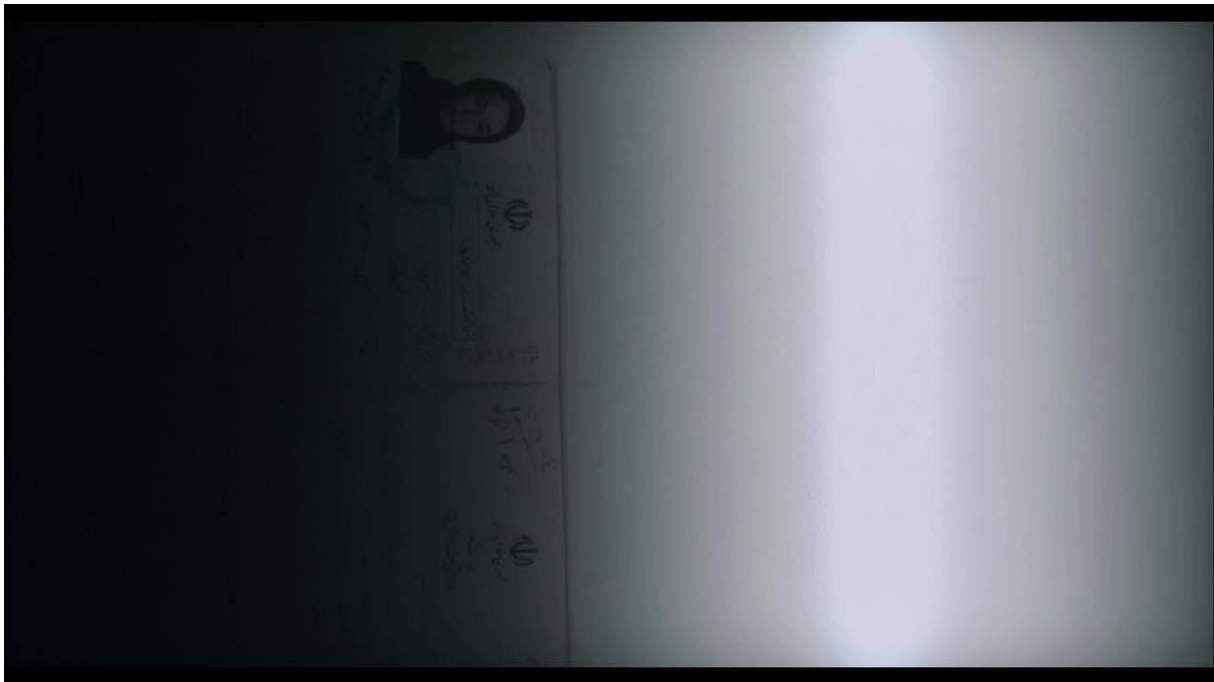


A Reading in the Machine

Sadjad Qolami



Sadjad Qolami's video essay utilizes the opening credits of *A Separation* (2011), featuring a photocopy machine in operation, as a metaphor for the cinematic apparatus – a machine generating copies of reality, a machine that indifferently unwinds no matter how harsh the depicted event is. Watch the video essay here: <https://flowcasts.uni-hannover.de/nodes/gbXgM>.

Creator's Statement

My relatively concise piece was crafted as an assignment on the exploration of voiceover within the context of a Videographic Criticism workshop at Leibniz University Hannover. We were supposed to choose a film at the beginning of the workshop and not change it for different assignments. When creating a PechaKucha based on my chosen film, *A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011), I initially selected the sound from the opening credits. However, in my final revision of the PechaKucha, I decided to use another part of the soundtrack. When the time came for a voiceover assignment, I recalled the eerie sound of the copy machine that had haunted me ever since. I chose to record a voiceover on that particular section.

The inspiration for my reading stemmed from my prior knowledge of Michel Chion's work on film sound. Within his influential work *Audio-Vision*, Chion introduces the concepts of empathetic and anempathetic sound, providing profound insights into the dynamic interplay

between music and emotion within the realm of cinema. According to his viewpoint, music in film has the capacity to evoke particular emotions in relation to the depicted situation on the screen through two distinctive avenues.

Empathetic musical compositions directly engage with the emotions of the scene, aligning with elements such as rhythm, tone, and phrasing to contribute to the overall atmosphere. Coined by Chion as “empathetic music,” this terminology is inspired by empathy, effectively evoking shared emotional experiences within the audience. In contrast, anempathetic music, marked by conspicuous indifference, progresses steadily, forming a backdrop of “indifference” against the scene. Instead of freezing emotion, this musical expression intensifies it, inscribing it onto a cosmic background. Chion characterizes it “anempathetic,” embodied in cinema through various elements such as player pianos and dance bands, cleverly reinforcing emotions while pretending not to notice.

Ultimately, the anempathetic effect is predominantly associated with music, but Chion extends its reach to noise as well. In specific scenes, following the death of a character, a sonic process may persist – an echoing noise of a machine, the hum of a fan, or the ambient sound of a running shower – as if oblivious to the tragic event. Iconic examples of this technique include Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), specifically the iconic shower scene, and Antonioni’s *The Passenger* (1975), where the persistent sound of an electric fan plays a crucial role. In these instances, anempathetic noise operates to further intensify the emotional impact by challenging conventional expectations and emphasizing the mechanical essence of cinema. In cinema, the prominence of anempathetic effects is attributed to the medium’s essence, intimately connected to its mechanical nature. Chion contends that films, propelled by the indifferent and automatic unwinding of projection, create simulacra of movement and life. While this mechanical essence is hidden with the help of life-like images and synchronized sound and music, anempathetic sound, in particular, unveils the mechanical nature of cinema, exposing its robotic face.

Author Biography

Sadjad Qolami (he/him) is a master’s student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover in Germany. He holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Guilan University and a master’s degree in Cinema from Tehran University of Art, both located in Iran. His master’s thesis explored the aesthetics of off-screen space within the films of Michael Haneke. He has translated books into Farsi, including *Vampyr* written by David Rudkin: a monograph on Carl Theodor Dreyer’s horror masterpiece. His focused interests include film studies, Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis, and modern philosophy. He is currently captivated by the manifestations of horror and disgust: ghosts, monsters, djins, and specters. His final project in the Videographic Criticism Workshop at Leibniz University Hannover, “Separating Windows,” was shortlisted for the final round in Adelio Ferrero Festival (2023).

Works Cited

A Separation, Directed by Asghar Farhadi, Filmiran, 2011.

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman, foreword by Walter Murch, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 8-9.