

Michel Chion (1947): Overview of Writings

Composer, journalist, essayist, short-film director, researcher, and professor, Michel Chion is also the author of over twenty-five monographs, mostly published by major French publishing houses (Fayard, Les Cahiers du Cinéma, Bordas, Puf, Buchet/Chastel, Nathan, Armand Colin, Flammarion) and sometimes with smaller specialized imprints (Metamkine on electroacoustic music, éditions de la Transparence, Plume). The author of a doctoral dissertation in contemporary literature on André Gide (1970), Chion has set himself apart from most other composers of *musique concrète*, electroacoustic or acousmatic music, (apart, perhaps, from his teacher [Pierre Schaeffer](#)) through his considerable body of writings. The parallels between the composer-theorists Chion and Schaeffer and their taste for writing can be extended to [François-Bernard Mâche](#) (a former student of the École normale and a respected Hellenist, and co-founder, with Schaeffer of the GRM [Groupe de Recherches Musicales]), and, to a lesser degree, the composer [François Bayle](#), (Schaeffer's successor at the INA-GRM). Chion worked as an assistant to Schaeffer in his classes at the Paris Conservatory and Schaeffer referred to him as his "pupil-master" ("*élève-maître*") in the preface to his *Guide des Objets sonores* (p. 9).

Michel Chion's literary output spans the period from 1976 to 2013. While the first three texts, written between 1976 and 1982, deal with *musique concrète* and electroacoustic music (even though he had left the GRM in 1976), the rest of his literary and critical work is alternately devoted to music, cinema, or their interaction. Today, Chion is best known for belonging to both worlds. On one hand he is a composer of *musique concrète* (to use a term important to him—one he is nowadays (in 2018) nearly the last person to use) and an interpreter of the "art of fixed sounds" ("fixed by electronic means" to be more exact). On the other hand, he is a prolific writer of essays and criticism on film. Since 1982, Chion has written books reflecting this dual affiliation, coming to defend the idea of "cinema as sound art".

Chion's writings are devoted to five large fields:

1. Genres or composers important to him:

Pierre Henry (1980), his first monograph
Le poème symphonique et la musique à programme (1993)
La symphonie à l'époque romantique, de Beethoven à Mahler (1994)
La comédie musicale (2002)

2. Interpretations of electroacoustic music and other works on listening:

Les musiques électroacoustiques (1976) co-written with Guy Reibel
La musique électroacoustique (1982) published by the Presses universitaires de France
Le Guide des objets sonores (1983)
L'Art des sons fixés, ou la musique concrètement (1992), re-issued under the title *La musique concrète, art des sons fixés* (2010)
Le promeneur écoutant : essai d'acoulogie (1993, revised and expanded 2009)
Le son, traité d'acoulogie (1998; 2010)
Musiques, médias, technologies (1994)

3. Film criticism, often published by *Cahiers du cinéma*

Jacques Tati (1987)
David Lynch (1992, 3 later editions)
Stanley Kubrick (2000, 2001, 2003, 2005)
La ligne rouge (2005)
Andreï Tarkovski (2008)
Les Lumières de la ville *de Charlie Chaplin* (2009)

4. Publications on the language of film (including sound), which often take a textbook form:

Écrire un scénario (1985)
Le Cinéma et ses métiers (1990)
Technique et création au cinéma (2002)
La comédie musicale (2002)
L'audio-vision, son et image au cinéma (1991)
Le Complexe de Cyrano, la langue parlée dans les films français (2008)
Les films de science-fiction (2008)

5. A compendium in five volumes defending the notion of "film as sound art" (the first three were published in the *Essais* collection of *Cahiers du cinéma*).

La Voix au cinéma (1982)

Le Son au cinéma (1985)

La Toile trouée (1996)

La Musique au cinéma (1995)

Un art sonore, le cinéma. Histoire, esthétique, poétique (2003), a hefty volume of 472 pages organized in 26 chapters and two parts which are revised and expanded version of the two earlier books *Le son au cinéma* and *La toile trouée*, two thirds of which is new.

In his *Guide des Objets Sonores* (1983), Michel Chion became recognized as a meticulous commentator on Pierre Schaeffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966), which remains one of the keys to Schaeffer's thought. The field of electroacoustic music owes much to Chion's theoretical work, which he dubbed "acoulogie", a term borrowed from Schaeffer, broadened in its definition to mean the art of listening to sound. Acoulogy is "the discipline that deals, in rigorous language, with sounds, with what we hear, in all its aspects, something that neither acoustics [...] nor the ill-named psycho-acoustics [...] do" (introduction to *Le Promeneur écoutant*). However, Chion's interest is not limited solely to film, film's relationship with sound, or *musique concrète*. In *Musiques, médias, technologies* (1994), for example, he develops an existential position on the place and development of "media arts", to use an expression more commonly adopted by French-speaking Canadians, such as Louise Poissant in her *Esthétique des arts médiatiques* (Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2000). Beyond possible similarities between phonographic and cinematographic writing that result from the media of fixation ("sonofixation", according to Chion's term) common to both fields, Chion describes "audio-vision" (1991) as an interweaving of sound and image, "by reciprocal projection and contamination of the heard onto the seen, or 'in negative', through suggestion" (back cover summary of *L'Audio-vision*).

As a result, Chion's monographs on sound, listening, and electroacoustic music are considered disciplinary milestones by the community of musicians and musicologists. On the other hand, his work on film is well-received by the film community, but sometimes with a degree of reticence, probably due to his sharply defined positions, notably on the status of "cinema as sound art" (2003). Though eclectic, his work has been unanimously praised for its multi-disciplinary character and depth of knowledge.

In addition to these monographs, which, like textbooks, are often structured with highly detailed tables of contents, Chion has written numerous contributions for encyclopedias (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *Larousse de la musique*, *Universalis*, *Dictionnaire du cinéma de Larousse*, etc.) and as a columnist for specialized journals (*Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Bref*, *Le Monde de la musique*, *Première*, *Revue & Corrigée*, *Positif*, *Les Inrocks*), research reports (notably for the GRM, mentioned above) or the general press (*Libération*) and, to a lesser degree, academic journals (*Analyse musicale*, *MusikTexte*).

Michel Chion's work, notably his monographs on film, has often been translated. For example, *La Voix au cinéma* has been translated to Italian, English, Spanish, and Korean; *Le son au cinéma* has also been published in Japanese, Korean, and Greek; *Écrire un scénario* in Spanish, Slovenian, Serbian, Turkish, Portuguese, and German; *L'audiovision* is also translated in six languages including Chinese. Finally, Chion himself is also a translator, notably of two works, one by Ernst Pawel on Kafka (*Kafka ou le Cauchemar de la raison*, 1996), and the other an autobiography of Kurosawa (1997).

Vincent TIFFON

17/05/2018

Trans. Chris Murray

Further reading

- *Portrait polychrome n° 8 : Michel Chion*, Paris, INA, 2005.

- Marchetti Lionel, *La Musique concrète de Michel Chion*, Rives, éditions Metamkine, 1998.

- Thomas Jean-Christophe, "Le son de Michel Chion", *Musica falsa*, n°5, octobre-novembre 1998, p. 90-92.

- Dack John, North Christine, *Guide to Sound Objects (Michel Chion)* :

https://monoskop.org/images/0/01/Chion_Michel_Guide_To_Sound_Objects_Pierre_Schaeffer_and_Musical_Research.pdf

To quote this article: Vincent Tiffon, "Michel Chion (1947): Overview of Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 09/02/2024, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/person/33771>.