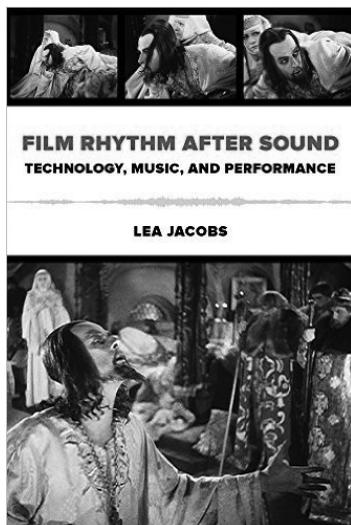


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## Book Review: Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm After Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance*



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What is the individual unit of film? Cinema studies has most often relied on the shot, while recent studies have gone toward understanding elements of staging. Lea Jacobs breaks away from pictorial straggles and toward the temporal through the beat. *Film Rhythm After Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance* opens with a historical quandary. While we remember the Pre-Code talkies for their quick-witted remarks flying back and forth, contemporary trade journals and memos often criticized the “slowness” of early sound films. As Jacobs puts it, “The problem of pacing was and remains a critical one for those dealing with classical film narrative, and it became particularly pressing in Hollywood at the moment of the transition to sound.”<sup>1</sup> *Film Rhythm After Sound* thus has a two-pronged approach: first, to examine filmic rhythm and tempo through the relationship between music, dialogue, editing, and movement (both actor and camera); second, to understand how filmmakers problem-solved technological difficulties to create the speedy films of the era.

Jacobs chooses her case studies very carefully, firstly demonstrating how to watch film rhythm

using a brief section from Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* (1941). Although *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) was the director’s first sound feature, Jacobs notes that this two part epic was the first where Eisenstein and composer Alexander Prokofiev had access to sound mixing technology. In *Ivan*, Eisenstein employed a “bricklaying” method, where instead of directly syncing image and sound (an edit for each musical beat, for example), visual cues could work equal to musical notes. Using a combination of musical transcription and digital technology, Jacobs layers shots, gestures, and dialogue on top of a musical score to show this visual and aural relationship. While John Mowitz’s *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object* discussed *Nevsky*’s sound elements through musicology, Jacobs’s more microscopic examination shows a nuanced relationship that discounts the idea that the filmic elements could be subordinate.<sup>2</sup>

Jacobs then chooses three different case studies from early Hollywood genres: Disney’s animated shorts, Paramount’s musicals, and Howard Hawks’s talkies. Each one of these shows a different workflow for its production, and thus offers a view into the

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different options for the filmmakers to create tempo. At Disney, animators and composers worked in close collaboration. But rather than elevating the composer, Jacobs's very close transcription of both the musical scores along with the visual materials of the image challenge the general understanding of "Mickey Mousing" (direct syncing) as the studio's singular strategy. Her close analysis of shorts like *Playful Pluto* (1934) finds sudden, calculated breaks between the image and sound, creating unexpected moments of suspense and humor.

Jacobs's examination of the Paramount musicals—Ernst Lubitsch's *Monte Carlo* (1930) and Rouben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* (1932)—demonstrates filmmakers finding alternatives to the dominant options of a complete post-sync or direct sound recording. While singing numbers usually were shot with the orchestras present, Jacobs makes a case for how directors like Lubitsch and Mamoulian "[integrated] speech much more closely with the score than was typical for the early sound period," with the former director using music "as part of a mix that is generally dominated by the pace established through editing and line delivery" in *Trouble in Paradise* (1932).<sup>3</sup> Some of Jacobs's explanation here feels rather limited given the narrowness of her line of questions. Her findings immediately opens up questions to how exactly sound mixing production worked in this period and how practices worked beyond one particular director or studio, especially ones that struggled with the transition to sound.

Her final chapter on Howard Hawks, however, provides a unique formalist study of a director's visual language that has all too often been simplified. Jacobs has previously published an article on how *His Girl Friday* (1940) managed a rapid tempo without necessarily more editing.<sup>4</sup> Here, she focuses on the early sound features of Hawks: *The Dawn Patrol*

(1930), *Scarface* (1932), and *Twentieth Century* (1934). Examining the technological innovations alongside the films, Jacobs demonstrates how Hawks made films that appear faster and faster, but not through techniques most producers often called for (more editing, shorter scenes, clipped dialogue). Hawks scholars have often focused on the director's naturalistic dialogue, but Jacobs breaks that dialogue down by speed of vocal delivery, where exactly lines overlapped and the background "wallah wallah" (improvised dialogue). Putting these precise dialogue transcriptions alongside the edits and the gestures of the actors, Jacobs attempts to see rhythm in film in a complex relationship dependent on very particular microsecond choices. Beyond an appreciation of Hawks at a more formally nuanced level, it creates a method of analyzing character and performance through tempo.

Jacobs shows an expertise at elements of musicology, but *Film Rhythm* avoids becoming overly technical. The short video essays provided on the University of California Press website literally slow down the images alongside the musical transcriptions. Looking and listening to rhythm offers a new and necessary approach that could be appropriated into understanding of Bollywood musicals, John Cassavetes films, or avant-garde filmmakers. The book should provide nuanced reading for higher-level formal aesthetics classes, but will work well for American film history, courses focused on film sound, and seminars on the auteurs utilized. Because "the great film composers and later commentators on their work have typically emphasized the narrative connotations of the score," rhythm and tempo has been left out of the conversation of how we watch media.<sup>5</sup> Jacobs's book creates a new stride toward close analysis, coming closer to understanding the nuances of a crucial pleasure to all cinema.

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### Notes

1 Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm after Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015), 24.

2 John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

3 Jacobs, *Film Rhythm after Sound*, 164.

4 Jacobs, "Keeping up with Hawks," *Style* 32.3 (1998): 402-26.

5 Jacobs, *Film Rhythm after Sound*, 224.