Chance Encounters: serendipity and the use of music in the films of Jean Cocteau and Harry Smith

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Abstract

The exploration of 'chance' as part of the creative process emerged as an increasingly important element in art practice during the twentieth century. It can be regarded as one of many approaches by which the avant-garde expressed its desire to create new forms in opposition to the aesthetic and conceptual values of the past. Film was not immune to this interest in chance procedures. This article focuses on notions of chance in the context of exploring the relationship between film image and music. More specifically, I discuss Jean Cocteau's method of 'accidental synchronisation' and Harry Smith's notion of 'automatic synchronisation', distinctive approaches to the use of music with film predicated on chance procedures. These methods can be viewed in terms of a longer history of experiments with sound, images and colour, that is, as precursors of the light-shows and multi-media events of the 1960s and other more contemporary media forms. Cocteau and Smith's experiments open up important questions about the processes by which audiences perceive and make sense of music in relation to film.

We must admit that there is something to be said for the immense importance of chance. An incalculable amount of human effort is directed to combating and restricting the nuisance or danger represented by chance. Theoretical considerations of cause and effect often look pale and dusty in comparison to the practical results of chance. (C. Jung 1949)

It is difficult to isolate the operation of chance from planned action, as all creativity can be seen as a train of interactions and oscillations between conscious acts and the multitudes of unforeseen possibilities they unleash and feed back to the deliberative process. Yet, the serendipitous, the aleatory, the chance occurrence, have always been a factor in creative practice. An active consideration of chance in the creative process is not a new idea. Leonardo da Vinci suggested that an intent consideration of marks and blotches on the walls was a good means of sparking visual ideas. However, it was in the twentieth century that the role of chance became more central to artistic practice, at least in the West. This can be seen early in the century, in the playful juxtapositions of Dadaist photomontage and collages. Jean Arp's *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance),* dated 1916–17*,* makes explicit the use of chance procedures, produced, in this case, by dropping torn paper fragments on to a paper sheet and fixing them where they fell. The Surrealists' exploration of 'automatic' drawing and writing and the collaborative creativity of the 'exquisite corpse', were developed as means to overcome the controlling, rationalising self and to open up chance occurrences and unlikely juxtapositions that may reveal the workings of the subconscious mind.
In music composition, John Cage's great conceptual leap forward, if significant for broadening the material base of composition to include the sounds of the everyday world, is also founded on his development of 'indeterminacy' as an approach to creativity – a methodology designed to bypass the structuring ego of the artist and open up chance occurrences in the compositional method. Cage's approach was heavily influenced by his study of Eastern religions and philosophies, particularly of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. Cage used the exploration of chance as the basis for his practice for much of his career. This manifested itself in a number of different ways. For example, with *Music of Changes* (1951) Cage made choices on the treatment of the material by consulting the

Chinese oracular book the *I Ching*; the composition of *Music for Piano* (1952–6) was based on responses to imperfections in the manuscript paper, while for *Variations I–III and VI* (1958–67) he made his decisions on the structure of the work on the random superimposition of shapes printed onto perspex (Nyman 1999). Other composers followed suit, developing their own 'aleatory' or 'indeterminate' approaches to allow chance elements to enter composition or performance, as in the use of 'graphic scores' or scores reduced to sets of instructions. The objective was to initiate more open-ended processes to generate 'new' compositional and performance practices – music that re-configured the relationship between composer, text, performers and audiences.

Cage's influence went beyond music composition and was an important conceptual and personal influence on a wide range of practitioners. A number of significant individuals from art practices other than music attended Cage's experimental composition classes at the New School for Social Research in New York City from 1957 to 1959. Notable students were Alan Kaprow, a central force in developing the art happening, and George Brecht and Dick Higgins, early members of the Fluxus art movement. Fluxus, a loose international group of artists formed in the late 1950s, put chance processes at the heart of their activities. Finally, Jazz, in its various forms, was another influence stimulating this interest in chance procedures and more open structures. Jazz placed improvisation as a central aspect of both its methodology and appeal, therefore bringing elements of chance into the heart of western popular music and influencing art music practices.

Why this impulse should emerge with such force in twentieth century art is of course a complex issue. Few would dispute, however, that it is closely linked to the modernist drive for new forms and for new methods to achieve them. The idea of chance was a potent weapon in the avant-garde's challenge to the cultural norms and ideologies of representation prevailing at the time or, in more extreme manifestations, to western notions of rational thought. It was a discernable factor in Dadaism and Surrealism, both of which can also be seen as responses to a supposedly rationalist order that had allowed, or even triggered, the cataclysm of World War I. In the exploration of psychoanalysis, eastern religious practices or occult philosophies, artists believed they had found the means to overcome the controlling ego, as well as to tap down into what seemed to them

more profound elemental or mystical energies to unleash the radical potential of the unforeseen. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that in the narratives of the avant-garde many of these methods of 'transcending the self' became reconstituted as an artist's mark of authorship.

As chance became an element of interest for the avant-garde in visual art, music and performance, neither film nor, what specifically interests me here, the combination of film with sound and music was immune. Although working in very different film forms, Jean Cocteau and Harry Smith developed approaches for using music with their films that, in their different ways, explored chance interactions. I want to examine their individual practices and the ways by which they might be understood most productively. What I hope will become apparent is that, as well as tapping into the currents described above, by exploring the principles by which audiences make sense of the relationship between sound and the moving image, Cocteau's and Smith's practices were in many ways prescient of a number of later developments in audio-visual media.

As an artist, writer and film-maker, Jean Cocteau often acknowledged serendipity as an active force in the creative process. Speaking about the cinema in 1919, a decade before venturing into film production, Cocteau recognized the many potentials of the medium and called for 'disinterested artists to exploit perspective, slow motion, fast motion, an unknown world onto which chance often opens the door' (Cocteau quoted in Abel 1988a: 173). For his first film *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), Cocteau commissioned composer Georges Auric to provide the score. Auric had been a member of 'Les Six', the group of young musicians Cocteau had gathered around him after World War I, and he had collaborated with Cocteau on a number of earlier projects. He would also work on all of the poet's film works. Auric was asked to create music for various sequences of *Le Sang d'un poète*. Cocteau then reorganised the music by placing it with different sequences to those Auric had worked with during composition. As Cocteau stated, '[I] shifted the musical sequences, which were too close to the images, in order to obtain accidental synchronisation' (Cocteau 1972:129). Cocteau employed an even more extreme example of this method of 'accidental synchronisation' in his 1946 ballet *Le Jeune homme et la*

mort. Cocteau's collaborator, Roland Petit, originally choreographed the ballet to jazz music, but just before the premiere Cocteau switched the music to a Bach passacaglia.

 In *Le Sang d'un poète,* Cocteau approaches Auric's music as just another element in the overall sound design. The music, Cocteau's stylised vocal delivery and the sound effects – some unrelated to the images (e.g. engine noises as the camera pans wealthy patrons in a theatrical box) – or sometimes occurring slightly out of synch with the images, are all placed to create surprising and unforeseen relationships with each other and the images. In his recent study of Cocteau's film works, James Williams (2006) quotes from a letter Cocteau sent his mother, in which he wrote that he wanted to create a 'miniscule ziz-zags of words and music' (Williams 2006: 47). For Williams, the overall effect of Cocteau's placement of the music is that '[b]y virtue of being asynchronised and syncopated, of course, Auric's music becomes even more prominent and can assume the status of a sudden momentous event' (Williams 2006: 47). Possessed of its own dramatic priorities and intensities, the music, especially in the opening episode, is suggestive of a parallel narrative space of which it is the only discernable element. As well as audio jump cuts, there are several music synchs on action, although it remains to be seen whether or not these were Auric's initial musical settings. The overall effect is a heightened sense of fragmentation and unease furthering Cocteau's aims for the film as an evocation of the poetic imagination.

Cocteau continued with this method, with some variation, on his *La Belle et la bête* (1946). Working again with Georges Auric, Cocteau chose not to listen to the music until it was finished. He instructed Auric not to seek too close an association between images and music, which, he considered, 'will only be brought about by the grace of God' (Cocteau 1972: 129). As he watched the music played back with the images in the recording studio at Maison de la Chimie, he observed:

> What's so astonishing for me, as… I watch the amalgam of music and images, is the accidental synchronisation whose charm can be ruined if the conductor is ahead or behind by half a second. Sometimes it seizes the image and lifts it up, sometimes it smothers it. What I must do is to make notes at the rehearsals and reproduce the accidents by design. (Cocteau 1972:129)

Although he avoided the more drastic decoupling of the music from its intended sequences, as he had done in *Le Sang d'un poète*, Cocteau nevertheless wanted to direct these to create a counterpoint between the two elements in order to 'give positive emphasis to these creative syncopations which jolt awake the imagination' (Cocteau 1972:129). Williams says of this practice: '[t]he factor of chance is again offered by Cocteau as a creative stand against the rules and mastery of the profession' (Williams 2006: 69). While this approach might be partly motivated as a wilful stand against the 'profession', it can be better understood as an aesthetic position (within the profession), that is to say, within the tradition of the counterpoint or contrapuntal theory of film sound/music; a position that, in the late 1920s, was being established in the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and René Clair (Weis and Belton 1985). These directors questioned the value of the sound film in relation to synched voice, insisting instead on an autonomy and/or equality of the image and the audio element. As James Buhler suggests,

> [i]n actuality, synchronisation and counterpoint are ideal types only rarely encountered in pure form. Synchronised sound, if clearly a guiding norm, is hardly ever an absolute in classic cinema, even for dialogue. Like the off screen look, off screen sound, expands the diegetic world beyond the edges of the screen, and thus hearing what was not seen is an important means of motivating film action. (Buhler 2001: 46)

But, it is perhaps the more self-consciously avant-garde film-makers who, for either political and/or aesthetic reasons, have more often leaned to the contrapuntal end of the spectrum. Beyond the question of Cocteau's preoccupations and influences, it cannot be ruled out that the poet was aware of these debates. What is certain is that Cocteau's serendipitous approach to film sound matches his improvisatory approach to image construction, witness the many examples, in his writings, of scenes coming together from unforeseen occurrences during the production process. Speaking before a screening of *Le Sang d' un poète* at the Vieux-Colombier cinema on 20 January 1932, Cocteau told the audience:

> When I was working, let me say again, I wasn't thinking of anything, and this is why one must let the film act like Auric's noble accompanying music. Music gives nameless nourishment to our emotions and memories, and if each of you

find your own personal meaning in this film, then I will have achieved my ambition. (quoted in Abel 1988b: 92)[i]

This statement indicates Cocteau's willingness to lose some sense of control within the production process, and his openness to the 'unforeseen' extended to the way his film might be received. In this regard music, being more readily accommodating of a range of personal responses, might be the model for a more open mode of reception for the film itself. Whatever the level of coherence Cocteau had developed in terms of a methodology of chance in relation to sound and music, *Le Sang d'un poète*, in particular, was early enough in the sound film's evolution to be seen by an inveterate experimenter like Cocteau as presenting another dramatic and affective element to play with – an element too intriguing and potent to be used in a self-evident manner. As he expressed in a letter to Auric during the sound editing of *Le Sang d'un poète*, 'it is necessary to relish this work, to mingle with it until hearing it becomes difficult. In rendering the film unplayable, un-exploitable, one will render it sacred' (quoted in Caizergues 1999:120, trans by author).[ii] For Cocteau, 'accidental synchronisation' was part of a battery of effects he was happy to let loose or rein-in as the situation demanded so as to stretch the boundaries of both the medium and the audience, and to transmit his particular vision of what film can do and be.

While producing work of a very different nature to Jean Cocteau's, Harry Smith also explored the possibilities of chance in relation to the combinations of music and image. Harry Smith was a film-maker, artist, anthropologist and musicologist with a long-term interest in alchemy and the occult. On occasions he even claimed to be the illegitimate son of Aleister Crowley. From the 1940s to the 1960s (the exact dates of his films are not always clear), Smith produced a series of complex abstract animated films that used a number of direct film techniques, such as hand painting, batik and stencils, as well as animating found images gleaned from books and magazines. If these films have received a fair amount of attention in relation to their visual dynamism and development of animation techniques, much less has been written about the use of music to accompany his films. For Smith, music was an important element in relation to both the creation of his films and to how music might be utilized to create a changing framework for how

they might be experienced. He proposed a method for the use of music to accompany his early, ostensibly silent, films that he later named 'automatic synchronization'. This method essentially consisted of taking any music, run it next to any of his films and the rhythms of the images and the music would 'automatically' sync-up. Although seemingly the use of 'automatic' here refers to the idea that music will 'always' synch-up with his films, I would argue that the term also refers to the idea of 'automation' as used by the surrealists: that chance procedures will bypass the controlling ego to connect with more elemental processes (I return to this point later).

The film writer Fred Camper (1999) describes a seminar Harry Smith gave in 1972 where he explained his concept of 'automatic synchronization'. After inducing everyone present to smoke marijuana in order to establish a suitable ambience, Smith picks on Camper who is in the audience. Camper takes up the story:

> At one point he explained automatic synchronization, and, preparing to show one of his films to demonstrate it, he pointed at me, as I was sitting on the floor near a stack of records, and said, 'Hey, you, pick a record, any record.' Without looking (it's to my eternal regret that I didn't look) I passed the first record on the stack up to him. He looked at it and said, 'You idiot, not *that* record.' I handed another record up to him, and he looked at it, and said, 'You moron, not *that* record!' Finally the third record was acceptable, and he played it while showing a film he was working on. I remained, and still remain, unconvinced of the virtue of this procedure. (Camper 1999: 1)

Apart from giving an idea of Smith's particular sense of humour, this anecdote suggests that the procedure did involve an element of selection. For Camper, and others, the major part of the problem with this method was that Smith authorized the release of his *Early Abstractions* with a soundtrack drawn from *Meet the Beatles*, the Beatles' first album, as released in the United States in 1964 on Capitol Records. As Camper explains, 'the rhythms of the imagery are incredibly complex, polyphonic really, and the sound tends to slave certain rhythms to it, while effacing or obliterating others. It makes films that are very profound seem like happy visual accompaniment to the songs' (Camper 1999: 1). This marriage of music and image is not helped by the lyrical content. Any lyric forms an additional semantic level that demands a certain level of engagement. Whatever their later developments and impact on popular music, at this time the Beatles' lyrics worked

the common romantic vein of most contemporary pop music. Tracks such as 'Please, Please Me' and 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' contained lyrics that are unlikely to enhance the experience of Smith's dense and complex imagery with its hermetic influences and symbolism. There is an increased incongruity noticeable with the introduction of figurative elements with occult significance in *Film No. 10* and the slower and more overtly romantic song 'Till There Was You'. The apparent overall randomness of the exercise is compounded by the fact that, after initial synching of start points, the tracks just run over the films: their individual distinctiveness to be subsumed beneath the linear trajectory of the album.

P. Adams Sitney (1979) suggests that this seemingly casual choice of music was a deliberate gesture intended to obscure the considerable achievements of Smith's animation work by merely updating the soundtrack. Smith was capable of being self-destructive as well as careless in relation to his work. Many pieces were destroyed or went missing over the years. He was also a great mythologiser of his own personal and creative history. In interviews, he appears to have a highly mischievous sense of humour, steering people off the track and into all sorts of engaging, esoteric terrains. Two stories circulate on the choice of *Meet the Beatles*. One suggests that Smith dispatched fellow film-maker Jonas Mekas to buy something 'of-the-minute' to accompany the release. Once at the record store, Mekas was informed that *Meet the Beatles* was the most popular new album. A more authoritative account comes from Smith's 'spiritual wife', Rosebud Feliu-Pettet. She relates that Smith used this particular music due to her insistence. As a dedicated fan of the Beatles she reasoned with Smith that '"It's got to be the Beatles. You're the highest art form that exists in this animated technique. And the Beatles are, of course, the greatest music in the world. So you belong together." So we tried it and it worked perfectly; so perfectly that the music was used forever after' (quoted in Igliori 1996:103). This apparent indifference as to the musical element belies the fact that Smith was highly knowledgeable of a range of musical practices. Smith received various honours for his musicological work and his *Anthology of American Folk Music*, originally released in 1952 on the Folkways label as a six-album compilation, is regarded as a catalyst for the folk revival in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and is still

highly influential. His later films, such as *No 11* and *No 12,* were considered to have a highly accomplished use of soundtrack (Sitney 1979).

To take a generous reading of Smith's choice, this was also a time of an increasing momentum in pop music, both as a musical genre and as the most vivid expression of a youth-oriented consumer culture. This culture, powerfully exemplified by the Beatles, was being actively engaged with and harnessed by artists, most explicitly, of course, in Pop Art. Smith's own engagement with pop music extended to producing satirical folk-rock band The Fugs' first album in 1965. A reel-to-reel of their music apparently accompanied *Early Abstractions* before the production of the optical print with the *Meet The Beatles* soundtrack (Igliori 1996).

Whatever the real intentions or factors behind the choice of *Meet the Beatles* to accompany the release of *Early Abstractions,* there are many recollections which indicate that Smith felt his films should be placed with contemporary music whenever possible. These screenings utilized a wide range of music, both live and recorded. In particular bebop jazz records and non-western music, the more fluid and complex cross-rhythms of which were perhaps better suited to the intricate visual rhythms of Smith's films. As with many other things in Harry Smith's life, there are contradictory stories of the genesis of his films in relation to musical soundtracks. As he relates in an interview with Mary Hill in *Film Culture*, his first three films of *Early Abstractions* were made to be silent:

> Those films were all made as silent films. They were basically derived from the heartbeat and the respiration which are, roughly,…72 times… a minute, and you expire about 13 times a minute. You see, those are important Cabalistic numbers – 13 is half of 26 – so I had taken those two basic rhythms….and interlocked them in certain ways. (Hill 1972: 1)

This, however, is a later recollection. In an earlier interview with Sitney in 1965, Smith indicated that he had an epiphany on the potentialities of sound and image connectivity whilst painting to a Dizzy Gillespie record. He produced paintings that were representations, often note for note, of jazz tracks such as Gillespie's 'Manteca' [iii]. As Smith recalls, 'I had a really great illumination the first time I heard Dizzy Gillespie play. I had gone there very high and literally saw all kinds of colour flashes. It was at that point that I realised music could be put to my films' (Sitney 1979: 242). Sitney states that Smith claimed to have cut down *Film No. 2* from over thirty minutes to synchronize the

film with Gillespie's track 'Gacho Guero', even if neither the original longer version nor a synchronised print appear to have survived. Although the jazz connection is still central, William Moritz (2001) recounts a different story again: 'Harry told me that he was jazz-crazy at that time, particularly for Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk, and insisted that he had synchronized the first three painted films to jazz performances by Dizzy Gillespie: Guarachi Guaro, Algo Bueno and Manteca' (Moritz 2001:1). Moritz also states that fellow film-maker Hy Hirsh had recorded live performances of Gillespie's band [iv] performing these three pieces and had given the tapes to Smith. Smith then painstakingly synchronized the images to these recorded tapes. However, he was not able to afford the cost of transferring the tape to an optical soundtrack, nor of producing sound release prints. On 12 May 1950, as part of the Art in Cinema programme at the San Francisco Museum of Art, there was a screening of what was then announced as the premiere of four hand-painted films by Harry Smith. They were titled *Strange Dream, Message from the Sun, Interwoven* and *Circular Tensions* – titles which the Harry Smith Archive takes to refer to *Films Nos. 1, 2, 3* and *5*, although they also suggest that the titles sometimes shifted in relation to the films. The programme noted that each one of the hundreds of painted film frames were to be considered a separate work of art. Bereft of sound prints, on this occasion the films were accompanied by a live jazz band.[v] In a letter to Arthur Knight, Art and Cinema organiser Frank Stauffacher wrote that he considered the show to be a highlight of the May series and that 'the event made notice and even a picture in Downbeat Magazine' (quoted in MacDonald 2006: 227). The Programme announcement for the event describes the screening as:

> Five Instruments with an Optical Solo. The film by Harry Smith, will serve as the sixth instrument in a be-bop jam session to consist of an expert group in person, on the piano, cornet, valve-trombone, bass and drums. This is the first presentation anywhere of a performance in which the optical images will be tried, not as visualization of the music, but as a basis for its departure.
>
> (MacDonald 2006: 215)

Whether this was the 'first presentation anywhere' of this particular approach remains to be seen, but it was definitely an early manifestation of the mixing of film and improvised music as a singular event – an aesthetic approach that became an important element of experimental cinema practice and multi-media performances in the 1960s and beyond (I

return to this point below). A little over a year later, at the same venue and sharing the bill with Maya Deren, Smith presented four of his '3-Dimensional' films. This time they were projected both with 'a synchronised soundtrack of Balinese, Hopi and Yoruba music, and also accompanied by modern instrumentalists and a vocalist improvising directly from the visual stimuli' (MacDonald 2006: 237). Smith appears to have 'synchronised' the music by playing tapes or records simultaneously with the films, as there seems to be no records of optical prints produced using these accompaniments. Whether it was creative intentionality or financial circumstances (or both) that lead to his early films being silent, they indicate that, from an early stage in his work, Smith was clearly open as to the musical accompaniment he would sanction for screenings – this long before he advocated 'automatic synchronisation', as he did at the presentation Camper attended in 1972. He chose to rely on this exploratory method to the end of his life, as witnessed in the classes Smith taught at the Naropa Institute between 1988 and 1991. As Rami Singh reminisces, '[i]n Harry's alchemy class of 1989 we collected many different types of music, from Enrico Caruso to The Butthole Surfers to Monk and Mingus and played them to *Early Abstractions* over and over again. Each time it seemed the music was made to correspond directly, note for note with each frame: and that was just the point' (Singh 1972:14). There are recordings of some of these lectures[vi] where Smith can be heard rummaging through boxes of records, playing sections, finding material he approves of to play with his films, commenting, looking afresh at his films as they are given new nuances and inflections with each new combination of music. Given his deep interest in hermetic philosophies and alchemy, Harry Smith was perhaps attracted to the seemingly 'magical' properties of bringing two unrelated elements together; each new musical accompaniment unleashing new elements, a catalyst for the images to be rendered afresh on each viewing. Through his friendship with the poet Allen Ginsburg, Smith knew about Burroughs reworking of the surrealists' 'exquisite corpse' method to develop the 'cut-up technique' (Sitney 1971), and Smith himself explored a similar process of 'automation', using file cards to produce the narrative order for the images in *Film No. 12* (ca. 1957–62). He indicated to Sitney that he considered the possibility that there may be some 'hidden hand' leading this process. Smith's knowledge of 'automation' in this sense might be seen as giving a wider definition to his use of the

term 'automatic synchronisation': that there was a more profound process of exploration at work for Smith and that the chance synchronisations he observed were more than just a quirk of perception.

If these were the practice and motivations of Cocteau and Smith in utilising chance, how can we best analyse and understand what is being revealed in their work? Beyond their personal nature, which elements of their approaches may have a wider application? Michel Chion (1994) outlines a number of perspectives that are useful for reflecting on the use of chance procedures by both Cocteau and Smith. Chion describes an educational exercise that many of us are likely to have encountered or used in various contexts. He dubs it the 'forced marriage', and it consists of playing a selection of music alongside a visual sequence. Chion argues that this process illustrates a range of phenomena in relation to sound-image association: 'by observing the kinds of music the image "resists" and the kind of music cues it yields to, we begin to see the image in all its potential signification and expression' (Chion 1994: 189). Through this exercise we become 'conscious of the fundamental strangeness of the audiovisual relationship: we become aware of the incompatible character of these elements called sound and images' (Chion 1994: 189). This line of argument can be straightforwardly sustained in relation to Cocteau's method, given that Cocteau deliberately teased out points of resistance and yielding for his own aesthetic ends. But in Smith's case, the matter is less straightforward because Smith effectively attempted to prove the opposite – namely, that through the deliberate mixing of different music with his films an inherent compatibility between the two elements could be brought to the surface. We could almost consider Harry Smith's 'automatic synchronization' method as a long-term 'forced marriage' exercise with his own body of work – utilizing a wide range of music constantly to reassess the signification and potentialities of his imagery. Second, however non-naturalistic the intentions of both film-makers, the relationship between music and photographic representation in Cocteau's work and in Smith's abstract animations operates differently, addressing different knowledges, conventions and, possibly, modes of sensory perception. As far as Smith's work is concerned, it is the 'transsensorial model' – another of Chion's ideas – that opens up a far more productive line of enquiry. With the

'transsensorial model, 'there is no sensory given that is demarcated and isolated from the outset. Rather, the senses are channels, highways more than territories or domains,' (Chion 1994: 137). Chion goes on to speak on this particularly in relation to rhythm:

> [w]hen a rhythmic phenomenon reaches us via a given sensory path, this path, eye or ear, is perhaps nothing more than the channel through which rhythm reaches us. Once it has entered the ear or eye, the phenomenon strikes us in some region of the brain connected to the motor functions, and it is solely at this level that it is decoded as rhythm. (Chion 1994: 136)

Given its rhythmic visual complexity, Smith's work can conceivably find purchase with any number of rhythmic or melodic points from any given music. The idea of the 'transsensorial model' is a less loaded term than that of synathesia, with its connotations of genetically inherited 'gift' or a consequence of medical conditions or narcotic experimentation. If the 'transsensorial' is a useful way of considering questions of how audiences might perceive sound and image as a 'rhythm' – making sense of the sound / image combination is clearly a question of sensorial perception as well as an issue of acculturation in the reading of film.

Just how well Chion's ideas stand up in relation to more developed models of perception or understanding of the neurological apparatus is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a brief reference to some terms from the ecological theories of perception might be useful to help clarify some of these issues. Developed primarily by James Gibson (1966 and 1979), mainly in relation to visual perception, and more recently drawn on by Eric Clarke (2005), in relation to music, the ecological perspective on perception considers human perception to be, in essence, exploratory, 'seeking out sources of stimulation in order to discover more about the environment' (Clarke 2005: 19). This perceptual system also 'self-tunes' to increase its absorption of information from the environment and to optimise its 'resonance' with it. Clarke quotes from Gibson, who condenses this process to the idea that 'a system "hunts" until it achieves clarity' (Clarke 2005: 19). This 'hunting after clarity' from stimulation, coupled with the acculturation of most observers that filmic presentation of sound and vision 'invites' connectivity, is but one way of considering this process of 'automatic synchronisation'. Even so, the seemingly 'automatic synchronisation' of abstract and complex rhythmic imagery with music cannot be considered 'automatic' in absolute terms; rather the automation should

be understood in terms of degrees. If Smith's work is compared with that of his near contemporaries and fellow exponents of direct film, Len Lye and Norman McLaren – films such as *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (Lye 1939) and *Begone Dull Care* (McLaren 1949), to name but two – it becomes evident to the extent that Lye's and McLaren's work is predicated on an extremely close synchronisation between the music and the kinetics of the marks, forms and colours that comprise the image. By contrast, in *Early Abstractions*, Smith's use of music can be characterised as being synchronised, but this is *soft* synchronisation, in the sense that the painstaking frame-by-frame attention at work in Lye and McLaren's films is absent, if not rejected or resisted, in Smith's. It is in this sense that Smith's 'soft synchronisation' is 'exploratory'. As well as being constantly exploratory, Smith's approach appears, in a way, as 'democratic', allowing audiences a space to form their own points of contact between sound events and visual events. If Fred Camper's critical observations of 'automatic synchronisation' are compared to the positive acceptance by Rami Singh and Rosebud Feliu-Pettet, then questions of personal taste and a willingness to engage are also allowed to seep into the equation. This is less relevant to Lye's and McLaren's work, where the sound and image are more clearly structured as a unity, directing the audience's attention to the virtuosity and playfulness of the music-image synchronisation rather than to the appropriateness of the music.

If Cocteau and Smith's experiments with chance are in many ways of their time, can they be regarded also as more than just of historical interest? Are there additional, longer-term influences discernable? Smith's work is probably more easily cast as a direct influence, given the period in which he worked and his particular artistic and cultural milieu. Smith's work needs to be placed in the context of an American avant-garde film culture that was intently interested in both the materiality of film and in the exploration of psychological and sensory affects, as exemplified by Stan Brakahge's 'light works' and the 'flicker films' of Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits. This cinematic ground was interwoven with a beatnik and hippie culture interested in esoteric philosophies and altered states, and with a similar interest in the exploration of audio-visual as a means to challenge sensory perception or to enhance chemical induced reveries. A trajectory can be mapped from the early 1950s to the late 1960s which includes, amongst much other

work: Smith's experiments in jazz joints and at the Art Cinema; Jordan Belson and Henry Jacob's multi-media 'Vortex Concerts' (1957–59); the notorious Andy Warhol's 'Exploding Plastic Inevitable'; and Ken Kesey's west coast 'Acid Tests' – new cultural forms and experiences open to notions of the 'random', or at least of the loosely structured combinations and interactions of music, images, dance and light. The creation of multi-media and multi-sensory experiences became the hallmark of psychedelic events and concerts. In both his practice and through personal associations, Harry Smith can be seen as a precursor of these cultural practices. As well as the live music and film screenings at the Art Cinema mentioned above, he also created 'proto-light-shows' – multiple-projector screenings that he re-filmed from the screen during performance (Moritz 2001). In the early 1960s, Smith presented films at the New Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York. There he created special screens for projection of his films, which he then augmented with additional projected images and coloured filters (Igliori 1996). These experiments can be seen as clear precursors of forms such as the light-show. While these practices tend to be presented as part of the trajectory of an individual artist, the focus on particular conceptualisations or methodologies should not obscure longer-term histories nor the creative genealogies from which these practices emerge. Harry Smith's experiments must be put in the context of a centuries' long search for forms exploring the synathesic facility and the seemingly intimate connection between light, colour and music. As documented by Barbara Kiensherf (2005), this body of theoretical experimentation and attempts to create 'colour music' in a performance context had been investigated for a number of centuries through a variety of inventions (such as colour organs and pyrophones) with varying degrees of success. This endeavour was largely taken up the 1920s and 1930s by film-makers such as Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and Oscar Fischinger, the latter having collaborated with colour slide projectionist Alexander László in the 1920s and developed his own Lumigraph colour organ in the 1940s. Indeed, Fischinger is particularly important in the American context, having had a direct influence on figures as diverse as Walt Disney, The Whitney Brothers and Harry Smith himself. Smith visited with Fischinger and paid respect to him with his *Film No.5,* the occasional title of which is *Circular Tensions (Homage to Oscar Fischinger)* (ca. 1950).

The pioneering work of Cocteau and Smith can still be seen as relevant. Combining music and image based on the operation of chance has been a consistent element in various media forms up until the present, particularly in popular music culture. It is discernable in some approaches to music video production and has often been used in television music programmes, in lieu of live performance. The BBC's *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, which ran from 1971–1987, made much use of this method, especially in the early days before the music video became a standard promotional tool for bands. Album tracks would be played over a variety of visual material, with *Felix the Cat* cartoons and skiing films from the silent era being particular favourites for this treatment. The emergence of the VJ in 1980s and 1990s – mixing eclectic selections of video material as a visual backdrop at concerts or in a club setting is also continuing this approach. Even computer software such as the Itunes Visualiser, which creates abstract visuals to accompany the music of your choice, echoes Smith's experiments, albeit in a highly mechanistic manner. Continuing the experiments of the Dadaist and Surrealists highlighted at the start of this essay, fine artists are also still employing chance as a methodology. In 2006–2007 an exhibition toured the UK highlighting work produced by a range of contemporary artists who used random processes as a means of making.[vii]

In the light of this long-term history, it is worth taking up a suggestion advanced by Paul Virilio (2003), namely that to invent a specific technology is to invent the relevant accident:

> to invent the train is to *invent the derailment* [original emphasis]…So, for Aristotle in his day and for us today, if the accident reveals the substance, it is indeed the 'accidens' – what happens – which is a kind of analysis, a techno-analysis for what 'substat' – lies beneath – all knowledge.
>
> (Virilio 2003: 24)

Given that the sound film is a cluster of technologies, I would like to conclude here with the proposition that even if (or perhaps, precisely also because) their experiments were only partially understood and clouded by personal preoccupations, the practices deliberately pursued by Cocteau and Smith can be productively re-thought as 'accidens'; that is as important attempts to open up knowledge and a better understanding of the sound film and of the ability of music and image to operate on each other to create

meaning and modulate affectivity. Following on from this proposition a question opens up: what was/is then the substance of Cocteau and Smith's experiments – which unexplored cinematic, theoretical and more generally, historical trajectories 'lies beneath' Cocteau and Smith's aesthetics of chance?

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[i] [Note of Richard Abel: Cocteau delivered this text as a talk (which was taken down in shorthand) before a screening of *Le Sang d' un poète* at the Vieux-Colombier cinema on 20 January 1932. It was reprinted in Cocteau's *Le Sang d' un poète* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1957). The talk was first translated in the *National Board of Review Magazine* 9 (February 1934), pp. 4–9. This translation by Carol Martin-Sperry is reprinted, by permission, from Cocteau, *Two Screenplays* (New York: Grossman, 1968), pp. 61–62.]

[ii] 'Il faut sauver ce travail, s'y mêler jusqu'à ce que l'audition devienne pénible. En rendant le film injouable, inexpoloitable, on le rendra sacré' (Jean Cocteau quoted in Caizergues 1999).

[iii] The painting based on Dizzy Gillespie's *Manteca* can be seen at the beginning of Smith's *Film No.4.*

[iv] Moritz played to Smith a bootleg LP of Gillespie's music entitled *Dizzy Gillespie Live in Sweden*. Smith insisted they were the same performances as the tapes given him by Hy Hirsch in the late 1940s. Moritz suggests these same live performances were later released, rather confusingly, as the CD entitled *Gillespie Live in Paris.*

[v] Bill Moritz (2001) lists the musicians as: Atlee Chapman on trombone and bass-trumpet; Henry Noyd on trumpet; Kermit Scott on tenor sax; Robert Warren on bass; Warren Thompson on drums; and Stanly Willis on piano.

[vi] These recordings can be accessed at the Harry Smith Archive website: http://www.harrysmitharchives.com/7_hear/index.html. Accessed October 2008.

[vii] The exhibition 'You'll Never Know: Drawing and Random Interference' was curated by Jeni Walwin and Henry Krokatsis and toured a number of venues in the UK between March 2006 and Feburary 2007. It featured work produced through a wide range of both natural and mechanical aleatory processes.

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