

The Musical Years: 1920–2020, VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine, Montréal

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The Musical Years: 1920–2020,
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Montréal, 2020.

Photos : Michel Brunelle

The Musical Years: 1920–2020

At a moment when going to the movies is difficult or altogether impossible, *The Musical Years: 1920–2020* at VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine in Montréal offers a unique glimpse into the art of experimental filmmaking. With their perpetual flickering of light and colour, the gallery's exhibition spaces emulate a movie theatre dedicated to exploring the relationship between image and sound. When the terms "musical" and "cinema" are presented together, one might think of the dazzling extravaganzas produced by the wizards of Hollywood during the so-called Golden Age of American filmmaking, but that is not the focus of this exhibition. Rather, *The Musical Years* showcases innovations in audiovisual production, making it possible for viewers to trace the evolution of music's relationship to moving images, and vice versa. To do this, a broad selection of films produced over the last century are displayed alongside contemporary installations that rethink the tangled histories of cinema and sound. The exhibition centralizes the role of the experimental filmmaker, featuring historical works by Ralph Steiner (1899–1986), Oskar Fischinger (1900–1967), and René Jodoin (1920–2015), as well as recent examples by Martin Arnold and Michaela Grill.

Throughout the gallery-turned-screening room, headphones are required to focus on each work's fundamental musical accompaniment. Given the thesis of *The Musical Years*, this is a wise curatorial decision. Upon entering the exhibition, rapidly flashing colours of Jodoin's animation *Rectangle et rectangles* (1984) emit from the first of many screens. The first gallery is separated with dividing walls, each one presenting a different experimental film by the pioneers of the field. The relative openness of the space allows viewers to interact with the films in ways that a conventional theatre would not. For example, multiple projections may be watched simultaneously, prompting a comparative reading

of the works. When removing headphones in this gallery, the sonic elements of the exhibition are silenced. As a result, the viewer is confronted with a dissonant flurry of moving images devoid of any soundtrack, demonstrating the absolute necessity of sound in the exhibition.

With too many works to adequately describe here, *The Musical Years* is a reminder of cinema's affinities with other artforms. As Marie J. Jean writes in the curatorial essay, the relationships between image and sound are directly linked to the interests of abstract painters such as Wassily Kandinsky, whose "coloured hearing" (a form of synaesthesia) allowed him to distinguish "chromatic sensations when he heard sounds, associating, for example, yellow with the brassy blast of the trumpet." This phenomenon is observed in Oskar Fischinger's *An Optical Poem* (1938), in which multicoloured shapes dance along to the orchestrations in Franz Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2" (1847). In order to achieve this effect, Fischinger cut pieces of coloured paper and photographed them in stop-motion. It is worth noting that *An Optical Poem* was co-produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the Hollywood studio that produced many of those aforementioned musical spectacles during the same period. Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism are also represented in the selected experimental films. Filmmakers associated with these movements, such as Hans Richter and Ralph Steiner, became increasingly interested in live-action subjects and visual effects. In *Filmstudie* (1926), Richter puts geometric forms in dialogue with figurative objects, such as human faces, flocks of birds, and disembodied eyeballs. Paired with Darius Milhaud's ballet, "La création du monde Op. 81a" (1922–23) and overlaid with sounds of sirens, engines, and bird calls, *Filmstudie* is an unsettling dive into the psyche. By contrast, Steiner's *Mechanical Principles* (1930) prioritizes live-action subjects. Close-up shots of moving gears, pistons,



and other mechanical objects are perfectly choreographed to the score for strings by Eric Beheim in an homage to the machine age and modern engineering. The relational power dynamics between sound and image are solidified in the two entirely different tones expressed in these works by Richter and Steiner.

Passage à l'acte (1993) by Austrian filmmaker Martin Arnold is the most recent work in this space that is otherwise comprised of experimental films from earlier in the twentieth century. The largest projection so far, Arnold's work is also the most reminiscent of a cinema screen, complete with a place to sit and watch. *Passage à l'acte* reuses several seconds of footage from a rather banal breakfast scene in *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962) to create a remixed twelve-minute sequence. Individual frames are frozen and replayed, feeling more like a chain of technical glitches than a narrative film. Unlike the works considered thus far, Arnold adheres to the film's original audio, with split-seconds of sound—speech, shuffling of dishes, and knocking doors—mutating into staccato beats that are both fascinating and frustrating.

Created exclusively for this exhibition, *les marges du silence / ghosts along the way* (2020) by Austrian filmmaker Michaela Grill and Canadian musician Sophie Trudeau provides a proper finale to the exhibition. Situated within broader practices of experimental filmmaking from the 1990s, this audiovisual installation validates the seemingly endless possibilities afforded by films that have recently entered the public domain. Paying tribute to the silent era, the installation is comprised of one large wall projection, a two-by-two stack of video monitors, and a standalone screen that flips through intertitles (title cards) from silent films. In the montage, the screens simultaneously show scenes of dancing, romance, and action, interspersed with memorable figures such as Charlie Chaplin, Norma Shearer, and Rudolph Valentino.

In its generous survey, *The Musical Years* reaffirms the enduring links not only between sound and image, but between cinema and parallel artforms. There is always a feeling of surprise when films—even of the experimental form—are displayed in galleries. By virtue of its thoughtful curation, *The Musical Years* provides a convincing display of sight and sound to anyone who is still unsure of the medium's role within art institutions.

Austin Henderson

**VOX, centre de l'image
contemporaine, Montréal**

Curated by Marie J. Jean
August 18—October 31, 2020

Michaela Grill & Sophie Trudeau

† *les marges du silence / ghosts along the way*, installation view, VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine, Montréal, 2020.

Photo : Michel Brunelle