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## Liminal soundscapes in Powell & Pressburger's wartime films

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This article explores Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger's wartime films through the prism of the soundscape, focusing on the liminal function of sound. Dwelling on such films as *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (1941) and *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), it argues that sound acts as a diegetic tool translating the action into a spatiotemporal elsewhere, as well as a liberation tool, enabling the people threatened by Nazi assimilation to reach for a more permissive world where restrictions no longer operate. Lastly, the soundscape serves as a 'translanguage', bridging the gap between soldiers and civilians, or between different nations fighting against a common enemy, thus giving birth to a transnational community.

Keywords: Powell & Pressburger; liminal soundscapes; Second World War; aural resistance; national identity

'The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices.'

Caliban, *The Tempest*, Act III, Scene 2.

The recent rediscovery and preservation of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's wartime films, carried on over the last decade by filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Bertrand Tavernier, has sparked a renewal of academic interest for overarching motifs that had previously deserved scant attention. Analytical studies recently conducted by Andrew Moor<sup>1</sup> or Natacha Thiéry<sup>2</sup> have shed new light on such themes as the porosity of borders between the real and the fantasised world, between past and present, between here and elsewhere, as well as the representation of invisible or – to use Andrew Moor's terms – 'magic' spaces<sup>3</sup>, without giving in to the customary distinction between their most acclaimed productions (*The Red Shoes*, *Black Narcissus*, *A Matter of Life and Death* or *Peeping Tom*), and their earlier works, probably deemed less idiosyncratic (*The Spy in Black*, *Contraband*, *49th Parallel*, or *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*). Peculiarly enough though, the recurring presence of those 'liminal spaces' is evoked in purely visual terms when it comes to their earlier collaborations, whereas remarks concerning Powell & Pressburger's innovative use of sound and music, and interest for aural experimentation, seem only to be intended for their most recent – and acclaimed – films. This critical bias owes much to those productions' epitomisation of Wagnerian

<sup>1</sup> Moor, A. 2005. *Powell & Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces*. London; New York: I.B Tauris.

<sup>2</sup> Thiéry, N. 2009. *Photogénie du désir : Michael Powell et Emeric Pressburger 1945-1950*. Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Moor, *passim*.

*Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>4</sup> aesthetics, and especially the advent of the ‘composed film’ in which – to use Powell’s own words – ‘music, emotion, image and voices all [blend] together into a new and splendid whole, of which the music [is] the master’<sup>5</sup>, and which contains whole sequences shot to a pre-recorded soundtrack.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it appears that the Archers’ aural experimentations truly *originate* in their early wartime films, in which the confrontation of different soundscapes, the crossing of boundaries through sound and the porosity of aural spaces, are given an aesthetic as well as a practical dimension, inherent to the need for Britons to withstand enemy aggression and ‘pull together’ across geographical, social and generational divisions. Although most of the Archers’ wartime films (produced between 1941 and 1946) will be examined through this prism<sup>7</sup> – with occasional forays into their later collaborations – two films in particular, which stand out as diegetic<sup>8</sup> and aural mirrors of each other, will be the object of specific consideration, namely, *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), and *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (1941). In the latter, composer Ralph Vaughan Williams’s ubiquitous music soundtrack is an essential constituent of the film’s soundscape, whereas *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* is entirely devoid of extradiegetic music and relies exclusively on diegetic sounds and indigenous music. As Michael Powell states in his autobiography, ‘[they] had decided on complete naturalism. There would be no music. There would only be the natural sounds of a country at war.’<sup>9</sup> That the ‘natural sounds’ of the country should never be stifled by the alien sounds of enemy aggression or occupation<sup>10</sup>, is a token of the nation’s continuous struggle and resistance to the invader. This article, therefore, maintains that in most of the Archers’ wartime films, the expression of the ‘people’s music’ (encompassing the whole spectrum of quotidian sounds) conditions the liberation of the nation and the re-appropriation of usurped spaces. Parallel spaces thus emerging through sound – in addition to evoking the conflation of discrete spatiotemporal dimensions, and enabling people to evade to fantasised and less prohibitive elsewhere – act as zones of convergence, bridging the gap between, and allowing the interpenetration of geographically and physically remote entities.

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<sup>4</sup> Literally, ‘total work of art’. Wagner, who believed that music should retreat into a more self-effacing role of dramatic collaboration, longed for a synthesis of the arts in which ‘all the single art-varieties should combine for their own highest completion’ (‘Zukunftsmusik’, in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, London: Kegan Paul, 1894, 3:308.)

<sup>5</sup> Powell, M. 1992. *A Life in Movies: an Autobiography*. London: Mandarin, 583.

<sup>6</sup> The ballet sequence in *The Red Shoes*, the confrontation between Sister Ruth and Sister Clodagh in *Black Narcissus*, and of course *The Tales of Hoffman* in its entirety, to name only the most prominent.

<sup>7</sup> More specifically *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *The Volunteer* (1943), *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), and *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (1941).

<sup>8</sup> *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* narrates the story of six RAF soldiers belonging to the crew ‘B for Bertie’ who, having had to bail out in the middle of occupied Netherlands, are helped by members of the local Resistance movement to travel across the country to the North Sea in order to return to Great Britain. *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*, on the other hand, retraces the journey of six Nazi soldiers across Canada, having been sent there as ideological missionaries but finding resistance from the local population.

<sup>9</sup> Powell, 389.

<sup>10</sup> The same principle presides over Humphrey Jennings’s *Listen to Britain* (1943), which aims at displaying an aural picture of the nation, whose strength and resilience lie in its refusal to let the ‘music of Britain at war, blended together in one great symphony’, be overwhelmed by the sounds of the assailant.

## **‘Let the sound do it’<sup>11</sup>: sound as a dramatic motor and gateway to a spatiotemporal elsewhere**

The function of aural cues as triggers for spatiotemporal lapses (be they flash-forwards or flashbacks) is, by and large, a *leitmotif* in Powell & Pressburger’s films. In *Black Narcissus* for instance, words or sounds recalling Sister Clodagh’s life as an engaged woman, before she took the veil, are repeated and echoed as distant reminiscences of an idealised past, and transport her into reveries about the sunny and idyllic Irish countryside of her youth<sup>12</sup>. These words are not uttered by the characters or a voiceover, but emerge like snatches of sound whose origin and reality remain unclear. Unlike most British films of the period, the flashbacks do not frame the plot as a whole, but rather work as an autonomous and fleeting subtext, whose aural muddle contributes to blurring the boundaries between past and present, or reality and fantasy. Similarly, in *A Matter of Life and Death*, British pilot Peter Carter’s switch from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, or from reality to a fantasised world (created by his altered mental faculties), is caused by a series of ‘highly organised hallucinations’, of a principally aural nature<sup>13</sup>. Sounds coming from his surroundings start to coalesce with fantasised ones, by which they are progressively substituted, indicating that his imagination has taken over. But the most telltale example of this blurring of boundaries through sound is to be witnessed in *A Canterbury Tale*, in which the analogy between Chaucer’s pilgrims and their modern counterparts (the soldiers stationed in the Kentish village of Chillingbourne) is illustrated by regular time lapses brought about by aural cues, which are heard each time one of the modern pilgrims stands on the Old Pilgrims’ Road. Alison Smith, a London shop girl freshly-arrived as a Land Army farm hand, magically hears the sound of ‘horses hooves, voices and a lute, or an instrument like a lute’<sup>14</sup>, while a mediaeval tune springs out of her imagination into the soundtrack. Each time the present coalesces with the past, a chorus of *a capella* women’s voices is heard, acting as a time-bending incantation. This musical magic spell recurs on several occasions, when the three modern-day pilgrims, through the spiritual intercession of Canterbury cathedral, receive a blessing, like the pilgrims of the past, ‘who came to Canterbury to ask for blessings or to do penance’<sup>15</sup>. This time-bending synthesis mediated through sound draws a parallel between medieval feudal society and the RAF, or between the spirituality of the Chaucerian pilgrimage and the war effort, reminding us, as Powell would put it himself, that ‘the past is always present within the present and it will show through, if people would just allow themselves to be open to it.’<sup>16</sup> This harking back to Britain’s former artistic and cultural heritage is a staple of the Second

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<sup>11</sup> Richard McNaughton, quoted in Vaughan, D. 1983. *Portrait Of An Invisible Man: The Working Life Of Stewart McAllister, Film Editor*, London: BFI, 83.

<sup>12</sup> These flashbacks occur four times altogether. During one of the morning prayers at the convent for instance, an ethereal and unseen chorus blends with Clodagh’s voice from the past exclaiming: ‘Oh, isn’t it a grand day, Con?’ Later on, the barking of a dog outside conveys her back to a shooting party she attended with her fiancé, in which the calls of hunting horns, the heavenly voices, and the barking of the dogs fuse together in a recreated sound picture.

<sup>13</sup> The most systematic of these ‘highly organised’ aural hallucinations are Peter’s recurring conversations with Conductor 71, the messenger and psychopomp from Heaven, sent to reclaim him to the afterlife.

<sup>14</sup> Alison Smith, in *A Canterbury Tale*.

<sup>15</sup> As mayor Thomas ‘The Glueman’ Colpeper explains to the American soldiers during his lecture on the cultural heritage of Kent.

<sup>16</sup> BBC interview with Michael Powell <[www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/BBC\\_Archive/Interview2.html](http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/BBC_Archive/Interview2.html)>

World War official discourse as it was implemented by the Ministry of Information, which endeavoured to remind Britons of the necessity of their fight against Nazi assimilation, and of the paramount importance of preserving the traditions and cultural achievements that constituted the specificity of the nation.

Beyond functioning as an aural cue bringing about the interpenetration of discrete dimensions, sound also acts as a dramatic driving force, cohering various episodes or ‘acts’, and allowing the action to unfold. In *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* for instance, the various checkpoints that the six airmen need to get through to reach the North Sea across the Netherlands are always characterised by a distinct sound. Each diegetic progression – corresponding in the film to a geographical one – is marked by the shouts and scathing comments of the German officers at the border posts, which are never translated, and thus apprehended only as mere noises. This description of the occupier in purely aural terms was a deliberate device, initially suggested by Pressburger himself, who saw to it that no Germans were ever to be *seen* in the whole film<sup>17</sup>. As Michael Powell states in his autobiography *A Life in Movies*,

One of Emeric’s very best ideas was to hear Germans everywhere, but only see them in the distance, if at all. We picked all the dozens and dozens of voices carefully, whether they were making jokes as they signed civilian passes, or barking orders. The audience saw military vehicles packed with soldiers careering along with their klaxons blaring, but we never got close to a German in the whole film, except in the sequence in the church. It was one of those inspirations that are worth their weight in gold.<sup>18</sup>

This pervasiveness of faceless enemies, expressing themselves in an impenetrable tongue, effectively establishes a certain atmosphere of paranoid tension. But more importantly, the dehumanisation of the Germans, only characterised by mechanical and rude voices, is a manifestation of how the Dutch members of the Resistance use them as mere tools for their progression, perfunctorily stamping their fake identity papers. Very tellingly indeed, the protagonists’ crossing of the district borders is always accompanied by an aural clash between the innocuous bells of their bicycles and the blare of the German tank signals, the former being the pacifist mirror of the latter, echoing the subtlety of civil disobedience, as opposed to barbaric Nazi practices.

Sound therefore not only operates as a link allowing a smooth continuity between the different episodes, but also as a guiding thread whose presence acts as a reminder of the

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<sup>17</sup> Or only fleetingly so, like silhouettes in a shadow theatre.

<sup>18</sup> Powell, *Op. cit.* 389. This device was subsequently to be re-employed by other filmmakers of the period, with the notable example of Humphrey Jennings’s 1943 film *The Silent Village*, re-enacting the massacre of Lidice in the fictional Welsh village of Cwmgiedd.

overarching ideas and values held by the film, just as the music would, in some of their other collaborations<sup>19</sup>.

The consideration conferred to the evocative power of sound shows how deeply the Archers were already committed to aural experimentation. In the context of the Second World War especially, the liminal function of sound acquires specific purport, as it acts as a bulwark against enemy encroachment and a means of transcending the alienating condition of soldiers and civilians enduring Nazi occupation, contributing to the creation of liberated spaces where Nazi restrictions are obliterated.

### **Doing away with enemy oppression through sound: liberated spaces and the politics of aural rebellion**

As previously illustrated, soundscapes in Powell & Pressburger's films are sometimes indeterminate and voluntarily pervasive, so that the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred. This process is repeatedly used to highlight the surreal character of war, and its somewhat cinematic quality. In a short film (or semi-documentary) entitled *The Volunteer* (1943), commissioned by the Ministry of Information and following a clear propagandist line – the film focuses on actor Ralph Richardson's character's enrolment and subsequent career in the Fleet Air Arm – the filmmakers play with cinematic frames and codes by way of introducing a film within the film, showing army operations on shore, and screened to soldiers of the Fleet Air Arm in the ship's hold<sup>20</sup>. The screening occupies a significant part of the film, so much so that the spectator is sometimes confused as to whether the action still unfolds within the frame narrative or whether it is now evolving within a second layer of narration. Once more, this indeterminacy is achieved through sound: sometimes Allan Gray's music soundtrack ceases, as though highlighting the 'larger than life' quality of warfare, sometimes it takes over, reminding the audience that the plot is still situated within the realm of fiction. The device is merely experimental here, and is only concerned with extradiegetic music. However, in longer features whose plots unfold in occupied countries (or pseudo-occupied ones, in the case of *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* for instance), the reappropriation of wrongfully acquired spaces becomes a necessity, and forms a regular *leitmotif*, governed by a vindictive and rebellious use of sound.

The symbolic reclaiming of occupied territories by people deprived of their fundamental freedoms, and the transition towards a liberated space where Nazi restrictions would no longer prevail, is constantly underlined through the foregrounding of forbidden and subversive sounds. In *A Canterbury Tale*, the village church and the Canterbury cathedral

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<sup>19</sup> This function of 'narrative cueing' is one of those assigned to film music in Claudia Gorbman's seminal study *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Indiana University Press, 1987) and could perfectly be enlarged to include sound as a whole. As Gorbman underlines, 'we may divide semiotic duties of music in classical film into two categories: (1) it refers the spectator to demarcations and levels of the narration; (2) it illustrates, emphasizes, underlines, and points, via what we shall call connotative cueing' (*Op. cit.* 82)

<sup>20</sup> This stepping out of the cinematic frame is a recurring device throughout the film. In one of the last sequences which takes place outside Buckingham Palace, Michael Powell himself plays the role of a tourist taking pictures, thus downplaying the supposed realistic form of documentary film making.

bells are rung as usual, despite the nationwide ban stating that bells were only to be rung in case of enemy invasion, thus taking on loaded significance. The ‘unmuffling’ of the bells acts as an aural beacon of hope that momentarily foretells the return to peacetime and the end of privations.

Moreover, the very trespassing of forbidden sounds on enemy territory is to be noted in the obviously subversive character of some pieces of intradiegetic music belonging to a genre that would have been banned by the Nazi *Reichsmusikkammer*<sup>21</sup>. In *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*, the whole sequence in which the two remaining Nazis penetrate a Native American camp in the Rocky Mountains is associated with an ethereal piano tune emerging from a radio set belonging to British anthropologist Philip Armstrong Scott (played by Leslie Howard). This melody – which was later made into a separate orchestral suite entitled *The Lake in the Mountains* by Ralph Vaughan Williams – is composed in the manner of Romantic composer Debussy, whose music was forbidden by the Nazi regime<sup>22</sup>. Interestingly, it pervades the whole sequence before the spectator can even locate the origin of the sound, thus at first assuming an extradiegetic position, which summons up another dimension unrestrained by Nazi rule. Similarly, in the trading post sequence of the film, a few bars from a traditional Canadian ‘fiddling’ tune – a genre that was also forbidden for its closeness to country music – briefly leak out of the factor’s radio before being interrupted by the intrusion of the six Nazis. This brief subversive presence could be viewed as a musical counterpart to the Canadian resistance to come.

But the most significant example of the subversive role of sound and music is to be found in the Dutch national anthem, the *Wilhelmus*, whose singing was strictly forbidden under Nazi occupation and which stands out as a leading motif in *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*. On several occasions, the communal singing of the anthem conditions the reclaiming of occupied spaces, such as the village church, guarded and patrolled by soldiers, and the village hall, used as the occupier’s headquarters. After the mayor’s young son has managed to smuggle several recordings of the national anthem into the German headquarters – having pasted misleading labels on the sleeves – the national anthem’s tune is heard victoriously coming out of the building windows, provoking the immediate and symbolical flight of the Nazis from the premises. The reclaiming of wrongfully acquired spaces thus operates through the almost magical intercession of the anthem of the oppressed. The process recurs in the Haarlem church sequence. In this passage, featuring the six airmen – in the guise of Dutch peasants – and their allies attending a church service, a German soldier penetrates the sanctuary, looking for the intruders. *The Wilhelmus*, first timidly initiated by the church organist as a defying gesture – which results in the ‘magical’ disappearance of the German’s silhouette – is then taken up by the whole assembly and fully developed on the great organ, thus completing the dismissal of the invader. Symbolically, the anthem still hovers over the

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<sup>21</sup> Literally, ‘Reich Music Chamber’. This institution was implemented under the Third Reich in order to promote ‘good German music’ and establish a list of ‘degenerate music’, aiming to ban any musical form that was deemed inconsistent with Nazi ideals. Pieces by Jewish composers were proscribed, as well as modern and jazz music, which distanced themselves from the classical form and were seen as a threat to Nazi order.

<sup>22</sup> The melody is an apt illustration of Armstrong Scott’s sophistication and gentlemanly manners, which are deemed ‘soft and degenerate all through’ by the two Nazis.

following sequence showing a German officer stamping a safe-conduct, effectively proclaiming it as the symbol of the struggle against the enemy. In Powell & Pressburger's wartime films, national anthems are predominantly bestowed with symbolical emancipative properties. In *Contraband* (1940), 'God Save the King' carries a particular status in that it enables Captain Andersen to find his way around London and locate the whereabouts of his ally Mrs. Sorensen. In *49th Parallel*, the Canadian national anthem 'O Canada' (as opposed to the royal anthem), is played and modulated throughout the opening and closing titles as the musical mirror to their independence and resilience. On the other hand, the complete absence of a German or Nazi anthem comes as an arresting detail. Instead of choosing modulated versions of the 'Deutschlandlied' or the 'Horst Wessel Lied' as the Germans' leitmotiv for instance, Vaughan Williams chooses to associate the Nazis with the Lutheran hymn 'Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott'<sup>23</sup>, thus denying them the right to be represented as a nation and only ever evoking a deficient, speculative Nazi identity rather than a substantial, positive one.

The subversive power of intradiegetic music is further assessed in one of the introductory sequences of *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, in which the six airmen, on their way to bombing Stuttgart, are flying over Germany. Geoff, an East End mechanic in civilian life, summons memories of the time he spent there with a German nurse, and starts singing a song she had then taught him, 'Ich küsse ihre Hand, Madam' ('I Kiss you Little Hand, Madam'), declaring that the song was forbidden in Germany, because it was composed by a Jew. The choice of this particular song – which was first performed by Jewish singer Richard Tauber in the 1929 German film of the same name<sup>24</sup> – together with the eerie quality of the scene (featuring six British airmen hovering over German territory and singing a forbidden song while the aircraft engine holds a comforting 'pedal point'<sup>25</sup>) endows the scene with a magical and almost other-worldly feel. The clash between two antagonistic worlds is once again deeply rooted in the soundscape, acting as a gateway to a fantasised elsewhere, in which Nazi restrictions and censorship are annihilated. This liminal function of sound is, to a certain extent, reminiscent of Pascal's belief in the soothing role of 'entertainment', enabling man to escape his mortal condition and forget about his inherent misery. However, in the case of Powell & Pressburger's films, the people under the yoke of occupation, or fighting Nazi assimilation, do not seek to obliterate reality. Sound rather appears as a means of resistance and a potent tool of liberation, through which parallel dimensions are reached.

But sound does more than arming the people with symbolical weapons of dissent. In times of conflict, when the need to close ranks against the enemy is more deeply felt than ever, sound emerges as a unifying force, bridging the gap between isolated entities, mending the fragmented, and rationalising the unknown.

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<sup>23</sup> Thus dwelling on their perversion of the Lutheran church precepts.

<sup>24</sup> *Ich küsse ihre Hand, Madam* was also the first European talkie that was ever produced, notably starring anti-Nazi actress Marlene Dietrich.

<sup>25</sup> The symbolic significance of the reassuring roar of the Spitfires looking out for enemy aircraft is a recurring feature of Second World War British productions. As passionately stated by Jo de Vries, one of the female members of the Dutch Resistance movement in *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, those engines, heard as an aural icon of hope, are 'oil for the burning fire of [their] hearts'. Interestingly, this reassuring hum is to be heard over the opening and closing titles, assuming the function of extradiegetic music.



## Transcending the borders: sound as social cement and transnational bridge

The transmission of radio waves [...] could be seen both as a sublation and a literalization of the Romantic idealization of sound, which stressed the capacity of sound both to pervade and to integrate objects and entities which the eye kept separate.<sup>26</sup>

This unifying and bridging power of radio waves, as noted by Steven Connor, is at the core of most British productions of the Second World War. Due to their being infinitely more residual and pervasive than the written word – as one can hear many sounds simultaneously, while it is impossible to see different visual objects at the same time – radio waves are regularly employed as a ubiquitous link cohering separated entities, and replacing the individual amid a larger community. Humphrey Jennings' masterpiece *Listen to Britain* (1943) for instance, is pervaded with snatches of radiophonic broadcasts, whose sources are never acknowledged (there are no visible announcers, wirelesses or radio valves). The radio waves seem to be freely circulating from household to household, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and between the frontline and the Home Front, thus establishing radio as the nation's 'interior monologue'<sup>27</sup>.

In many of the Archers' wartime films, the reuniting of soldiers fighting on the Front and civilians withstanding enemy attacks is made possible by the cohesive power of radio sound. On several occasions, radio acts as a tool of communication between soldiers and civilians, and a mutual morale booster. In one of the opening sequences of *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, the crew of 'B for Bertie' gathers around the wireless set to listen to a football game involving a team to which one of them, Bob Ashley, belonged as a civilian: their re-creating and commenting on the game momentarily causes them to forget about the war and to be brought back to their former lives as mere civilians. In another sequence, the six protagonists listen to Frank's wife's vocal performance on the BBC Forces Programme, which sounds as a patriotic call from Great Britain to the soldiers, while, on the other hand, helping her keep her spirits up (her husband having been reported missing in action). Although physically remote from each other, Frank and his wife are momentarily reunited through what could be labelled an 'acousmatic' vocal link<sup>28</sup>, magically transcending the borders and flouting the perils of warfare. The human voice, the 'oldest and greatest of musical instruments [that] no bombs or blockades can rob us of'<sup>29</sup>, according to Ralph Vaughan Williams, is the cement with which gaps can be spanned and fractures can be mended, due to its residual and incantatory quality. For sound-on-film theoretician Michel

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<sup>26</sup> Connor, S. 'The Modern Auditory I' in Roy Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories From The Renaissance To The Present*, London: Psychology Press, 1997, 207.)

<sup>27</sup> This notion is further developed by Dai Vaughan in his book about Jennings's editor and close collaborator, Stewart McAllister, *Portrait Of An Invisible Man*, London: BFI, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> This term was initially coined by Pierre Schaeffer and designates a sound which can be heard while its origin remains unknown. It is derived from the Greek term ἀκουσμα (*a-cousma*), meaning 'what you can hear, but cannot see.'

<sup>29</sup> 'One thing, I think, we can be sure of, no bombs or blockades can rob us of our vocal chords; there will always remain for us the oldest and greatest of musical instruments, the human voice.' (Vaughan Williams, R. 1940. 'The Composer in Wartime', *The Listener*, 23, 989.)

Chion, 'on-the-air' sounds, originate in some electrical mode of transmission such as radio, telephone, intercom, or amplifier, which allows them to 'go beyond the so-called natural mechanical laws of sound propagation and travel freely in space yet still remain anchored in the real time of the scene.'<sup>30</sup> Those sounds thus 'enjoy the freedom of crossing boundaries of cinematic space'<sup>31</sup>. Precisely so, the ubiquity of sound transmitted by the wireless allows for the interpenetration of several geographical spaces, and the mutual support of Allied nations in their struggle against Nazi Germany. The communication between the members of the Dutch Resistance movement and their counterparts operating from Great Britain – among whom the Queen of the Netherlands herself<sup>32</sup> – is illustrated in the film by the dialogue between Jo De Vries, a key figure of the Dutch local resistance movement, and her husband, one of the announcers of 'Radio Oranje' broadcasting from London, and acts as the symbol of the two nations' common purpose<sup>33</sup>. Consequently, Great Britain's presence in occupied countries is always evoked *in absentia*, its unflagging support being communicated to its ally through its vocal presence.

Most importantly, the emergence of an international community of purpose transcending geographical borders is attained by the creation of universal 'aural icons', understandable and recognisable by all, regardless of their geographical origins and linguistic identities, so that dialogue and diegetic speech are relegated to the background. Just like American sergeant Bob Johnson in *A Canterbury Tale*, who manages to address the locals through their kindred relationship to nature despite an initial language barrier<sup>34</sup>, the crew of 'B for Bertie' progressively learns to recognise their Dutch allies as brothers in arms, whose values and sensibility are much akin to their own. Although they fail to understand each other's languages (the dialogues in Dutch are untranslated, so that the spectators and the characters should be placed on equal footing and shift their attention to the soundscape), several 'aural icons' progressively emerge as a kind of 'translanguage'<sup>35</sup> allowing the conflation of initially separate worlds. Morse code, for instance, is used by the soldiers and the Dutch resistance alike as a warning signal in case German soldiers should show. Very tellingly, they choose as a warning signal the famous letter 'V' for Victory (materialised in Morse code as three dots and a dash), which was 'tapped out' throughout Europe as the symbol of the Resistance movement and emerged as the aural illustration of international solidarity. Ultimately, the exclusive characterisation of the enemy through sound – tank sound signals, incomprehensible orders shouted through megaphones, German bugle calls, the whizz

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<sup>30</sup> Chion, M. 1994. *Audio-vision: sound on screen*, New York: Columbia University Press, 76.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Queen Wilhelmina, who had fled to Great Britain with the rest of the royal family, took an active part in the Dutch resistance movement by broadcasting messages of support to the nation from London, via 'Radio Oranje', the Dutch clandestine radio station hosted by the BBC.

<sup>33</sup> The two nations shared interests are also constantly reminded to the spectator through the *Wilhelmus*, which sings the praises of William I of the Netherlands, who fought against Philip II of Spain beside Queen Elizabeth I.

<sup>34</sup> Initially at odds with the peasant community of Kent because of their cultural and linguistic differences ('Mirrors, tea drinking, left-hand driving, stripes upside down [...], it sure is difficult!' he exclaims while attempting to use the telephone), they finally find a meeting ground when they discover their common rural upbringing ('Oak should be cut in winter', 'Course', 'Or the spring', 'That's right', 'And beech in the fall, and plank it out—', '—At Christmas', 'Yeah', 'That's how my dad taught me', ' Ah. You was well brought up').

<sup>35</sup> This term was coined by Michel Chion, in his December 2007 lecture given at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, entitled *Les films bi- et multi-lingues*.

of bombs, and the staccato of machine-guns or, on the other hand, the reassuring roar of the Spitfires looking out for enemy aircraft – results in the establishment of a communal experience of war. Be they English, French, Belgian, Dutch, Czech, Danish, Norwegian, Polish, or Greek, spectators could recognise in the protagonists' aural perception of war a foil for their own experience. As it seems, the establishment of an international community of feeling was Powell & Pressburger's ultimate design, as they resented the parochial fixity that the advent of the sound film had imposed upon an art form whose scope, they believed, ought to be transnational.

Those liminal soundscapes are, ultimately, the token of the Archers' commitment to internationalism and rejection of basic jingoism. Their ecumenical ethos, illustrated by the cosmopolitanism of their permanent artistic team (counting three Germans, a Pole, two Hungarians, and a Frenchman), is of course to be understood within the scope of Pressburger's own status as a Hungarian immigrant and 'enemy alien' – he was, in fact, imprisoned by the British government and threatened with deportation. But the status of sound as a go-between also reveals the hybrid nature of their wartime films, veering between a certain form of documentary realism and magical utopia. However, far from marking them out as escapist fantasies divorced from reality, the generic hybridism of those films offers a very potent reflection upon British national identity during the Second World war – exceeding the 'People's War' and the 'pulling together' propaganda rhetoric – by subtly putting the onus on the shared interests and converging attributes of the people, rather than on their differences and on the need for Britons to safeguard their heritage. This sound-driven philanthropy, as it were, is in many ways redolent of the Mass Observation movement's ethics<sup>36</sup>, as it sought to reinvest the people with a voice of their own and provide them with a platform, by directly documenting their feelings and reactions to contemporary events, such as the London Blitz for instance. The role of cinema during the Second World War was, therefore, to transcribe individual and isolated aural perceptions of war as it was experienced daily by Britons and their allies, into a collective and organised whole. Although the recognition of sound as a signifier in itself, and as the object of experimentation, was by no means blueprinted by the Archers<sup>37</sup>, they were pioneers in identifying the transfigurative power of film sound, mutating an individual, alienating, and fragmented aural experience of war, into a communal and rationalised one.

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<sup>36</sup> Created in 1937 by filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, anthropologist Tom Harrison, and poet Charles Madge, the Mass Observation movement aimed at recording everyday life in Britain and documenting the feelings of the people by collecting first-hand testimonies, interviews, or overheard comments on the street.

<sup>37</sup> As early as the 1930s, members of the GPO Film Unit – which was to become the Crown Film Unit in 1940 – such as John Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, Basil Wright or John Eldridge, started advocating an active and meaningful use of sound in film.

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