts the viewer and renders the act of viewing uncomfortable, but crucially not disengaged.
David Caesar’s *Idiot Box*, a film which might by some measures be usefully grouped together with *Metal Skin* and *The Boys*, uses background noise in sound and image in both more subtle and more obvious ways to interest and engage the viewer. *Idiot Box* opens with a series of aerial shots of a city at night, as if from a police surveillance helicopter tracing a path through familiar web of roads and buildings. Short grabs of dampened sound collide – muffled telephone conversations, the echo of car horns echoing, television or radio broadcasts blaring, the dull throb of a helicopter’s blades – before an electric guitar crafts a rhythm and a melody from the cacophony and the camera glides down to ground level. In these moments the city itself is situated as a character and actor in the film. And like the city, the film is never silent. Ambient noise predominates – traffic noise, dogs barking, muzak, telephones ringing, radios or televisions burbling in corners. For Mick and Kev the noise of the city is comforting, its absence abhorrent. In the words of one of Mick’s poems: “When I get home/ I put the telly on/ for the noise/ I hate the quiet/ I fucken hate it”. For Mick and for Kev, background noise works to provide what Jacques Attali describes as “a sense of security” (10). It familiarises their environment, places them within it, and confirms their identity. Unlike *Metal Skin*’s Joe who is constantly in collision with his environment, Mick and Kev are at home in the city. As the film’s last scene exemplifies, the city inhabits them as much as they inhabit it: Kev lies on the pavement with a bullet in his stomach, his blood seeping in to the city’s grey veins. He asks Mick “Am I dead yet?” “Nah, mate,” Mick replies. “Not yet.”
By contrast, none of *Metal Skin*’s characters are allowed the luxury of security. Just as the acousmatic scream disconcerts the viewer, so the city and its noise unbalance the characters. It offers no comforts. The bleakness of the environment inhabited by *Metal Skin*’s characters is emphasised by the almost complete lack of sunlight in the film; daytime scenes are shot against unforgiving grey skies, or at twilight, or in the rain. Industrial, dockside or suburban scenes are desaturated of colour, with occasional flashes of maroon or lime green in the characters’ clothing the only break in this monotony. Much of the film is shot at night to emphasise the characters’ separation from the mainstream and lack of interaction with “normal” city life; as their night work at the supermarket indicates, they are not even full members of the service economy, but are marginal even here. Incessant and intrusive editing (sometimes described as MTV style), numerous jump- and cross-cuts and confounding time shifts, work to disorient the viewer and prevent a distanced critical appraisal of the characters and their world. Bill Murphy and Jane Usher reportedly spent a collective total of five months editing the film. Their work emphatically conveys Wright’s aggressive filmmaking style and the primary emotion driving his work: frustrated anger. But such anger – which is one of the resonances of the acousmatic scream which opens *Metal Skin* – can never be usefully channelled.

The director’s proclaimed sympathy with the marginalised, the outcast, the fringe-dwellers of society extends only to a desire to document, not to offer hope, solutions, options where he knows (or thinks he knows) there are none. Of all the characters in *Metal Skin*, only Dazey has agency. Only Dazey initially has the power to make things happen, although ultimately all, and particularly Roslyn and Savina, are victims of circumstances which are beyond their control. Joe first encounters Dazey on his first night at the supermarket when he stumbles in to the tearoom, catching Dazey and another co-worker *in flagrante delicto*. The next night, at the end of the shift, Dazey seeks Joe out, concerned to ensure that Joe does not tell Roslyn what he has seen. He tells Joe “I hope you can keep your mouth shut about what you saw the other night. Things happen, you know. I mean, I love Ros, but … things happen, you know? You know what I mean?”. Joe looks blankly back at Dazey who takes his half-nod to mean understanding. But Joe, who has never been able to make “things happen” with women the way Dazey so effortlessly does, knows it is Dazey who does not understand the repercussions of his actions, or even that he is able to act where others are not.
This is reinforced in a later scene when, after making love to Savina, Dazey seeks out Roslyn who is sitting by the water’s edge at the docks. Roslyn talks about leaving the city, and getting a job on a cruise ship as a hairdresser. As they embrace Roslyn notices teeth marks on Dazey’s neck. Pushing him away, she says “I know you screw other girls. Why do you hang around? Why don’t you just leave me alone?” She turns to walk away, but he calls her back. She turns to face him and says again “Why don’t you just get out of my life?” She walks away. In voice over we hear her whisper “Please…”. As the camera cuts to a long shot of the shoreline at dusk she whispers again “Please… get out of my life”. Throughout this exchange, she implicitly acknowledges that just as he is responsible for bringing her to this state, only his action can end their relationship. She can never leave him, only he can leave her.

In the final tumultuous scenes following the deaths of Savina and of Joe’s father, Joe tries to make Dazey understand that his actions have consequences, and that he as much as the others is bound by forces beyond their control. With his gun in Dazey’s mouth Joe tells Roslyn “There are things… things that nobody understands. There are things… powerful… and he just doesn’t understand”. Finally, plaintively, with righteousness born of a lifetime without love, a lifetime spent looking after his father who drifts in and out of his own personal hell, Joe cries “Dazey doesn’t deserve to be loved”. This, it seems to me, is one of the fundamental components of the acousmatic scream: the wail of the repressed, patient, unloved finally demanding to be heard. But the logic of the film demands that these characters are doomed to a pitiful and violent fate because of these nebulous “things” which they do not understand and cannot control. Joe, however hard he tries, is a perpetual loser: he loses a drag race at the railyards early in the film, he loses a fight after the race, he loses Savina to Dazey, he loses his job helping Savina steal catfood from the supermarket. He is unable to overdose successfully, and he is finally unable to kill Dazey. As he lies dying, half crushed under the Nascar, the last thing Joe hears is Dazey taunting him, saying “I beat you” over and over again. But in the end, everybody loses: Joe and Savina are dead, Dazey has lost Roslyn and wrecked his father’s car, and Roslyn has finally lost her mind.
This dystopic ending, which has become something of a hallmark in Wright’s work, further distances him from the mainstream of Australian cinema and from the slew of quirky comedies which invariably end on an ambiguous if upbeat note to offer the audience the pleasure of speculating about the characters’ future (Scott [Paul Mercurio] and Fran’s [Tara Morice] popular triumph at the end of Strictly Ballroom (Baz Luhrmann 1992); Muriel (Toni Collette) and Rhonda’s (Rachel Griffiths) gleeful escape from Porpoise Spit in Muriel’s Wedding; or the reuniting of the sisters in the act of disposing of the lothario who came between them in Shirle Barrett’s Love Serenade [1996]). With Metal Skin Wright has moved from an investigation of the limits of mateship in Romper Stomper, where Davey ultimately chooses the girl (Gaby, played by Jacqueline McKenzie) over his mate (Hando) and kills him to stay with her, to a world from which tender certainties and devotions have been banished. Joe desires nothing more than human connection, particularly with Dazey in whom he searches for a mate, a father figure, a mentor, but who he must ultimately destroy or be destroyed himself. Unlike David Caesar’s take on mateship in Idiot Box in which the characters’ devotion to each other is what sustains them, Wright’s two halves of masculinity can never be perfectly aligned, and will always result in noisy (self-)destruction.

The dystopic ending underscores the director’s denial of empathy with his characters. Wright prefers to unsettle his audience through story and style, to “engage the senses in a very aggressive way, rather than stand off and have the audience judge the characters at a distance” (11). But this tactic often alienates the audience as it denies critical distance while forcing the viewer to endure his characters’ torment and the inexorable movement towards their tragic fate and to relive the terror of the acousmatic scream. As Mendelsohn recalls of his first viewing of the completed film, “I remember feeling … that it was an incredibly intense thing. I remember going ‘Whoah’ at the end, and being glad to be out of there” (12). Perhaps then the acousmatic scream is actually the sound of this spectatorial release of tension, an expression of intense relief at the end of an ordeal. Perhaps it is not the scream of a character at all, since it is precisely this retrospective thankfulness at being removed from an horrific experience which Wright’s characters are destined never fully to experience.

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This piece was refereed.

Endnotes

4. Fischer Black, ‘Noise’ *Journal of Finance* vol 41 no 3, 1986, p. 529. Black usefully notes that “noise is what makes our observations imperfect. It keeps us from knowing the expected return on a stock or portfolio. It keeps us from knowing whether monetary policy affects inflation or unemployment. It keeps us from knowing what, if anything, we can do to make things better.” Noise as rumour, conjecture, misheard or half-heard or overheard hypothesis, is information’s Other. But noise, like information, can drive a market, though its condition is, unlike information’s, irrationality; noise is “bought” by the uninitiated, the uninformed, who act on it, irrationally, “as if it were information that would give them an edge” (J Bradford De Long, Andrei Shleifer, Lawrence H. Summers, & Robert J. Waldmann, ‘Noise Trader Risk in Financial Markets’ *Journal of Political Economy* vol 98 no 4, 1990, p.704).
5. Serres, *Hermes*, p.67
8. “Synchresis” is a term devised by Chion to describe the way in which synchronic sounds enrich the images they accompany, and aid comprehension. It derives from the combination of *synchronism* and *synthesis*. Chion, *Audio-Vision*, pp.63-4

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Goldsmith** [http://sensesofcinema.com/author/ben-goldsmith/]

Ben Goldsmith is a Senior Research Fellow in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, based at Swinburne University of Technology. He is co-author (with Susan Ward and Tom O'Regan) of *Local Hollywood: Global Film Production and the Gold Coast*. 