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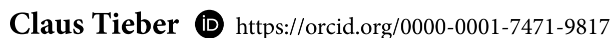

Fascinating Rhythm

The Screenwriting of Sound Symphonies for American and European Film of the 1930s

Abstract
This paper examines the role of rhythm in screenwriting in the 1930s. By analyzing how the transformation to sound enhanced the musicality of screenplays, the study highlights the emergence of so-called "sound symphonies" and the rhythmic integration of noises in American and German films from that decade. Focusing on the development of this device from the advent of sound until the end of the 1930s, the article reflects how broader shifts in film production shaped screenplay notation practices.

The Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch, who had to migrate to the United States in 1936, serves as a guiding thread throughout this short history of the Sound Symphony. Analyzing several case studies reveals that the evolution of this device and its notation in screenplays was transnational and did not follow a linear path. While early sound films often featured the musicalization of noises as standalone musical numbers, later years saw these elements integrated into larger musical sequences. Despite this shift, screenplay notation continued to vary until the end of the decade, depending on production modes and filmmakers' backgrounds. Ultimately, this investigation demonstrates that analysis of screenplays can offer valuable insights into film and production history.

Keywords
screenwriting history, sound film, film rhythm, film music, musical numbers

Rhythm, Film, Screenwriting

> *I use tons of camera directions, all for rhythm.*
> William Goldman[1]

The importance of rhythm for the aesthetics of film has been a topic of discussion since the 1920s. Film rhythm was mainly seen in the context of avantgarde or "abstract" film, and it is predominantly connected with editing and cutting. But, as Lea Jacobs writes, "narrative films can also be considered rhythmic insofar as filmmakers need to exercise control over the tempo with which the narrative events unfold and engage in the subtle process of timing short lengths and the performances of the actors."[2] This approach to film rhythm, which conceives of the concept of rhythm in a more abstract and theoretical way, goes beyond editing and opens a way to examine the topic on different levels. One of the aesthetic challenges of early sound films — to return to the historical timespan this article deals with — was maintaining a film's tempo, keeping narration, camera movement, performance, sound, and music "in time."

When the accompanying music in the cinemas of the silent era was played live, it could be adapted and adjusted to the projected film. The images on the screen set the rhythm, and musicians in the cinema followed it. Once the acoustic elements were added to the film material itself (or played from a disc in sync with it), the relationship between images and sound shifted: an anchor was needed, and rhythm seemed to fulfill this need. The issue of film rhythm thus became a practical concern, not just a theoretical topic. But what is film rhythm in a broader sense? On which levels besides editing can it be detected and analyzed? And how does it relate to the screenplay?

Tempo and Rhythm

Before delving deeper into these questions, it is useful to clarify some terminology by distinguishing between tempo and rhythm. Tempo refers to the speed with which information is delivered, pictures are shown, music is played. In screenplays, tempo is usually not noted, contrary to sheet music.[3]

Rhythm, however, is a method of structuring time based on repetition and accentuation. Rhythm is a term used "to describe all processes that involve periodically repeating units,"[4] as Alexandra Ksenofontova states. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell put it

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1) William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood* (London: Abacus, 1983), 66.

2) Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm After Sound: Technology, Music and Performance* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2015), 24.

3) See Adam Ganz, "We Come to Realize: Screenwriting and Representations of Time," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting*, eds. Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 131–150.

4) Alexandra Ksenofontova, *The Modernist Screenplay: Experimental Writing for Silent Film* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 194.

very bluntly in their book *Film Art*: "[…] rhythm involves, minimally, a beat or pulse, a tempo or pace, and a pattern of accents, or stronger and weaker beats."[5] Film rhythm is the result of the combination of sound rhythm and image rhythm. This cooperation of the two main aspects of film can take different forms, mostly one element sets the rhythm and the other follows. Again, in screenplays, rhythm is an aesthetic quality; the term functions as an analogy to music but cannot be applied in its precise musical meaning. In its strictest sense, rhythm is a property unique to music. However, when incorporated into film, music can impose a sense of tempo and rhythm on the moving image.

The writing of music in screenplays can be extremely varied. Screenwriting manuals from the 1930s, although published only rarely in this period, pointed out the problem.[6] Screenwriter Tamar Lane's manual *The New Technique of Screen Writing, A Practical Guide to the Writing and Marketing of Photoplays* (1936) dedicates a whole chapter to the issue.[7] In chapter 6, "Tempo and Rhythm," she starts with a distinction of the two terms:

> *Tempo* is the relative speed or rate of movement of the story as it unfolds from beginning to end. In some respects, it may also be defined as the characteristic pace in which the situations or plot are told.[8]

Rhythm, by contrast, "is a regular or harmonious beat or accent to movement or sound; movement or sound marked by some regularly recurring accent or quantity."[9] It is worth emphasizing that although these definitions are neither precise nor proper in a musicological or any other sense, Lane

1. adds musical terms like *pace* and *beat* to her definitions, and
2. that tempo and rhythm are detected
   a. within the narration, meaning the amount and flow of narrative information over the duration of a film or within a certain scene or sequence. Lane argues that certain scenes — mostly those with what later will be called plot points — are faster than others.
   b. within movements — those of the characters or the camera and within sound, especially, but not exclusively in music, also in sound effects and speech/voice.

Lane concludes that "rhythm […] is a much overtalked and little practiced theory."[10] Her manual was published in 1936 and represents the state of the discourse at a time when the transition to sound was already completed.

5) Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Boston et al.: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 359–360.
6) For an analysis of these early screenwriting manuals, see, among others, Steven Curran, *Early Screenwriting Teachers 1910–1922: Origin, Contribution and Legacy* (Feltham: Accelerated Education Publishing, 2019).
7) Tamar Lane, *The New Technique of Screen Writing: A Practical Guide to the Writing and Marketing of Photoplays* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936).
8) Ibid., 65.
9) Ibid.
10) Lane, *The New Technique of Screen Writing*, 65.

In another manual that was published in 1930, when sound was at its very beginning, the authors Walter Pitkin and William Marston paradoxically "advise all writers to ignore" rhythm, just to continue to write about it for the following eight pages of the manual.[11]

They define the term as follows: "rhythm is an experienced recurrence of time patterns. The source of the experience may be sights or sound and perhaps even odor."[12] They further distinguish four different forms of rhythm in film:

1. the ordinary rhythms of music
2. the ordinary rhythms of march and dance
3. the ordinary rhythms of language, especially singing and dialogue
4. the extraordinary rhythms of total picture tempo, now within a sequence; and again between sequences.[13]

They also add the importance of "rhythmic units of story movement,"[14] which might be understood as another term for "acts."[15] Film rhythm is by no means reduced to editing in this manual, and its emphasis on music and dialogue represents the influence of the earliest sound film.

Adding a transnational perspective to these American voices, the German critic and screenwriter Willy Haas wrote in 1929 that the screenplay of the future will be characterized by the "organic permeation of image rhythm and sound."[16] According to Haas, the combination of picture and sound via rhythm is therefore a crucial function of the screenplay.

Today, rhythm in film is a rarely discussed issue, and it is even less prominent in screenwriting studies. Among those who have recently written or discussed film rhythm are Yvette Biro, who discusses the relationship between narrative and rhythm at a theoretical level;[17] Laurent Guido examines the theoretical discourse on rhythm in film during the silent era.[18] Domietta Torlasco theorizes about rhythm in film more broadly[19], whereas Karen Pearlman concentrates on editing when discussing film rhythm.[20] The most recent publication to my knowledge is by Steven Shaviro, who regards rhythm as "an organizing principle […] visually as well as sonically" in his examination of music videos.[21]

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11) Walter Pitkin and William Marston, *The Art of Sound Pictures* (New York and London: D. Appleton Company, 1930), 119.
12) Ibid., 119.
13) Ibid., 120.
14) Ibid.
15) Ibid.
16) Quoted in Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus, *Das Ringen um den Tonfilm: Strategien der Elektro- und der Filmindustrie in den 20er und 30er Jahren* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1999), 224.
17) Yvette Biro, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
18) Laurent Guido, *L'âge du rythme — cinéma, musicalité et culture du corps dans les théories françaises des années 1910–1930* (Lausanne: Èditions Payot, 2007).
19) Domietta Torlasco, *The Rhythm of Images: Cinema Beyond Measure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).
20) See among others: Karen Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (Amsterdam: Focal Press, 2009).
21) Steven Shaviro, *The Rhythm Image: Music Videos and New Audiovisual Forms* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 2.

Whereas most research on rhythm in film focuses on editing, Shaviro hints at the fact that "rhythms cross over between the soundtrack and the image track,"[22] therefore emphasizing the relation between sight and sound that this paper is most interested in. Needless to say, none of these works deals even peripherally with screenwriting.

Rhythm in screenwriting is a topic often mentioned in passing, but seldom examined in detail. One of the reasons for this circumstance is the close connection of film rhythm with editing and the assumption that editing is largely independent of the screenplay. Australian scriptwriting scholar Helen Carmichael points out the importance of rhythm in screenwriting in her manual: "A good script is like a good poem [...] it has rhythm, like music."[23] Famous screenwriter William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969) hints at the connection between technical suggestions, the visual design or format of a screenplay, and rhythm. He explains: "I use the phrase *cut to* the way I use *said* in a novel — strictly for rhythm. And I am perfectly willing to let one sentence fill a whole page."[24]

A look at the screenplay in question demonstrates how this works. Goldman uses the standard screenplay format to deliberately create rhythm. The repetition of "cut to" on the page creates the desired editing rhythm. The rhythm of the scene becomes visible on the page of the screenplay, which is structured by the formation of these notations.[25]

The screenplay is also a visual medium, meaning not just that it is written to be translated into an audiovisual result, but that its format also has a visual meaning on its own. This is why some of the rhythms created within the screenplay can be detected first and foremost visually — on the page of the screenplay. This example is by no means exceptional or unusual, quite the opposite: it demonstrates how the very structure of the screenplay format — specifically its requirement to mark scene transitions — can be employed to create various types of rhythm. More precisely, we can identify three distinct forms of rhythm related to filmmaking:

(a) rhythm as it is prescribed in the screenplay
(b) rhythm as it appears in the film and sometimes even
(c) rhythm as a visual/textual quality in the screenplay itself, that may or may not transfer to the film.[26]

Goldman's example belongs to category (c), and in this article, my primary focus lies on the forms outlined in (a) and (c). Since the argument centers on forms of rhythm rooted in the screenplay, rhythm manifesting exclusively in the moving images falls outside the scope of this discussion.

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22) Ibid.
23) Quoted after Steven Maras, *Screenwriting, History, Theory and Practice* (London: Wallflower Press 2009), 69.
24) Quoted after Claudia Sternberg, *Written for the Screen: The American Motion-Picture Screenplay as Text* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1997), 85 [emphasis in the original].
25) A reprint of some pages from Goldman's screenplay can be found in his chapter "The Screenwriter," in *The Movie Business Book*, 3rd ed., ed. Jason E. Squire (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 63–65.
26) Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this categorization.

The Transition to Sound

The addition of sound and music to film production, although experimented with since the invention of the medium in the late 19th century, faced new aesthetic problems based on new technical solutions. The evolving screenplay tried to provide a foundation for addressing these challenges. The integration of sound led to the breakdown of the screenplay into smaller components, creating formal units that could be repeated and varied, including audible elements, some of which were inherently rhythmic.

As Lea Jacobs writes, the topic of film rhythm was heavily discussed in the early years of sound film when filmmakers tried to find solutions for connecting image and sound. Jacobs distinguishes three different approaches:

- to closely connect sound to the movements in the image ("mickey mousing"),
- to connect film/visual rhythm to dialogue, whose tempo and pace seemed to be too slow in the first years,
- to connect film/visual rhythm to its editing pace and to use music as a structuring rhythmic device.[27)]

According to Jacobs, the aesthetic problems introduced by sound were resolved along these three lines until filmmakers achieved "virtuosic control" by the mid-1930s. Film is "above all, a rhythmic art."[28)] The sound symphonies discussed in this article can be read as a form of mickey mousing, but their editing pace follows the rhythm of the visualized sounds. As we will see, the screenplay plays an even more important role in linking sound and image in a rhythmic way than has thus far been realized. The screenplay itself was heavily affected by the transition to sound, and its format was changed.

Sound in cinema comes in the form of voice (dialogue), music, and sound effects. Although the continuity script of the silent era was not completely free of suggestions for dialogue, (diegetic) music, and (diegetic) sounds, a new screenplay format was needed that was able to include all the different acoustic elements that synchronized sound entailed.

Dialogue, sound, and music do alter the screenplay format inevitably. In most cases, the appearance of sound and music is visible at first glance on the page of a screenplay. The format makes the newly added sonic elements visible. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the two-column screenplay, which puts the visuals on one side and the acoustic elements on the other side of the page, thus making the audible aspect of film visible. Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch described the format as follows: "[…] just look at a so-called screenplay. On a formal level, the language is divided into two parts. Everything we can hear is on the left, and what we can see is on the right."[29)]

The sides would be switched occasionally, and not all screenplays were written in this format, but it was a heavily used model in Europe as well as in Hollywood, especially in

27) Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm after Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 20.
28) Ibid.
29) Günther Krenn, *Walter Reisch: Filme schreiben* (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv, 2004), 61.

scenes in which sound and music played an important role. After 1934, the two-column or parallel format can be found only in notations of musical numbers in American screenplays; it was consistently used in Europe, in some countries as late as the 1990s.[30] In screenplays for documentaries, the format is still in use. The two-column format makes the sonic aspects visible at a glance. This effect is even strengthened when the screenplay changes from an overall one-column format to a two-column one for the length of a musical number, as in some screenplays for Hollywood musicals of the 1940s.[31]

The early years of sound film, between 1927 and 1932, led to a confusion of screenplay formats. In Hollywood, each studio had its own format, and sometimes there was not even consistency within the same studio. The impact of sound led to a brief crisis of format, which was solved with the dominance of the master scene script. In the following case studies, I am focusing on one device of using rhythm that became popular in the early years of sound film — the rhythmization and musicalization of noises, especially in the form of so-called "sound symphonies." My aim is to analyze the notation within the screenplay of some of these sound symphonies. They offer insights into the production process, the roles and functions of the screenplay beyond narration, which were overlooked so far.

In Hollywood, Germany, and France, the Sound Symphony was used to emphasize the new technology, to make sound musical, and, most importantly, to make it visible. Sound symphonies were a demonstration, a showcase of the possibilities of synchronized sound.

In my case studies, I want to demonstrate how this device, which has a long history in popular music and theater, was further developed in the early years of sound film and became firmly established in Classical Hollywood cinema. The transnational examples are largely linked through the Austrian screenwriter Walter Reisch, who began his career in silent cinema and, alongside actor-director Willi Forst, played a key role in developing the popular subgenre of the Viennese film. This genre situates its narratives in a stylized, historical Vienna and centers on themes of art and love, with music serving as an essential and defining element.[32] Reisch was a "musical" writer, meaning that music and musicality played an important role in his screenplays. He penned the lyrics for the songs in many of his films. The Viennese film was a subgenre of the German-language music film for which Reisch wrote a number of screenplays (and directed a few). Reisch was forced to emigrate to the United States in 1936 due to his Jewish heritage, making him a fitting example of a screenwriter for whom music plays a crucial role. The influence of the operetta tradition is evident in his work, as it is in the work of other émigrés, particularly in their contribution to the American film musical and the development of musical numbers.[33]

30) In the Czech Republic for example, two-column screenplays were used until the 1990s, see Petr Szczepanik, "How Many Steps to the Shooting Script? A Political History of Screenwriting," *Iluminace* 25, no. 3 (2013), 73–98. Italy is another example for the late use of the two-column format, see Adam Ganz and Steven Price's analysis of *Once Upon a Time in America* (1994) in Adam Ganz and Steven Price, *Robert de Niro at Work: From Screenplay to Screen Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11.

31) See Steven Price, *A History of the Screenplay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 149.

32) See, among others, Robert Dassanowsky, *Screening Transcendence: Film Under Austro-Fascism and the Hollywood Hope, 1933–1938* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 67–83.

33) See also Claus Tieber, "Walter Reisch: The Musical Writer," *Journal of Screenwriting* 10, no. 3 (2019), 295–306.

The Sound Symphony is neither Reisch's invention nor is he the sole screenwriter who used this device. Rhythmizing and musicalizing everyday sounds have their origins in live theater. There is a direct link from director Rouben Mamoulian's use of the technique in his 1927 stage production of "Porgy" — based on the play by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, which later served as the basis for Gershwin's famous opera — and his celebrated opening sequence of *Love Me Tonight* (1932).[34)]

In *Porgy*, Mamoulian used noises for a scene in which a village wakes up: "Mamoulian fastidiously listed eighty-four characteristic outdoor sounds he encountered"[35)] in his copy of the script. In this director's script, "Mamoulian's noises accumulate one by one in the course of the next four minutes. The governing meter shifts from 4/4 to 2/4 to 6/8 — in effect, an accelerando."[36)] It is noteworthy that Mamoulian notes exact rhythmic time. A couple of years later, he incorporated the device into his film *Love Me Tonight*. The film starts with the waking up of Paris, using noises that get rhythmized and lead to the first song of this film musical.

The screenplay for the film merely summarizes the idea without giving too many details, because by that time, Mamoulian himself had already delivered the scene's blueprint on stage, and it had been used in a number of Hollywood and European films:

```
     A-1 — 20
(Twenty scene numbers
are tentatively allowed
for a symphonic opening
depicting rhythmically
the awakening of Paris,
working down to an intro-
duction of Maurice
Courteline (MAURICE
CHEVALIER) and including
two singing numbers, the
first about Paris and
its rhythm, sung by
Chevalier as he dresses,
and the second dialogue
number, "How Are You,"
taking him down the street
toward his shop. Maurice
is dressed roughly, pic-
turesquely, with sweater and
neckerschief. At the
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34) Joseph Horowitz, *"On my Way": The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin, and Porgy and Bess* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 53.

35) Ibid.

36) Ibid., 54, an excerpt of Mamoulian's amended script can be found in Horowitz (2013), 237–240.

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finish of the number,
DISSOLVE TO:)37)
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Given the technique's long history in live theater, it is highly unlikely that Mamoulian's theatrical "noise symphony" was the first of its kind. But his experience on the stage obviously played into his direction of *Love Me Tonight* and might also be the reason for the short description in the screenplay. The following examples demonstrate that the notation of these sound symphonies depended more on modes of production and the writers' experience within them. The variety of descriptions in the early sound years is also due to the transformation or crisis of the screenplay format in general.

Broadway Melody

The Sound Symphony itself is not just a transformation of a theatrical or musical gimmick. Film adds an important element: editing. Screenplays in which one can find such sound symphonies either explicitly note or imply shots and cuts and can therefore be seen as "blueprints" for these sequences. Sound symphonies on screen became possible with synchronized sound. The first screenplay in which I could find the device is *Broadway Melody* (USA 1929, Harry Beaumont). The screenplay is dated September 1928.

```
FOUR OR FIVE QUICK DISSOLVES

Getting over the idea of myriad sounds orchestrated into this
vast symphony.
Suggestions for these are:
CLOSEUP POLICEMAN's WHISTLE TRAFFIC SIGNAL
CLOSEUP SHOT TICKET SPECULATOR; BALLYHOOING
CLOSE SHOT BLIND FIDDLER WITH CUP, PLAYING
CLOSE SHOT NEWSBOY SCREAMING THROUGH THE CROWDS HEADLINES OF
TABLOID'S LATEST MURDER38)
```

This short description lists a number of visible sounds, written as quickly-cut close-ups. The term "symphony" is explicitly mentioned, as it is in many other (later) screenplays. The device is no longer a theatrical one; it is a filmic one that synchronizes image

37) Samuel Hoffenstein, Waldemar Young, and George Marion, Jr., *Love Me Tonight*, First White Script, April 19, 1932, Paramount, Paramount Pictures scripts, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, no page number. For a detailed analysis of the number as realized in the film, see Michael Slowik, *Defining Cinema: Rouben Mamoulian and Hollywood Film Style, 1929–1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 134.
Note: Screenplays are copyrighted, and it is not permitted to photograph or scan them in most archives. Therefore, I am unfortunately not able to provide any figures for these examples. However, I have tried to reconstruct the formatting as detailed as possible.

38) Edmond Goulding (Story), Sarah Y. Mason (Continuity): *The Broadway Melody*, September 18, 1928, Margret Herrick Library (Academy of Motion Pictures Art and Sciences), Special Collections.

and sound for the purpose of impressing the audience. It demonstrates that these (everyday) sounds can now also be heard in the cinema. Sound symphonies at the beginning of a film further functioned as a new form of overture during the first years of the sound film.

The screenplay of *Broadway Melody* documents the intention to include a Sound Symphony at the film's start, while the final film itself opens with an aerial view of Manhattan, and only two of the mentioned noises are actually heard (but not seen).

Meanwhile in Europe, sound symphonies, or at least comparable visual emphasizing of rhythm, can be seen and heard in René Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (France, April 1930) and *Le Million* (France, 1931), and Géza von Bolváry's *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* (*Zwei Herzen im ¾ Takt*, Germany, March 1930, screenplay Walter Reisch), among others. In December 1930, another film was released in Germany, for which Reisch had developed a Sound Symphony.

***Ein Herr auf Bestellung* (*A Gentleman for Hire*) (Germany 1930, Géza von Bolváry)**

The screenplay for *Ein Herr auf Bestellung* (*A Gentleman for Hire* a.k.a. *The Darling of Vienna*), a German musical comedy from 1930, was written by Walter Reisch, directed by Géza von Bolváry, and starring Willi Forst. The transition to sound started in Germany in 1929, a bit later than in the United States, but it was carried out in an equally swift manner. The film in question is an example of an early German sound film — now almost forgotten, but highly representative of the period's challenges and solutions.

Austrian actor-director Willi Forst plays a charismatic public speaker, hired to deliver speeches for any occasion, ranging from weddings to funerals, accompanied by the pianist Lillebill in a love story with a happy ending. The main plot revolves around Forst acting as the unseen voice for a professor with speech difficulties, offering a fresh take on the classic Cyrano de Bergerac tale.

Reisch's screenplay for *Ein Herr auf Bestellung* is 164 pages long, while the film runs only 85 minutes. This fact alone highlights how in the early years of sound cinema, screenwriters were experimenting with the new technology, seeking a format that could address its challenges.

Before the story even begins, the first line in the screenplay notes: "No orchestra is seen during the whole film."[39] The film was released in December 1930, and this note underscores that extra-diegetic film music was not yet established as a norm, and that a film employing non-diegetic music in this way was still a novelty in 1930s Germany.[40]

Rhythm as an organizing principle is emphasized in this script (and in other screenplays of the time). The terms "rhythm," "rhythmic," etc., can be found 11 times in Reisch's screenplay. The terms "syncopation," "syncopating," etc., 4 times. This quantitative evidence alone is reason enough to stress the importance of rhythm in screenplays of the early sound years.

39) Walter Reisch, *Ein Herr auf Bestellung*, Screenplay, without a year (1930) hold at Filmarchiv Austria, 2.
40) See also Michael Slowik, *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 180.

The role and function of rhythm in screenwriting becomes clearer in the following variation of the previously mentioned Sound Symphony. In this case, Reisch combines a song by the female lead character with an "animal symphony," emphasizing the end of each line in a kind of call-response structure:

```
(after each line the animals living in the kitchen are
syncopating Lillebil's singing:)
1st line: the woof woof of the poodle
2nd line: the meow of the cat
3rd line: the tweet of the canary
4th line: the cuckoo clock strikes
5th, 6th, 7th line without syncopation
8th line syncopated with the quack quack of the tree frog[41]
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Reisch created his first Sound Symphony ("Geräuschsymphonie") in his screenplay for *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* (1930). He used lifeless objects as sources of sound for this film, whereas in this case, animals are "singing," meaning that their typical noises are musicalized. In less than a year, the stand-alone Sound Symphony, the musicalization of noises, became part of a song; the novelty was still an attraction in its own right, but it became integrated into an otherwise conventional musical number.

The musical number is first constructed in the screenplay. The way in which it is written down on the pages of the script already implies the rhythm of the scene as well as the editing rhythm. "The animals are syncopating Lillebil's singing," writes Reisch in his screenplay, although "syncopating" is not the proper musical term here. Reisch frequently used musical terms very loosely, but what he intended in this case was that at the end of each line of (human) singing, there was a cut to a musicalized noise of an animal. As the screenplay implies, each animal had its close-up. The musicalization of the animal noises is designed to fit the rhythm of the song. "Syncopation" signifies a type of synchronization here. The screenplay suggests more than it explicitly states. Each line describing an animal's sound corresponds to a cut. Reisch describes an idea of how the scene should work, not a precise description of it. In a public lecture in 1936, he referred to these specifics of (his) screenwriting:

> The screenplay needs descriptions of situations. "A man is leaving a door, he rushes through a long corridor, the girl steps out into the corridor, her face expresses fear. […]" This is a purposeful description. What we actually read is: close-up, long shot, the camera moves, pans. trick included; numbers added. You see: This is what makes a film good or bad. Every film consists of 5-600 of such shots.[42]

41) Reisch, *Ein Herr auf Bestellung*, 85.

42) Walter Reisch, "Manuskript und Drehbuch (1936)," in *Walter Reisch: Film schreiben*, ed. Günther Krenn (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv Austria, 2004), 62. Translation CT, Original German: "Das Drehbuch braucht Situationsbeschreibungen. 'Der Mann verlässt eine Tür, er eilt auf den langen Gang, das Mädchen tritt aus einer Tür auf den Gang, ihr Gesicht drückz Entsetzen aus. […]' Das ist Zweckbeschreibung. Da ist zu lesen: Nah, Totale, Kamera fährt, schwenkt, Trick dabei; dabei Nummern. Sehen Sie: Das ist es was einen Film gut

What Reisch is trying to explain in this lecture is that screenplays include proposals for camera positions and movements as well as for editing, even if they are not explicitly written into it. The format of a script can also reveal such information.

The Great Waltz (USA 1938, Julien Duvivier)

In the United States, the so-called Sound Symphony did not disappear with the standardization of synchronized sound becoming the norm. Throughout the era of Classical Hollywood cinema, traces and elements of this device continue to appear in various films. European immigrants with their musical and theatrical experience and expertise played a crucial role in the genealogy and development of this device.

This influence is evident in the screenplay for the Johann Strauss Jr. biopic *The Great Waltz*, directed by Julien Duvivier and written by Walter Reisch, who shares screenwriting credits with Samuel Hoffenstein. The original story was provided by Gottfried Reinhardt, son of the famous Viennese theater director Max Reinhardt. The screenplay also credits John Meehan as co-writer, although he is not listed in the on-screen credits of the finished film. The European influence on the project is unmistakable.

At the center of the screenplay is an extraordinary musical number that builds on the tradition of rhythmizing sound — the device developed in the early days of sound film. While most of the screenplay is formatted in a single-column layout, this particular scene shifts into a two-column format. The left column, labeled "SOUND TRACK," is noticeably narrower, emphasizing the synchronization between visual action and musical or rhythmic sound design.

Johann Strauss Jr. takes a coach ride into the Vienna woods with opera singer Carla Donner.

127	CLOSE SHOT CARLA AND SCHANI
SOUND TRACK	
Singing of birds. Irregular rhythm of horse's hooves and carriage noise. Yodel in distance.	Both of them gaze out at the landscape morosely in opposite directions. They hear yodel, both look off in the same direction. CUT TO:[43]

The beginning of the sequence establishes the realistic sounds that soon become rhythmized. "Irregular rhythm" is in fact no rhythm at all, just the normal, irregular, realistic repetitions of the animals' noises. Rhythm explicitly mentioned here foreshadows the blurring of realistic sounds and music (organized sounds) in the following musical number. The sequence continues with the addition of a musical instrument embedded in the narrative setting: a diegetic flute.

oder schlecht macht. Jeder Film besteht aus 5-600 solcher Einstellungen."

43) Samuel Hoffenstein, John Meehan, and Walter Reisch, *The Great Waltz* (Los Angeles 1938, screenplay held at UCLA Arts Special Collections, Collection 73, Box F-461), 70.

127-A SOUND TRACK Duet of the Shepherds. Theme #1. Flute and English Horn. Bells of Sheep.	MOVING SHOT OF PANORAMA (idyllic country side) CAMERA PICKS UP shepherds and their herd.

The screenplay refers to "Theme #1," the first of the waltzes used by Strauss in this composition. As is typical of Strauss's work, the composition consists of a series of waltzes; in this case, four distinct waltz themes are used, with some being repeated. Reisch was most likely aware of this particular musical structure and responded to it within his notation of the musical number. He was known for working closely with composers — particularly Robert Stolz — when writing screenplays, and he often contributed lyrics for the films' songs. In the case of *The Great Waltz*, however, the original compositions were arranged and altered by composer Dimitri Tiomkin. I have no information regarding the nature of the collaboration between Reisch and Tiomkin.

The shift to a two-column format in the screenplay attempts to "synchronize" sound and image, with rhythm as the dominant element — explicitly mentioned in the screenplay itself:

Neighing of hrose. Horse's hoove louder, in 3/4 temp.[44]	The horse pricks up its ears and neighs.

The sounds of the Vienna woods — the animal's calls and the shepherd's music — form the prelude to the musical number. As in the Viennese film tradition, the motif of an animated, musical environment inspiring the composer appears here in its most explicit form.

Strauss imitates frog. Carla laughs. Strauss hums.	He imitates a frog in a funny way. She laughs. He looks at her. She looks away. He looks at her again and begins to hum a tune. At first he hums with assurance then He becomes uncertain as to the melody and hums slowly, hesitantly as if composing.

Birds, and even frogs, join the sonic landscape until Schani (Strauss) begins to whistle. He "imitates a frog," and only when Carla joins in — transforming the rhythmized and musicalized sounds of nature into refined, artistic singing — does the melody take shape. As the screenplay notes, she sings the "proper continuation" of the theme "in coloratura,"[45]

44) Ibid. (The typo "hrose" appears in the original text).
45) Ibid., 71.

prompting Schani to realize that he has found the inspiration for his next composition: "Yes, that's it. Schani sings."[46)]

The device of rhythmizing and musicalizing everyday sounds — in this case, the sounds of nature — was widely used in the early days of sound film, as discussed earlier. In this 1938 musical number, we still find clear traces of the Sound Symphony technique that Reisch had employed in earlier works, such as in *Two Hearts in Waltz Time* and *A Gentleman to Hire*. By this point, however, the musicalization of everyday sounds no longer functions as an attraction in and of itself, but has become an integrated component of the musical number. This sequence not only exemplifies the seamless blending of realistic sounds and music, dissolving from natural ambient sounds to artistic singing, but also reflects Reisch's deep familiarity with the structure of the waltz, upon which the entire number is built. He constructs the sequence directly around the musical form.

When Schani finally "ends the music like a conductor of an orchestra" (ibid.), Reisch inserts another *sync point* (in the sense used by Michel Chion),[47)] further emphasizing the synchronization of sound and image in the screenplay.

Strauss himself famously drew inspiration from natural sounds in his compositions, continuing a long-standing musical tradition of using nature as a creative source. The cinematic device of the Sound Symphony goes beyond this tradition in music and theater. It transforms the device into a "musical moment," to use Amy Herzog's term — an instance in which the conventional hierarchy of sound and image is inverted, and music takes the lead. In such moments, editing, camera movement, and even the physical movements of actors are guided by musical structure, rather than subordinating music to narrative progression.[48)]

Such musical moments can be found not only in finished films but can already be embedded in screenplays. Screenplays often do not merely suggest specific musical themes and compositions; they prescribe a specific relationship between music and image, anticipating musical dominance in the scene's audiovisual construction.

The sequence in question thus serves a dual purpose: it functions as the obligatory musical number in a composer biopic while also offering a cinematic solution for representing the act of composing a famous waltz, without resorting to the clichéd image of the solitary genius at his piano. Indeed, the screenplay deliberately subverts this trope with the note that Strauss appears "as if composing" when he finally finds the melody.

The number also shows Vienna as the "city of music," where the artist is deeply influenced and inspired by its natural and cultural surroundings. This portrayal stands in contrast to the National Socialist myth of the misunderstood, isolated genius. Here, the artist is shown as being in dialogue with his environment, not apart from it. The music itself — originally composed by Strauss but arranged by Dimitri Tiomkin and set to new lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein — epitomizes the transformation into a typical Hollywood musical number, visually and aurally dramatizing the creative process.

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46) Ibid.

47) See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 59.

48) Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference: Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7.

Shall We Dance (USA 1937, Mark Sandrich, screenplay by Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano)

The description of "Tales from the Vienna Woods" in Reisch's screenplay is noteworthy for its richness of details, especially at this point in history, when the Sound Symphony device at the start of the number — the musicalization of environmental sounds — had been in use for almost ten years. Around the same time, traces of the Sound Symphony can be found in American film musicals, as we can see in the screenplay for *Shall We Dance* by Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano.

The scene in question takes place on a ship and uses the ship's engines as the everyday noises that become rhythmized and that eventually dissolve into the musical number: George and Ira Gershwin's "Slap That Bass." Fred Astaire plays Russian ballet dancer Petrov, who falls in love with an American tap dancer (Ginger Rogers). The soundscape of this setting is established a few scenes before the actual musical number begins:

```
Throughout the following scenes can be heard the familiar sounds of
dock atmosphere: trucks rolling along, steamship WHISTLES, ad libs.
Of porters, and so forth.[49]
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A brief scene follows in which "the entire Ballet Company is practicing."[50] The screenplay constructs the dualism between the high art of ballet and the folk art and entertainment of Jazz and tap dance, typical for the American film musical.[51] The musical number in question takes place in the "ship's engine room."[52] The screenplay notes:

```
Over the scene can be heard improvised MUSIC. CAMERA PULLS BACK to
disclose the mammoth engines, which are clean, bright and shiny.[53]
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In the film, the music develops slowly from the sound and rhythm of these engines to a full song. A group of people of color

```
utilize various parts of the huge engine as musical instruments,
and now slap away rhythmically as they and Petrov vocalize:
`Slap that Bass`.[54]
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The noises are rhythmized to fit the Gershwin song; this musicalization of noise serves as a prelude and staged inspiration for the following number, intended to make it appear more natural. By 1937, the standards and conventions of a Hollywood sound screenplay

49) Allan Scott and Ernest Pagano, *Stepping Toes*, December 7, 1936, UCLA Arts Special Collection, Collection 73, Box 791, 26. (The working title for the film that was released as *Shall We Dance*).

50) Ibid., 34.

51) See also Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992).

52) Scott and Pagano, *Stepping Toes*, 31.

53) Ibid.

54) Ibid., 32.

were firmly established, especially if a unit was at work that had collaborated on successful film musicals before: screenwriter Allan Scott wrote *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936), and *Swing Time* (1936) among others, director Mark Sandrich made *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935) and *Follow the Fleet* (1936), and producer Pandro S. Berman was responsible for *Top Hat*, *Follow the Fleet* and *Swing Time*, all starring Fred Astaire. A seasoned creative team was at work on these films, and by the time *Shall We Dance* was written and produced, it is reasonable to assume that they had developed a working rapport that allowed them to collaborate efficiently without the need for extensive explanation.

The mentioned opposition between (European) high art and American popular forms takes center stage when the ballet dancer Petrov (Astaire) joins a group of black workers and musicians, marking a pivotal moment of cultural convergence and transformation.

```
CAMERA FOLLOWS Petrov around the large boiler room as he dances to
the sound of the musical machinery. As he approaches the various
whirling parts of the machine, his feet rap out a counterpart to
the beat of that particular machine. Around and around he goes —
faster and faster up a landing and down again, the ring of the iron
steps changing pitch. The shafts of one motor beat out a counter
tempo to the other motors. All these things Petrov takes advantage
of as he leads up to the spectacular climax.
FADE OUT[55]
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Hermes Pan, Astaire's choreographer in many films, remembers the inspiration for the number:

> Fred and I were walking on the lot one day and there happened to be a cement mixer. They were building something and there were all kinds of chugging rhythms, you known, construction noises. And we just started dancing against them — something dancers automatically do — all the way down the street. That became the basis for the number in the film.[56]

This anecdote might be part of a mythologizing and/or marketing strategy, or not, but it fits perfectly into the picture Hollywood films are constructing: artists take their inspiration from their environment, everything is music, just like in the discussed number in *The Great Waltz.*

The musical number "Slap that Bass" from *Shall We Dance* exemplifies the tendency for the musicalization and rhythmization of non-musical noises to become more refined and integrated only a few years after their initial use in sound films. Here, the device serves only as a point of departure (briefly revisited during the number), but no longer as the primary attraction.

55) Ibid., 33.

56) Joe Collura, "He Danced with Fred Astaire: Hermes Pan," in *Classic Images* 91, (January 1983), 10–12, quoted in John Francheschina, *Hermes Pan: The Man who Danced with Fred Astaire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87.

Conclusion

The rhythmization and musicalization of everyday noises have a long-standing tradition in theater and music. With the advent of synchronized sound, film transformed this device into a genuinely cinematic one. These "sound symphonies" were not merely sonic attractions; rather, they were combined with film's visual devices — particularly editing — to create sequences in which image and sound are synchronized through rhythm. In these scenes, rhythm forms the organizing principle, linking the auditory and visual elements into a cohesive filmic moment. Screenwriters sought to notate this combination of image and sound through various methods, most notably through the use of the two-column format. This format became a practical solution for the visual representation of the interplay of image and sound on the page of a screenplay — a solution that lasted relatively long, in any case longer than the general transition from the silent continuity script to the master scene script still in use today.

These sequences demonstrate how rhythm can function not only as a musical element, but also as a cinematographic quality — a way of organizing and synchronizing image and sound. As Lea Jacobs has shown, filmmakers in the early years of sound film actively sought ways to integrate these elements into a coherent formal system. These sequences are thus evidence for the growing importance of rhythm as a cinematic quality in sound film. The aim of this article has been to show the role and function of the screenplay in creating and shaping these sequences.

As we have seen, the notation of "sound symphonies" in screenplays varies depending on historical period, individual writers, and mode of production. In early examples such as *Broadway Melody*, *Two Hearts in Waltz Time*, and *A Gentleman for Hire*, the descriptions are highly detailed and suggest a high level of musical expertise. In the Hollywood musical *Shall We Dance*, by contrast, the descriptions are shorter and more efficient than in the other examples. This is mostly due to the specific mode of production, the Hollywood unit system,[57] in which long-standing creative teams worked with an implicit understanding of each other's methods. This stands in contrast to *The Great Waltz,* whose production team was largely composed of European émigrés, including Austrian Walter Reisch, French director Julien Duvivier, and Russian composer Dimitri Tiomkin. The extraordinary richness of musical details in this screenplay can be attributed in part to Reisch's knowledge and experience in music and theater, especially to his deep familiarity with the Viennese traditions of waltz and operetta. The European influence on the development of musical numbers in Hollywood film musicals and in the screenplays is unmistakable.

The Sound Symphony was a transnational phenomenon, appearing in films from Hollywood, France, Germany, and Austria. Even if some influences can be traced (director and Reisch-collaborator Willi Forst was a great admirer of René Clair), there is no evidence of direct, linear development from one Sound Symphony to another. Nonetheless, it is striking that some screenwriters use the same term — Sound Symphony, Geräuschsymphonie — to describe this device.

57) David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 320.

What can be observed is a gradual shift: the musicalization of everyday sounds, once a stand-alone attraction of early sound cinema, became integrated into broader musical numbers in later years.

The screenplays of these films offer valuable insights into both the transition to sound and the history of screenwriting. They reflect evolving attempts to develop a format adequate to the new technology, the mode of production, and the screenwriter's musical knowledge — all these influences can all be traced on the pages of these screenplays.

The screenplay as text is still rarely analyzed for its aesthetic features, and even more rarely for its "non-representational signs" (Dyer).[58] In focusing on these formal elements through the lens of the Sound Symphony, this article has sought to draw attention towards these qualities that are essential to the screenplay medium. The development of the Sound Symphony is just one case study that demonstrates the centrality of rhythm in screenwriting — not simply as a musical concept, but as a formal, cinematic principle.

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