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Jacques Becker's *Le trou* (*The hole* France 1960) is a particular kind of sound film. It captures your ears, takes them and holds them weightless as it traces a sensory rush across their surface. Playing us between sound and silence, feeding and holding our anticipation of and need for the next aural fill, the film carries us suspended and attentive in this sensory alertness. *Le trou* was Becker's final film; he died a month before its release. Based on a novel by José Giovanni, the story takes place over a period of about six days as five cell mates, each awaiting sentencing, attempt to dig their way out of La Santé prison. As in most of Becker's work, one is unusually conscious of the film's pacing, its alternations between sound and silence, long shots and close ups, movement and stasis. But *Le trou*, unlike Becker's other films, is primarily driven by sound - sounds that temporalise the visual in specific ways.

Becker's oeuvre consists of a somewhat eclectic group of works, ranging from gangster films such as the glorious *Touchez pas au Grisbi* (France 1954) to light romantic comedy like *Antoine et Antoinette* (France 1947) and he moved across a range of genres with remarkable ease. The thirteen features that he directed between 1942 and 1960 place him between the tail end of the golden age of French classical cinema and the beginnings of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Too early and too late to belong to either of the privileged periods of French cinema, Becker's work has often been compared to that of Jean Renoir, for whom he worked as an assistant between 1932 and 1939. But perhaps of greater relevance is his collaboration with editor Marguerite Renoir (née Houllée), the de facto - and then ex-de facto - of Jean Renoir. She edited many of Renoir's films in his so-called "middle period", as well as most of Becker's films. This collaboration is by no means insignificant considering the centrality of pacing to the Becker's films and his trademark *le temps mort*.

As Philip Kemp points out in his essay "Jacques Becker - life in the dead time", *le temps mort* is a bit of a misnomer (though it is a term the director himself used), for the relevant scenes can hardly be understood as "dead time", and the films are far from slow (40). While not much may happen in terms of plot in Becker's *le temps mort* scenes, they nevertheless carry the films. In these scenes of everyday interactions and gestures, of intimacies marked by familiarity and affection (as between the two ageing gangsters in *Touchez pas au Grisbi*), time is not so much dead as expanded, carving out a place for the temporalities of

objects and spaces.

As Kemp indicates, Becker's films have often been discussed and described in somewhat abstract terms, most often through reference to their rhythm and texture. Admittedly such characterisations usually tend toward the vague and flimsy; as a descriptor rhythm never seems to tell us much in and of itself. Nevertheless, I would argue that rhythm is central to Becker's films, and is central, moreover, to his infamous *temps mort*. Each of Becker's films has its own distinctive rhythm, established through editing, gesture and narrative structure.

An example is the opening of *Antoine et Antoinette*, with its musical call and response structure. Beginning with the end of a working day, the film opens with Antoine (Roger Pigaut) at his job in the printing press, each shot driven by movement, each edit picking up on this movement. As Antoine and the other workers prepare to leave the factory, this opening sequence takes on a dance-like quality, the duration of each shot slightly extended so that each new shot seems to pick up the beat with added vigour. Courting the spectator with this to-ing and fro-ing, the sequence establishes a rhythmic momentum that is answered by the introduction to the other central character, Antoinette (Claire Maffei), in her department store workplace. Rather than the horizontal movement that characterised Antoine's sequence, here movement primarily takes place on the z axis, the camera passing from one body in motion to the next until we, like the customer looking for passport photos, reach our destination: Antoinette in her job at the photo-booth counter. Even here the momentum is only briefly halted, shifting as it does from the movement of the frame and the figures within it to the movement of facial expression as the film pauses on a close-up of its heroine. Soon everything is back in motion as Antoinette sets out on her journey home.

While *Le trou* also has its own distinctive rhythm, its rhythmic structure is of a quite different order to that which we find in Becker's other films. Here it is not so much a case of the film being structured around or characterised by a particular rhythm. Rather, it seems to be *driven* - and increasingly possessed - by a rhythm or pulse, and this pulse arises from (though is not reducible to) the centrality of particular sounds.

"*Le trou* is the essence of Becker", writes Kemp, "a film distilled down to the play of gestures and looks, of hands and faces, a study of relationships at the starkest level" (46). And certainly, like all of Becker's films, it revolves around gestures and expressions and is lovingly attentive to the relationships between bodies and other bodies, between bodies and things. Kemp's essay is a wonderful response to this body of work which has received little attention in Anglo-American cinema studies, and is rarely screened. But in *Le trou*, I would argue, this distilling is of a somewhat different order to that found in Becker's other films, and this is primarily because of the role that sound plays in it. At one level, the film could be seen as being distilled down to a few sets of sounds. But more importantly, with *Le trou* it is less a case of the film being "distilled down to the play of gestures or looks", or

even a set of sounds, than of it being distilled down to a central beat or pulse. It is this pulse - arising from the soundtrack and inscribing its demands across the film - that I will focus on.

Like most of Becker's films, *Le trou* offers a cinema of listening, though it does so in a more extreme form than any of his earlier works. In this, Becker's most homoerotic piece, the erotic force is carried through sound - through both its withholding and unleashing, and the ways that particular sounds continue to ring through our ears long after they have departed. Even its iconography becomes increasingly auricular, particularly when the men reach the passages beneath the prison. In one of the most beautiful shots in the film we see two of the men - Roland (Jean Keraudy) and Manu (Philippe Leroy) - making their way through one of a maze of underground passageways in the prison. In the centre of the frame is a square of light generated by their candle and, within it, the two figures making their way into the distance. Surrounded by a thick frame of darkness, their movements suspended in the silence of the soundtrack, these figures seem weightless, miniaturised as they travel through the cavernous space.

While *Le trou* offers a cinema of listening, its soundtrack is by no means complex. It contains no music, and in fact has a fairly limited sonic range. The soundtrack (indeed, the entire film) is structured around three principle sets of sounds. First and foremost, there is the sound of the smashing of stone and cement. This sound dominates the soundtrack as the men hammer their way through the cell floor, reach the maze of corridors beneath the prison that connects its various wings, and then begin hammering again, this time at the cement wall that will take them through to the sewers. As potent in its absence (when work has to cease) as in its presence, this sound drives the film from its first appearance. Accompanying it is the sound of a heightened taking in and expelling of air - the exhilarated breathing of bodies exerting themselves, a sound which isn't allocated to any one of the central characters in particular but serves, rather, for all of them, producing the sense of a composite desiring-body.

Added to this aural mix is the softly spoken and somewhat sparse dialogue. All these sounds appear in close up. It is as if one hears - and watches- the film through headphones, the sounds and silences pumped directly into one's ears. One of the most entrancing stories about the film (one I heard at the Becker retrospective in Los Angeles in 1999 and am unable to verify) is that Becker, gravely ill at the time, supervised the sound mix and edit for the film after he had lost most of his hearing. Regardless of the veracity of this story, it is the perfect complement to a film that is crucially about sound and listening, about sounds that attempt to blast through and puncture surfaces. For the two sounds that dominate *Le trou* are characterised by urgency and by the collision and crossing of surfaces: the sound of heightened breathing (that of the interior of a body as it meets, consumes and expels the exterior) and the sound of the impact of one hard surface on another. These two sets of sounds, each marked by repetition,

establish a beat across the film, a beat which is as potent when it is aurally absent as when it is present.

Rarely is one as conscious of the appearance and withholding of sound as in *Le trou*. Certainly, the withholding and release of sound is something that we often find in prison films. In George Hill's *The big house* (US 1930), for instance, there is a magnificent release of sound in the scene where the prisoners are marched into the prison grounds for their "recreation time". Punctuated by the sound of a whistle that dictates both movement and sound, the soundtrack moves from the sound of marching to silence as the men are lined up in battle-like formation. Both image and sound are then held suspended until the final whistle releases them. The constrained stillness of the image is released into movement as the men fall out of their regimented lines; and the held silence of the soundtrack is released into a cacophony of calls and mumbling. In long shot, this simultaneous unleashing of bodies and sound disperses the image in multiple directions.

We also find something similar to this force of sound in the famous last scene of Robert Wise's *I want to live!* (US 1958) - another prison film of sorts. In its final moments, Ed Montgomery/Simon Oakland - Barbara Graham/Susan Hayward's too-late ally - leaves the prison grounds after the execution and cuts out the raucous cacophony of sound, for him and for us, by turning off his hearing aid. The startling effect of this sudden silence is partly a result of its placement, coming as it does after the long torturous night of waiting for the Governor's commutation of Graham's death sentence. This is a waiting that the film not only refuses to release us from, but also delivers in its most sadistic form - at times interrupted by hope, at others by the invasive procedures of the state as it monitors and prepares the body of Graham/Hayward for execution. The impact of this sudden silence is also due to the fact that we have not been aware of Montgomery's hearing aid until this point, and so the sudden shift to his aural point of view is all the more startling. As the sound cuts out, the frenzy of movement in the depths of the shot - reporters rushing back and forth, vehicles moving away from the prison grounds, the sun rising - seems to float free of any temporal or spatial anchoring, and the image, we realise, is temporalised as much by silence as by sound.

But what in *I want to live!* and *The big house* takes place in specific scenes plays a quite different role in Becker's prison film. Here, the temporalisation of the image through sound and silence - or more accurately, the temporalisation of the image through the establishment of a beat or pulse - serves as the structuring principle of the film. This beat or pulse renders the image as oddly elsewhere and past, unable to meet the demands of the film's sounds.

In his book *Audio-vision: sound on screen*, Michel Chion analyses the place of noises in film practice and analysis. The tendency to neglect noise in favour of music and dialogue in critical work on sound cinema, he argues, is "proportional to the scanty presence of noises in films themselves", a tendency which, in film production at least, is now being countered by the uses - and possibilities - of

Dolby sound technology. As Chion suggests in the chapter "Sound Film - Worthy of the Name":

The sound of noises, for a long time relegated to the background like a troublesome relative in the attic, has therefore benefited from the recent improvements in definition brought by Dolby. Noises are reintroducing an acute feeling of the materiality of things and beings, and they herald a sensory cinema that rejoins a basic tendency of... the silent cinema.

The paradox is only apparent. With the new place that noises occupy, speech is no longer central to films. Speech tends to be reinscribed in a global sensory continuum that envelops it, and that occupies both kinds of space, auditory and visual. This represents a turnaround from sixty years ago: the acoustical poverty of the soundtrack during the earliest stage of sound film led to the privileging of precoded sound elements, that is, language and music - at the expense of the sounds that were pure indices of reality and materiality, that is, noises.

The cinema has been the talking film for a long time. But only for a short while has it been worthy of the name it was given, a bit hurriedly: sound film. (155-6)

Setting aside the question as to whether noise offers "pure indices of reality and materiality", *Le trou*, while not using Dolby sound technologies, none the less offers a form of sound film that has a number of similarities to that for which Chion calls. This is not simply a result of the absence of "precoded sound elements" such as music and the seeming dearth of dialogue (a restraint that is narratively justified through the importance of silence, softly spoken conversations, and the need for the characters themselves to be constantly listening for, and alert to, the approach of the prison guards). *If Le trou* approaches the status of a sound film "worthy of the name" it is because of the acoustical space produced.

Listening is privileged in *Le trou*, not only at a diegetic level but for the spectator him or herself. This is, in part, because of the nature of the film's sounds. These sounds - the smashing and giving way of stone and cement, and a body breathing under exertion - are noises marked by repetition and which know no directionality. From the first moment that the men begin hammering their cell floor with a piece of metal, the image gives way to sound. The image barely moves, gripped, it seems, by the demands of the sound. The frame remains transfixed on the stone surface and the hand that beats down upon it before cutting to the other men staring motionless at the floor as if willing it to open, and then returning again to the stone surface. This is among the film's most riveting scenes, as the men go for broke, placing their bets on the hope that the sheer volume and audacity of the noise they are making will be their best cover. No complex aural space here, and little modulation in sound. But the audaciousness of this volume in the prison is surpassed by the audaciousness of the sound in the cinema itself.

There is something deliriously disarming about staring at the screen as the theatre fills with the sound of a relentless and repetitive smashing. For no matter how odd it is that the guards do not register this sound, it is even odder that the image doesn't either. Like watching a dubbed film, we become conscious that image and sound are not bound together, and that the image here is not only mute but deaf. The sound of relentless smashing operates here like a kind of apostrophe, or rather a failed apostrophe. Barbara Johnson defines apostrophe as "a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness (...)" [B]ased etymologically on the notion of turning aside, of digressing from straight speech, it manipulates the I/thou structure of direct address in an indirect, fictionalised way. The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, anthropomorphic".

While seemingly in synch, here sound and image do not meet. Rather than animating the image or "turning its silence into mute responsiveness", this sound and its relentless demand render the image ghost-like and deaf; the sound of smashing becomes more like a knocking that attempts to waken the image. While the floor eventually gives way, the image does not - and no doubt cannot - respond to the demands of this sound. To do so it would have to stop and cease unfolding. "Hearing, when it occurs, breaks the continuity of an undifferentiated perceptual field and at the same time is a sign (the noise waited for and heard in the night) which puts the subject in the position of having to answer to something" (Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis). And what, after the hushed tones, minimal soundtrack, and temps mort that have governed the film up to this point, could call on the image to respond more than this knocking? If, as Adorno and Eisler argue, music in film has served "as a kind of antidote against the picture (...) [and] was introduced not to supply [the onscreen characters] with the life they lacked - but to exorcise fear or help the spectator absorb the shock", then this sound does exactly the opposite, foregrounding the peculiar kind of absence that is the cinematic image.

Le trou addresses our ears before all else, and does so through the oscillation of sound *on* and sound *off*. I'm not referring here to the distinction between onscreen and offscreen sound, but to a much more elementary distinction between sound and the absence of sound or, more accurately, between being swallowed and summoned by sound, and listening for sound. For while the sound of smashing is relentless in its force, it is not constant. This on/off structure could be understood in relation to Rosalind Krauss's proposal of the pulse that underlies - indeed drives - the works of artists of what she calls the "optical unconscious". The pulse that Krauss locates in works such as Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs and the images in Max Ernst's *roman-collage* of 1930 *A little girl dreams of taking the veil* is, she argues, not temporal - at least not in any simple sense - and is located within vision itself. "The pulse [these artists] employ", she writes, "is not understood to be structurally distinct from vision but to be at work from deep inside it".

But on their face, of course, there is nothing "anti-art" about the *Rotoreliefs* (...) Their "anti-art" comes at another level, the one where they make common cause with popular culture's own embrace of the media, of all forms of reproduction, here, most obviously, with the industry of recording. The *Rotoreliefs* with their pulsatile yet silent music evoke the listener's fascination with the spectacle of the turntable's monotonous spiral, with the sameness of its hypnotic beat whatever the melodic phrasing. What the *Rotoreliefs* throw in the face of Art and of Painting is not the image of another culture but a form, that of a pulse or beat, that the modernist artist senses all too well as the enemy of his craft. For that pulse is devolutionary, destructive, dissolving the very coherence and stability of form.

In this, Duchamp was not alone in the 1930s. The artists of the "optical unconscious" were particularly drawn to this beat, acknowledging the role it had begun to play in all forms of the popular. (205-6)

Krauss refers to a pulse in the still (and serialised) image; with *Le trou* we are dealing with a pulse that seems to arise from sound and that charts the moving image. Nevertheless, there are a number of connections that could be drawn between Krauss' pulse/beat and the film's on/off pulse. With each, we are dealing with a pulse that appears to work from "inside" vision and is "devolutionary" and "destructive" of form.

To trace these connections we need to identify the nature of *Le trou's* pulse. A number of pulses or beats could be located in this film. There are the pulses established by each of the repetitive noises (the smashing, the breathing and, when the men reach the iron grill leading to the underground corridors, the filing of iron bars). And beneath and through these, there is the pulse established by the on/off oscillation of sound, its presence and absence. Each of these pulses or beats, moreover, works directly on our ears, addressing them as bodily organs that can be summoned, traced, activated and eroticised. In this respect, such pulses work very differently to those demonstrations of digital sound technologies that often precede and introduce the film in contemporary cinema complexes. Whereas the latter primarily serve to exhibit the (possible) aural space of the theatre, the pulses of *Le trou* serve to chart the carnal density of our ears, rendering them, through this mechanical on/off pulse, as an extension of the projection apparatus.

It is here that the film's central and governing pulse/beat can be located. Krauss refers to the ways that the *Rotoreliefs* summon the technology of the turntable. This reference to the turntable - "*with the sameness of its hypnotic beat whatever the melodic phrasing*" - suggests another hypnotic beat that *Le trou* gives us, a pulse/beat that we tend to forget about in relation to cinema. The repetitive sounds of the film, their release and withholding, bring to the fore a more elementary pulse than those of the sounds themselves. They summon the pulse

of the projector, a pulse that, to be sure, underlies and can be set against the variety of other pulses/beats produced in a film (through figure movement, editing, sound, and so on). With the film projector, as with the slide projector and its relentless expelling of air (a sound much more compelling than that of the click of the slide's movement in the gate), one encounters a kind of pulse, for beneath all that play of shadow, colour, and figure movement, there is always the projection of light itself. This pulse of projection exists regardless of whether the sounds of the projector are hidden away and buffered by other sounds or not. When, in *Sunset Blvd.* (US 1950), Norma Desmond/Gloria Swanson rises in her home theatre to meet and be consumed by the light of the projector, it is the pulse of light that seems to summon her, both narratively and visually rendering her visible and giving her form while at the same time dissolving and consuming her.

If *Le trou* summons the pulse of the projector, it is largely because of the sonic qualities of its soundtrack. There is little fluctuation in either the volume or direction of the sounds of smashing and breathing in the film. We do not move around this noise, hear it from a distance or approach it from different directions. Nor, as mentioned previously, does the camera move around the "source" of this noise. The sound of smashing, rather, seems to grip the image in its field and in so doing infuses vision itself. This sound is simply there, in close-up. With its repetitive beat, the pulse that drives *Le trou* mimics the relentless movement of the film through the gate and the projector's expelling of light, as if attempting to give the image voice.

Through a beat that crosses and entwines sound and viewer, and summons the projection apparatus in its path, the viewer's body is implicated into the need to escape. This need for release is not simply the desire for and identification with the men's escape from the prison (though of course it is that as well), but arises from the need to escape and to be released from the conflicting rhythmic demands of the film and the failed apostrophe of an image that does not respond to the demands of sound. The whole film seems to take place and expire between two sounds - between the first sound of smashing and the belated scream of Gaspard, the betrayer, in its final moments, a sound that the film withholds for what seems like an eternity through a series of shots of the other men as they turn towards him. For, in the tradition of the prison genre, the escape is, of course, thwarted in the final moments. In his final film, the rhythm so often credited as central to Becker's work takes the form of a suspended beat. Surpassing the service of narrative suspense, this suspended beat stands as a protest against narrative time and against the relentless unfolding of the image. *Le trou* plays itself out in the hollows of our ears.