ANA KOKKINOS AND THE AUDITORY SPECTATOR
“I wanna tell you that I’m feeling closer”

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Abstract
Ana Kokkinos is an acclaimed director of Australian independent films. Her portrayals of contemporary life in Melbourne, and the delicate rendering of diegetic sound interplayed with score music in her films, create rich film worlds in which her characters—and us as spectators—occupy Melbourne. With a multicultural population of over 4 million, Melbourne is Australia’s second largest city and located in the southern, temperate zone of the continent, and it has a significant profile as a locus for Australian culture, couture and cuisine. Two of Kokkinos’ feature films that paint intimate portraits of the city, Head On (1998) and Blessed (2009), present rich soundscapes that encourage identification not only with the characters but also within the space constructed by camera and soundscape. In both works, diegetic and extra-diegetic sonic moments form layered soundscapes that serve as vectors for emotion, enabling us to identify and empathise with the characters. This emotional engagement builds on the spatial and sensate world of the film, with the soundscapes suggestive of the dynamic relationship our bodies have with comfort and discomfort, belonging and dislocation, movement and silence. The integrated diegetic and extra-diegetic soundtracks encourage relationships with these films in ways connected to reality, and to the cinematic world of Melbourne.

Keywords
Melbourne cinema, composed and compiled scores, diegetic sound, spectator, audition

Introduction
As a contemporary Australian filmmaker who has established herself on a local and international scale, with her work featuring abroad at film festivals in the North American and European continents, Ana Kokkinos deserves recognition for her dynamic contribution to the sound of Australian cinema. The sophistication of Kokkinos’ aesthetic and emotional style can be identified in the performances that she draws from her actors, the way relationships and feelings play out on screen, and the sensitive, richly sensorial worlds that she creates.¹ Concomitant with this

¹ This article addresses Ana Kokkinos’ films within something of an auteur framework. However, Blessed and Head On were both made with an ensemble of sound designers—among them Craig Carter and Livia Ruzic in Head On, and in Blessed, John Wilkinson as sound mixer, and Andrew Neil and Glenn Newnham as sound editors—so crediting Kokkinos with her directorial influence will allow the most straightforward analysis.
style, her films invite the audience into a relationship with the visuals that is augmented by a dynamic exploration of spatial and identificatory soundscapes. From early short films to established independent features, *Head On* (1998), *The Book of Revelation* (2006), and *Blessed* (2009), Kokkinos has made a contribution to the Australian filmmaking landscape and allowed Melbourne to be seen and heard—and experienced—in some detail. Melbourne’s presence in Kokkinos’ work is culturally and locationally specific and, at the same time, possesses a welcoming fluidity, as the depth and tangibility projected by her worlds makes them accessible regardless of preconceived familiarity. As spectator-auditors, we are encouraged to identify with characters and are simultaneously affected by the rich integrated soundscapes. Although there is much existing critical appreciation for Kokkinos’ work (including: Hardwick 2009; Bennett 2007; Collins and Davis 2004), this article expands the discussion through an exploration of key scenes and soundscapes that identify intricacies of suburban and metropolitan Melbourne, and their significance to both the text itself and the spectator-auditor.

The concept of the spectatorial body, and how its textures, contours and movements extend beyond presence to become an identificatory body on screen, is an important aspect of film theory. Jean Epstein (1977) mused that the cinema’s essence is movement, and the close-up its soul. While he highlights the close-up, he does not deny that the spectator’s own consciousness is imperative to the experience of the cinema. Outside the relationship between the spectator and the screen there is “no movement, no flux, no life in the mosaics of light and shadow which the screen always presents as fixed” (Epstein 1977: 23). More recently, the complexities of theories of the body have extended to an awareness of the corporeal aspects of film viewing as theories of affect address cinema as it is experienced physically by the cinematic spectator. Michel Chion opens his book *The Voice In Cinema* (1999) with several musings on the re-labeling of silent cinema. He writes,

> Today’s flat cinema dreams of depth; and similarly the so-called mute cinema made spectators imagine the voice, far from denying or mourning its demise. (1999: 7, emphasis in original)

Chion is calling for a redefinition of silent cinema as mute because, by communicating via images and showing mouths moving in lieu of people speaking, the viewer could possibly imagine those words being spoken. Reading the lips of actors and watching them interact with their own reality, spectators might have heard the words and movements in their own heads. In this way silent cinema elicited an imagined soundscape and, by similar logic, spatial sounds could elicit feelings, perspectives and sensations. That today’s cinema “dreams of depth” is an astute observation, but the power of cinema moves beyond simply dreaming; enabled and embodying spectators through the sensorial realm, cinema has depth. This article will analyse the aural scope of Kokkinos’ films, their full spectrum of sound and music, to elucidate ways in which the spectator-auditor is invited into and embraced by such depth.

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2 Antamosi was filmed on 16mm as part of the Victorian College of the Arts graduate program in 1991, and her following film *Only the Brave* (1994) won the Grand Prix for Best Film at the Melbourne International Film Festival.
The Spectator

Textually, *Head On* and *Blessed* directly confront the subject of listening—and the failure to hear—in the domain of the everyday.\(^3\) The narratives feature characters struggling to be heard, and whose regular pathways of communication with others have been disrupted, obscured or ignored. In these relationships, dishonesty becomes an accepted, almost expected, undertone of communication. Trying desperately to be heard and understood, an entire spectrum of children, teenagers and adults learn that words are simply not expressive enough. Even as characters and narratives are introduced, the audience is being informed that these films are about the importance of listening, of sympathising, and of taking notice. Shifting this textual awareness from the narrative to the filmic construction, and the experience of film viewing, *Head On* and *Blessed* both require a conscious form of listening as well as watching. Kokkinos has herself observed that *Blessed*, at its base, is about the primal relationship of mother and child, of the strength of this relationship and of all the struggles that it presents (Cordaiy, 2009). This is a relationship that all spectators can relate to; whether we presently have a mother or don’t, everybody can relate to the difficulties and pleasures of being somebody’s—or nobody’s—child. As Brian McFarlane observed,

> The film can sometimes be hard to watch; there are moments as excoriating as anything in recent cinema; it is never less than emotionally demanding; there is nowhere to relax in it. (2010: 88)

Sound and music play a large part in the intensities of this activated response, as I will show. In the same way, *Head On* deals with fractured identities, surviving adolescence, and being accepted or rejected for the person you are.\(^4\) At the level of core narrative, and embellished by their nuanced soundscapes, these films are particularly appropriate for the analysis of sensorial affect influenced by emotional resonance.\(^5\)

In his groundbreaking book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, published in 1960, Siegfried Kracauer writes that, in addition to photography, “film is the only art which leaves its raw material more or less intact” (1965: x). In 1964, Roland Barthes published his essay ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’, calling for a redefinition of film beyond the animation of photographs, suggesting “the having-been-there gives way before a being-there of the thing” (1977: 45). The power of film lies in the projective consciousness of its form, that is, in its ability to project sensations onto its audience. Of course movement is the primary instigator of this, but sound, transmitted via movement as a vibration felt by the ear, creates an illusory but accessible three-dimensional space that we could realistically inhabit. We can pay attention to film, certainly, but we can only truly be affected by cinema that creates a world with dimensions of realism and emotional depth. In Kokinos’ cinema, the city and the suburbs are presented and explored as real, present places; as Barthes might say, almost-right-there. Spatial sounds are a large part of that immersive depth and can reach the ear/body almost more directly than the

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\(^3\) Both films take place more or less over a 24-hour period.

\(^4\) These issues are of such core importance that they must be mentioned, although they are not directly relevant here and are explored in more depth in texts mentioned earlier. See Hardwick (2009) for a particularly incisive analysis of Ari’s struggle for acceptance as marred by his desire for rejection.

\(^5\) Matthew Saville’s *Noise* (2007) explores Melbourne through the perspective of a police officer whose hearing is affected by tinnitus, captured through a series of nuanced elements in the sonic environment. For a full analysis, see Hadland (2010).
image reaches the eye. Hearing sound does not necessarily require listening, but watching film requires actively looking and, by virtue of our passive reception of sound phenomena, we may be more susceptible to emotional sonic content. Robynn Stilwell declares that, “Music tends to remain a subliminal signal for most audience members” (2001: 169) and by extension sound might remain so too, as often we hear things without consciously recognising them. It is the purpose of this study to explore the sounds we hear while watching films. In the same way that the average spectator-auditor might be emotionally affected by the tone of a film score without distinguishing the exact tune of a song, the diegetic soundscape of a film can build an emotional and sensorial space that encapsulates the spectator-auditor without conscious recognition. Sound, by its very nature and existence, is a physical sensation, able to affect us not only intellectually, but also with an appeal to the corporeal textures of the body.

Philip Brophy asks his readers to step outside of the construct that film sound serves the image and imagine that sounds and images simply coexist (1999). This is the way we experience the phenomena in reality, as the world runs with sound and image simultaneously, one always responding to the other. In film analysis, the richness and depth of the soundscape is worth exploring together with how sound is instrumental in creating film space and character psychology. The cine-consciousness of the spectator should not be taken for granted. We are vulnerable, sensual bodies, and our identification with a film and connection to the space of a film might be tenuous if not for our relation to realistic auditory phenomena. Of course, as serves the medium, many films are modified by extra-diegetic music that is external to the filmic reality, and changes aural amplification within it, and Head On and Blessed both employ these techniques. These two films demonstrate that such post-production modifications can actually enhance the presence and power of the sonorous diegesis, and when sound intertwines with score music, that both are indispensable to the whole.

Hearing Head On

In contrast to the ensemble narrative subjectivities of Blessed, Head On’s individual subjective perspective follows nineteen-year-old Ari (Alex Dimitriades) through a 24-hour period. The diegesis in Kokkinos’ earlier film is filled with the changing soundtrack that shapes Ari’s experiences. The film’s opening is a kinetic audio-visual synthesis, with composer Ollie Olsen’s Greek-inflected rebetiko score overlaying grainy black and white photographs of a past generation of Greek immigrants arriving ashore in Melbourne. This montage of historic photographs cuts to Ari’s face in the present day and the tempo of Olsen’s score music is softened, easing the spectator into an alignment with Ari’s own perspective through auditory identification. The opening score segues into the music playing inside a club, one beat melding into the other as the dominant soundtrack moves directly into the emotional, affective space of the film and the sonorous position of the auditor is aligned with Ari’s own. From inside, the camera and the spectator follow Ari outside and into an inner-suburban backstreet, remaining spatially located in the film space as the music continues to throb in the distance. As he walks further away from the music, the high-pitched rebetiko resonates in Ari’s head; the music from the diegesis has once again shifted perspective, and becomes aligned with Ari’s own auditory perspective.

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6 A filmmaker and composer, Brophy worked with Kokkinos as composer of original score music for Only The Brave.
A somewhat disorienting experience follows to communicate Ari’s drug-stimulated senses: the thunderous sound of a train as it passes by overhead; the textural sound of water as Ari enters a public bathroom; the tear as he unzips his fly; and his anxious breath, heightened in the relative silence of an interior. The film cuts to Ari in bed, masturbating but also remembering and reimagining the night before. The audiotrack signifies this temporal and identificatory dissonance as, even though it is the next morning, the rebetiko that temporally defined the previous night remains. When he gets out of bed, he moves into the kitchen of his brother’s house where Hot Chocolate’s ‘You Sexy Thing’ (1975) is on the stereo, signifying Ari’s now firm presence in the present. As Ari leaves the kitchen, music spills out of headphones hanging around his neck, its compressed sound quality and lack of clarity aligning with Ari’s indifference towards it and, perhaps, his sexual attraction towards his brother’s housemate Sean (Julian Garner). As Ari and Sean walk along Lygon St in the inner-northern suburb of Carlton, a soft guitar rhythm briefly acts as score but, as the camera cuts to Ari alone, his headphones in his ears, the beat and lyrics of British electronic band Lunatic Calm’s ‘Leave You Far Behind’ (1997), featuring the lyrics “I wanna tell you that I’m feeling closer”, penetrate the aural realm. There have been several different stimuli to hear, but one thing is clear: our listening is channeled through the audible realm of the characters, and the way they hear their own world.

Figure 1: A close-up of Ari’s Walkman, as he operates his own soundtrack.

Academic writing about Head On is replete with accounts of Ari’s Walkman and the music he listens to, particularly in relation to how he defines himself as a queer Greek-Australian teenager (Stratton, 2005; Conomos, 2009). While it is informative to note Ari’s song choices in relation to his dislocated identity in both a diasporic and local community, it is important to explore the way in which his own sonic perspective is presented as individual, separate to and stronger than those of other characters. An analysis of these particularities is crucial, as it is with Ari that our identification is clearly aligned, in plot, characterisation, and often point of view. In Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music (2001), Anahid Kassabian delineates two styles of musical construction for a soundtrack, namely, composed and compiled. Kokkinos' films—along with many others—blend composed score with recorded songs, so an analytical review of the songs chosen to construct Ari’s identity cannot be the only way to consider the powerful affectiveness of this film. The treatment of music as it is heard by Ari and by the

7 Many song choices are also signified in Christos Tsiolkas’ source novel Loaded. For a discussion of music in the novel and film, see Stratton (2005).
audience is very powerful in connecting our own auditory experience to Ari’s subjectivity and psychological perspective.

Early dialogue at Ari’s brother’s house reveals that, due to the protective traditions of his Greek parents, his mother and father will be angry at his overnight absence from the family home. He approaches his father in his garden and when his father angrily snatches Ari’s Walkman from him, the tape is stopped and the music cut. After he has predictably argued with his parents for his independence, he retreats into his bedroom and aggressively slams the door. He argues with his mother through the door and, fed up, inserts his headphones in his ears. To parallel his own auditory perspective, the diegetic volume of his Walkman—still playing ‘Leave You Far Behind’—is markedly increased. Ari heads to the industrial side of town to meet friends, walks along Melbourne’s major river, the Yarra, then the music in his headphones changes track into the slow trance of Way Out West’s ‘Ajare’ (1994). As he walks through the bustling Footscray public food market and out into the street, he confronts a barrage of street sounds which, along with the music coming from a nearby busker’s violin, leaks into his ears. With this cacophonous three-way mix of city sounds and music, the spectator is exposed to the same sounds as Ari as though we, too, might be experiencing the world multilayered through headphones.

The dynamic variation of perspective and amplitude continues throughout Head On, with the volume of Ari’s Walkman frequently adjusting according to his proximity to a musical source, be it his headphones, stereo speakers, or live performance. We can hear music as Ari would hear it as he walks through the suburbs and, when he removes his headphones, the amplification of volume is lowered. With the headphones hanging around his shoulders, the music can be heard with muted volume and some distortion. In one early scene, The Saints’ 1978 single ‘Know Your Product’ is blasting loudly from his friend Joe’s (Damien Fotiou) car, and as Ari approaches and Joe turns the stereo down, the volume reduces accordingly. As spectator-auditors who hear as Ari hears, we are aligned with his subjectivity, and at the same time very much located in the film space. In a later scene, Ari is in the bedroom of his friend Johnny (Paul Capsis) with Las Vegas’ ‘Underground Lovers’ on the stereo, the volume fluctuating in accordance with the evident emotional intensity of their conversation. When Ari leaves the room, the song does not cut out but gradually fades, and the characters walk into another part of the house within the audible range of the outdoors—the sounds of birds and children playing is heard inside. Later that night, in the bathroom of a Greek club in the inner city, Ari snorts cocaine with his friend Betty (Elena Mandalis) and fights with Joe but, even through all these isolated dramatic moments, the sonic
continuity very much stabilises our presence in the film space. The steady hum of
voices is heard from a distance, a quiet reminder of the current location, within a
larger, populated space. As Ari and Joe argue, the musical performance begins
again, and as they move into the open space, surrounded by music and an
atmosphere that celebrates it (the kind of atmosphere prevalent at a music
performance) the volume is loud, vibrations are sensorially surrounding. Once
more, the volume is dynamically related to the movement of Ari through the
building and, as he leaves once more, it fades down until the string instrument is
no longer audible. The volume of the diegesis fluctuates in support of Ari’s
movement, and that of the identificatory perspective, through space.

![Image of a musical performance](image)

Figure 3: The haBiBis perform live, their music and resonance central to the soundscape.

As illustrated, much of the music in *Head On* is situated in the diegesis, and our
perspective is for the most part anchored to Ari’s. As the music of his life is layered
with the sounds of metropolitan and inner-city Melbourne, the spectator-auditor is
invited into a rich terrain— music is nearly omnipresent in the diegetic
soundtrack—so it is worth analysing the film’s penultimate scene to discover how
we remain anchored without music.

While dancing in a gay club, Ari and Sean share their first kiss to the pulsating
electronic soundtrack. Their bodies filled with adrenaline in response to the
music’s fast-paced rhythm, Sean suggests that they leave the club, and, as they do,
the music cuts abruptly when the camera cuts to Sean unlocking the door of his
house. Having experienced an acoustic frenzy for most of the film, the sudden
absence of music, both source and score, is an almost unwelcome shock. Ari is
without his Walkman here and, like the spectator-auditor, is forced to confront the
present reality of the silent landscape, without refuge of music. They enter Sean’s
bedroom, and a siren tears through the relative silence. (Could this be to warn
them off pursuing this encounter?) The scene lasts for almost six minutes without
music; the score only re-enters for the final scene as Ari walks along the industrial
docks of Melbourne as an accompaniment to his acousmatic epilogue. During these
six minutes Ari is forced to hear an atmosphere of silence and, as though in a
panicked attempt to circumvent this, he increases the intensity and aggression of
fellatio with Sean. The camera frames Ari’s face, and the audio communicates that

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8 The song heard here is the 1996 track ‘Tiny Little Engines’, written by Ollie Olsen with Andrew Till and Geoffrey Hales, and performed by The Visitors.
Sean is choking, the visceral sounds eliciting a powerful, recognisable sense of bodily contact. Through the lens we only see Ari’s face and it is aurally that the audience is exposed to this abject discomfort, the raw bodily sound of gagging. Hurt and humiliated, Sean violently rejects him, and as we are left with Ari there is no Walkman or score to mediate our contact with the world. Ari is alone, and so are we, suddenly exposed in the relative silence of this night in the city. The film ends with Ari on the docks of Port Melbourne, the central metropolis in the distance, and Olsen’s ‘End Theme’ on the soundtrack, but this brief reprise of the opening score does not reduce the impact of the previous stark silence. It is little more than an end theme, and the sounds of the city remain beneath the reprise.

The Spatial and the Sensual in Blessed

The sonic layering of Blessed is subtler than in Head On as, without a personal mixtape in a cinematic Walkman to anchor our spectator-auditor subjectivity to the filmic subjectivity, Blessed appeals to the polyphony of the everyday environment. That said, the difference in the construction of the diegesis is noticeable even from a comparison of the two film opening sequences. As illustrated, Head On opens with loud score music that shifts spatial perspective to shape the diegetic space with its first scene. In contrast, the opening of Blessed is a montage of the children whose stories will encompass the narrative, overlaid with Cezary Skubiszewski’s score. Also in contrast to Head On, the score here is associated with a chorus of characters (and will later accompany a similar montage featuring the group of mothers) and supports what Kassabian would label an ‘affiliating identification’, or an openness towards the music and text that encourages multiple identifications (2001: 141). The score’s leitmotif is associated with all characters and can accommodate multiple conditions of subjectivity, in contrast with Ari’s dominant subjectivity in Head On, which is further complicated by the inevitable individual experiences and memories of spectator-auditors. As Kassabian writes, “no music can guarantee one or the other kind of identification” (2001: 142), and this accounts for the significance of spatial sounds and sound volume in the anchoring of identification. So while Skubiszewski’s score evokes an emotional connection to the film’s characters, other sounds are equally key to building a soundscape that is suggestive of and sensitive to reality, and these operating elements must be considered in tandem. We are not simply spectators, or auditors, who are engaged in film viewing. Our bodies respond to the centripetal pull of spatial sound drawing us sensually into the film world, and sometimes we hear as though we might be there. Henri Lefebvre, in his essay ‘Seen from the Window,’ observes,

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9 Stratton (2005) and Bennett (2007) interpret this scene using a different framework, discussing it in terms of Ari’s ambivalence about the unsettling confluence of his Greek-Australian identity and his refusal to be loved by Sean, or any Anglo-Celtic figure.

10 As a point of interest, the final track over the credits is Loaded by Primal Scream, released in 1991 on their album, which features an audio sample of Peter Fonda’s call to liberalism and freedom of youth from The Wild Angels (Roger Corman, 1966). This sample finishes the credits—“We wanna get loaded, we’re gonna have a party”—encompassing, arguably, an equally hedonistic perspective to Ari’s.

11 All the children are asleep, in what Kokkinos describes as a “beautiful montage moment” (Cordaiy, 2009: 19).

12 In her 2008 article ‘Image, Music, Film’, Wendy Everett similarly believes that, although music can suggest or identify an emotional significance, it “cannot ‘mean’ directly. It can only connote or infer” (quoted in Hadland, 2010: 37).
Over there, the one walking in the street is immersed into the multiplicity of noises, rumours, rhythms... But from the window noises are distinguishable, fluxes separate themselves, rhythms answer each other. (2000: 220)

This is an intriguing empirical anecdote as it identifies the spectator who is at a remove from their spectacle to be the most privileged in observation. But as spectator-auditors of films with a rich spatial depth produced by a blend of kinetic and sonic stimulus, we are akin to the people “over there”; as if walking in the street (as Barthes might say, being-there), we become immersed, through sound and movement, in the space of the world on film.

Following the opening montage, and a short introduction to Katrina (Sophie Lowe) and her mother Bianca (Miranda Otto), fifteen-year-old Daniel (Harrison Gilbertson) walks in to the kitchen of his home as the score music finally fades out and we are anchored to the diegesis, exposed only to sounds of the everyday that draw us into the space of the film and build our familiarity with its world. As he fights with his mother Tanya (Deborra-Lee Furness), their dialogue is contextualised by the neighbourhood sounds of children playing, birds chirping, and cars passing in the distance. The camera cuts to Katrina and her friend Trisha (Anastasia Baboussouras) at an above-ground train station where a recorded voice announces arrival times, the dinging bell of the railway boom gate signifies an approaching train, and the chirping birds and swell of traffic noises firmly establishes the location as suburban.13 Introduced to Trisha’s truant brother Roo (Eamon Farron) waking up in a silent house, the suburban sounds continue. Moved to a different part of Melbourne—by the sea, with Orton (Reef Ireland) and his sister Stacey (Eva Lazzaro)—the soundscape changes to incorporate the sounds of ocean waves and seagulls. James (Wayne Blair) is introduced while working, aurally trapped by claustrophobic echoes of an underground electrical system and, above ground, surrounded by the industrial sounds of trucks and machinery that broaden the Melbourne suburbs. We return to Orton and Stacey, this time in a suburban shopping centre where tinny music emanates from invisible speakers, and footsteps define the surrounds. Later they are outdoors in a park—in fact, all of the characters move through the city and suburbs, the acoustics of their locations changing with the scenery. Sounds like these change as the day approaches night, as bird sounds are replaced with a bed of chirping cicadas and crickets that suggests the still warmth of Melbourne summer evenings, traffic is imbued with a greater sense of urgency and force. As the sky becomes darker and the streets and buildings light up, the soundscape follows, amplifying the intensity of the spatial atmosphere and allowing the spectator to experience the full nuanced temporality of the soundscape.

Following this sequence during which the listener is exposed to the sonorous spaces of suburban Melbourne and a brief musical interlude, Daniel breaks into a stranger’s house and, upon entering, the sound of his tense breath is emphasised against all other sounds. A grandfather clock is located in the house, never shown but always heard, its pendulum sounds the slow passing of time, and the tension within Daniel (and the spectator) as he meets the owner of the house, Laurel (Monica Maughan). As Daniel and Laurel move through rooms of the house, the

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13 Boom gates, at level crossings (otherwise known as railway crossings), are a common part of the suburban landscape across Australia. Within the inner-city grid of Melbourne the railway transport system is located underground, in a subway-like infrastructure. As soon as the train moves outside the grid, it becomes above ground, and roads are punctuated by such crossings.
ticking pendulum keeps the spectator-auditor tied to the space by its constant resonance for over six minutes, a steady soundscape mirroring the acoustic realm of the characters. Later in the film, when Laurel is alone in the house, the ticking can still be heard, a constant defining element of the space and of its isolated silence. It is in these closed, restricted spaces that the sensorial phenomena produces anxiety caused by fear and anticipation, and sustained by unremitting sounds. In a later scene, when Tanya is waiting tensely in the hospital for her son, the hum of his heart monitor drones unremittingly, not only an aural signifier of life but also a reminder of the proximity of death. Like the dreaded ticking of a clock, these sounds signify an unending duration of anticipation, and the unresolvable pain of anxious time.

This interlacing of sound, silence and narrative tension suggests that the whole scope of sound and silence is diagnostically related to spectator-auditor anxiety. When Roo is alone in a warehouse with a pornographer, the environment is, as expected, eerily quiet. There are certain sounds emanating inside from the cityscape on the outside: gentle traffic sounds, children playing joyfully; it sounds like the suburbs. It is the ‘silence’ inside the warehouse that really ignites our fear, our anxiety that Roo is truly alone with the stranger, and that he is trapped. These ambient sounds of the neighbourhood quotidian are important in situating us in the film space. The sounds resonate with a slight echo, with an irresolute awareness of distance and proximity; we hear them as Roo might hear them. As these sounds mark the territory of the neighbourhood, and the relative silence inside the building is penetrated by the threatening voice of the pornographer and the camera’s intrusive sound of surveillance, we become aware how isolated the characters are inside the building. The walls act as a barrier but, rather than keeping danger out, they contain the danger; the contrast of the ambient sounds outside with the threatening noises inside the building works to deterritorialise both Roo and the spectator-auditor from the space. Our anxiety as spectators here is enhanced by the threat to the otherwise familiar and innocuous acoustic realm.

It is well known that in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), director Peter Weir added the sound of a slowed-down earthquake to the optical track to encourage an almost

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14 It is interesting to note that, as soon as the score enters in this scene, even beginning softly, the ticking is immediately removed from the soundscape. In a later scene James returns to the house while a musical cue plays and the ticking is absent but, upon conclusion of the cue, the ticking is more apparent in the mix. While other diegetic sounds remain, the clock may interfere with the musical rhythm, so its absence allows the music to dominate.
oneiric, unspecified but nonetheless terrifying sense of dread in the audience. Weir has said that under optimum exhibition conditions “there is at times a slight vibration in the theater itself, as well as in the viewer’s breastbone” (cited in Bliss and Weir, 1999: 10). This may be achieved by the described sound effect, although Weir seems to be merely reveling in the corporeal affectiveness of sound heard by our bodies; sound by its very nature is already received as a vibration. Yet the sound effect remains remarkable in its construction of the isolating, dangerously enthralling environment of Hanging Rock. When Roo is isolated inside the warehouse, haunted by the sounds of the normative suburban landscape from which he is removed, the spectator-auditor experiences a similarly compelling funereal dread, but it is the threat of the everyday and the invocation of danger and entrapment in a setting isolated from a safe environment, that can generate this aural anxiety. Picnic at Hanging Rock successfully utilises an almost otherworldly, ethereal soundscape to induce a certain delirium but, set in the present day city and suburbs, Blessed is very much tied to present time and place and the immediacy of the modern city and its suburbs.

On the city streets, police sirens enunciate danger, urgency and emergency, resoundingly paradigmatic of the urban soundscape both in our immediate reality and in the cinematic code. When James receives a telephone call informing him that his mother has passed away, he heads onto the rooftop of his office building and punctuating his exit onto the cement roof, a siren screams in the distance. As a sound of panic it is a siren for someone else who might be in trouble; individual stories like those of Blessed and Head On populate the entire city. The score is soon reintroduced as the city of Melbourne occupies the background of the frame, continues through another character montage, and then again, Melbourne, seen behind a train heading towards the urban centre. The score fades out, finally, inside a police station and, as James enters the mortuary to identify the body of his mother, another siren punctuates the soundscape. Later in the film, as Gina (Victoria Haralabidou) leaves the same mortuary with her daughter Trisha, the sound of sirens fills the air, travelling across suburban distances as it informs the space and its inhabitants (narrative and spectatorial) of emergency. Throughout Blessed, the siren exists to reflect of the trauma of characters’ lives, as an acoustic

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15 While it has similarities to establishing shots of cities in film, this is, rather, a punctuation mark, something of a visual tie to bring all the characters back to the same place. Throughout the film’s montages, a passing train is a regular feature, perhaps more a symbol of the interrelatedness of the ensemble’s stories.
parallel of danger, death and despair. Following the final siren, the score is reintroduced and a montage begins of children and mothers, some together, some alone, and we are at once overwhelmed with inconsolable grief and a bittersweet hope in the tender gulf between mother and child.

Psychologies of Sound

In *Blessed*, moments of emotional tension and cataclysmic anxiety are expressed through changes in diegetic volume, symbolising the physiological response of our own spectator bodies to sound. Such variation of sound volume can be viewed through Rick Altman’s conceptualisation of point-of-audition sound, which draws the listener into the diegetic world “not at the point of enunciation of the sound, but at the point of its audition” (1992: 60). At the moment when Gina argues with Trisha while sewing school uniforms, accidentally scratching her daughter with scissors, music from the radio—already soft in volume—dulls in intensity. This diminuendo mirrors the intensification of the spectator-auditor involvement in the psychology of their relationship. As the two characters become more and more involved in their own dynamic, their perception of external phenomena is dampened. There are several other moments when sound signifies the subjective perspective in this way; in Tanya and Pete’s (William McInnes) kitchen a radio can be heard softly, and it fades as the emotional intensity of their arguing overwhelms them. When Bianca is sitting at a pub filled with poker machines and taking a break from gambling, she is overwhelmed when a stranger gives her seven hundred dollars; as her excitement intensifies the artificial chiming of the machines becomes duller, then is accentuated again as she leaves the venue and returns to her present situation. Aligning our position as spectator-auditors with the space of the film, the volume of the soundscape does not remain static or shallow. As observed, volume fluctuates in accordance with, and as an expression of, point of audition and the emotionally sensate position of the characters.

![Figure 6: A radio is sometimes unheard, sometimes an unwelcome intrusion, in Gina’s kitchen.](image)

With three feature films set in Melbourne, Kokkinos builds the cinematic identity of the city as a dynamic, nuanced, fear-inducing but also protective space. The work of the sound designers, in building soundscapes that are not necessarily

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16 Poker machines are commonly used gambling machines, also referred to as fruit, slot or pokie machines.

17 *The Book of Revelation* (2006) has a far more extensive use of extra-diegetic score music, also composed by Szubiszewski, and a discussion of its auditory properties may be the subject of analysis elsewhere.
mirrors of reality but maintain a correlative realistic attachment to our senses, demonstrates the integration of a sensorial dynamism in Australian cinema. In another iconic Melbourne film, *Monkey Grip* (Ken Cameron, 1982), the sound layering, and the use of emotional sound, is much more methodical. Bruce Smeaton’s score always accompanies the temporal interludes of Nora’s (Noni Hazlehurst’s) narration, suggesting that the score, along with the acousmatic presence of Nora’s voice, is removed from the sensory experience of Melbourne as a whole. The sounds of the city are heard constantly but with little experiential variation, traffic booming outside of houses as though one was standing on the street, that same barrage heard travelling along in trams, voices and squeals at the swimming pool. Live music, as an essential part of the narrative and of the characters’ lives, also has a significant role to play in the sonic environment, redolent of a particular time and place but removed from the affective realm of the cinema. *Monkey Grip* presents Melbourne as a raw space but it uses the traditional trope of the voice-over to draw together image, narrative and subjectivity, largely privileging the voice in storytelling, and without a developed use of point of audition sound. In contrast, Kokkinos synergises the sounds of the city, the sounds of her characters interacting with the world, and musical score to create an affective space for the viewer.

With the final sequence of *Blessed* the centripetal force of film space intensifies and our spectator identification and sympathies follow. Rhonda (Frances O’Connor) enters the mortuary and must identify the bodies of her two children who, in a horrifying accident, have been burned alive, their bodies fused together as one. Knowing that they would have experienced extreme suffering as they died, Rhonda screams, articulating her shock and despair in the only way possible to articulate such sadness. No thought, nothing within the realm of reason can explain any response to the death of a loved one. Her screams are chilling—the sound of her cries, her tears, and her breath literally brings goosebumps to the surface of the skin. Chion explains that the scream embodies “an absolute, outside of language, time, the conscious subject” (1999: 78). An expression of a state of despair, the scream occurs “where speech is suddenly extinct, a black hole, the exit of being” (Chion, 1999: 79). At this absolute event—the end of life—there are no words left, and screams are piercing reminders of the futility of language and its distance from our bodily experience. All other noise is extinguished when Rhonda screams; it is a song of the dead, not only of human death but the death of all other expression.

Like the siren, the use of the scream as an expression of pain and terror is by no means a unique trope of the cinema. It is relevant nonetheless to consider the presence of the scream in Kokkinos’ cinema, particularly as Kokkinos is a female director; Chion writes only of the scream as directed by a male, as a form of mastery over the female, neither of which apply here. Outside any preconceptions, the scream is a primal human reaction that can rupture, rather than master, both the interpersonal and the acoustic realm. In *Only the Brave* (1994), a troubled teen Vicki (Dora Kaskanis) douses herself in petrol and sets herself alight. Attempting to rescue Vicki, her close friend Alex (Elena Mandalis) struggles, and ultimately fails, to rid her body of flames. She cries, her screams becoming louder and louder, eventually echoing throughout the entire industrial precinct. Amidst this sonic black whole, a desperately cried “no” is the last word we hear. In response to death, the absolute negative of life, that is all we can say. In the hospital, she doesn’t speak, her screams the last sounds of human expression that we hear in the film; the scream as the ultimate vocalisation of pain.
As visually explained through montage, all characters but one are given resolution in *Blessed*, mediated by the bittersweet comfort of the score; whether reunited or alone, their pains and worries are softening, although not necessarily resolved. It is with Rhonda that we stay, our identificatory support strengthened by the density of the aural psychological field. In the film’s denouement, the camera follows Rhonda as she steps out of a police car and walks into a pub, and in turn she follows the music; it grows louder in a correlation to her (and our) spatial presence. ‘Elsie’ (1983)—by 1980s Australian rock band the Divinyls—is playing inside and several poignant lyrics are heard before the song gradually segues into score music. The delicate treatment of music here cannot be categorised as either diegetic or extra-diegetic, as it exists as a complex amalgamation of both spectator-auditor and character psychologies. As the new wave, punk rock nihilism of the diegetic ‘Elsie’ transitions into the affecting score—Skubiszewski’s composition of drums, strings, guitar and synthesiser played legato—there is a strange awareness of the fact that we in the audience can hear while Rhonda, perhaps, cannot hear (also, no one else is dancing to the ‘beat’ of the score music, suggesting its transitional presence). The camera follows Rhonda into the club, then focuses on her face while she dances. The score slows, reduces to the base of strings and cello, the camera stays on her face and the upper part of her dancing body, Rhonda using dance and movement for the only therapeutic consolation she can find. The score approaches a diminuendo until finally all sound, including extra-diegetic music, source music, and situational sound made by people surrounding her, is cut. As a reaction to this silence, we in the audience become silent too; in a physiologically sympathetic human response mediated by visual stimulus, we can hear that her breath, like the breath of her onlooking social worker Gail (Tasma Walton), is strained. Rhonda breathes out, finally, the sound of her breath isolated, all other sounds muted. The soundtrack signifies that Rhonda cannot hear; she is experiencing a catatonic stupor in response to the death of her children. By the time the score finishes, we are engulfed by silence, hearing only the sound of Rhonda’s breath. With no sound left but the restrained quietness of Rhonda’s breath, this suggests that we are right there with her in this moment, and can hear her hearing ‘nothing’.

Conclusion

This close analysis of the interplay of score music and the diegetic soundscape in *Head On* and *Blessed* highlights the value of any type of sound to the spectator’s auditory involvement in film and thus their access to sensorial depth. It is worth noting that in Kokkinos’ debut feature, it was important to the larger scope of the film that the spectator be drawn close to the characters, particularly Ari, as signified textually by the repetition of Lunatic Calm’s song lyrics. *Head On* had an associated soundtrack album released in 1999, with a range of selections from the composed score and compiled songs. *Blessed* did not, and the absence of what might be a marketable soundtrack heightened the importance of the spatial soundscape. Expanding the dimensionality and emotional capacity of film, diegetic sound that builds the reality and space of the film should be considered in a film’s overall acoustic construction. In both *Head On* and *Blessed*, source music and

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18 ‘Elsie’ has a significant presence in *Monkey Grip* too, and is heard twice throughout the film: at the publication studio where Nora works, and at the party in one of the final scenes. In *Blessed*, the song’s presence is given much more prominence, saturating the diegesis rather than supporting it as background music. The version of ‘Elsie’ in *Monkey Grip* appears on the 1982 EP associated with the film, but the track in *Blessed* is a slightly longer version, released on the Divinyls’ 1983 album *Desperate*. 
diegetic sound are closely related, and can be mediated by extra-diegetic score music. Locations, character subjectivities and spectator-auditor psychologies are developed in terms of each of these sonic aspects of the cinema, and the visual works with the acoustic realm to present a wholly sensorial space.

References


Filmography

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Blessed (Ana Kokkinos, 2009)
The Book of Revelation (Ana Kokkinos, 2004)
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Noise (Matthew Saville, 2007)
Only the Brave (Ana Kokkinos, 1994)
Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975)