Review of:

Elsie Walker: *Life 24x a Second. Cinema, Selfhood, and Society*

New York: Oxford University Press 2024

Anika Babel

Life 24x a Second: Cinema, Selfhood, and Society is Elsie Walker's third and most »unorthodox«[1] book, each published by Oxford University Press (2015, 2017, 2024). Throughout the introduction and six chapters, Walker celebrates the humanitarian value of cinema, foregrounding this through gripping student and personal testimony rather than by »any intricately sustained effort to situate [her] work in relation to well-established theoretical works or other scholars« (21). *Life 24x a Second* will appeal to pedagogues and researchers of film and film music, though students and sociocultural scholars will also find plenty of intrigue.

Throughout the book's 200 pages, Walker swaps skepticism for a tenacious apperception of cinema's life-affirming powers. This is evidenced early into the introduction where she ruminates on the limitations of applying affect theory when aiming to honor the »personal revelations« that films can provoke (6–7). Although Walker does not disparage the broader usefulness of affect theory, she does challenge an apparent reluctance among theorists to consider »ways that films move individual audioviewers (*including* themselves)« – attributing such reservations to a »fear of seeming undisciplined or biased« (emphasis preserved, 6–7). Alternatively, Walker asserts that »the synergy between our personal and professional lives is inherently unavoidable, meaningful, *and* desirable« (emphasis preserved, 57).

Amid its many contributions to pedagogy and conscientious scholarship, *Life 24x a Second* is anchored by Walker's over two-decade long career and expertise in film ›sound tracks‹. As with her 2015 debut monograph *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory*, Walker's literal and figurative gap between ›sound‹ and ›track‹ opens space for

[1] As acknowledged frequently by Walker (21, 78, 102).

sound design and dialogue to feature reciprocally alongside considerations of music. This is palpable from the very first case study, THE FAREWELL (USA 2019, Lulu Wang), in the introductory chapter. Her analysis – focused on the utterances and potential meanings of one word: ›ha!‹ – demonstrates the resonances that films can initially impart, while highlighting the reverberations and even modulations that occur when ›audioviewers‹ *re*attend films. Moreover, it sets the level of incisive detail that readers can expect from the ensuing case studies.

Like Anahid Kassabian's agential use of ›perceivers‹ and my own preference for ›filmgoers‹ (see Kassabian 2001 and Babel 2023), Walker's use of ›audioviewers‹ implies a distribution of attention to both sight *and* sound – much in the way that she does not privilege music, dialogue, or sound by employing ›sound tracks‹. Unlike that term, however, Walker explicitly delineates her rationale for replacing sight-bias language (specifically ›spectator‹ with ›audioviewer‹) in the midst of one of the book's most riveting arguments: life over death.

The title of Walker's book may sound familiar. In Jean-Luc Goddard's LE PETIT SOLDAT (France 1960) the protagonist states: »photography is truth and cinema is truth 24 times a second« – referring to cinema's standard frame rate of 24 images per second. This dialogue inspired Laura Mulvey's 2006 book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*,[2] which in turn provided the genesis for *Life 24x a Second*. It would be too simplistic to consider Mulvey and Walker's books as opposite sides of the same coin or as the glass half full/half empty versions of each other. Instead, both authors' approaches could be analogized to midnight: a single instance that demarcates both the end and the beginning of days. Where Mulvey's focus on visual stillness invariably leans towards notions of »dead ends« (12) or »loss« (144); of moments already gone/passed/past; Walker's perspective on films (or midnight, so to speak) recognizes that by interacting with films – by watching and rehearing, remembering and re-remembering – they are »always dynamic« (13); they are becoming; films breathe life. This is reminiscent of Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip V. Bohlman's use of ›dynamism‹ and ›eschatology‹ within socially-engaged contemporary landscapes to frame the transcendent power of sacred

[2] Walker does not state the subtitle in the main body of text, notes, or the extremely select bibliography.

music (2016). Indeed throughout the six chapters of *Life 24x a Second*, Walker confronts several pressing social issues: »the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, contemporary feminism, personal lifeshocks and the broad realities of mortality, grief, and death acceptance« (142).

Chapters one to three are given more weight in this review since Walker establishes her general methodologies and approaches to both research and teaching here. Chapters four to six are summarized relatively briefly before concluding remarks on *Life 24x a Second* are offered.

In chapter one, we are eased into an analysis of BLACKKKLANSMAN (USA 2018, Spike Lee) via Walker's typical contextualization of case studies within larger societal or pedagogical issues. Indeed, Walker never places films within the ›deathly‹ confines of a vacuum, thus redoubling her imperative concern that, like all films she considers, »BLACKKKLANSMAN represents life unfolding as it has and as is does … for the most urgent of purposes today« (37). Lee's film is the epicenter of Walker's ambition to »hear other people *and* cinema better in relation to the current BLM movement« (emphasis preserved, 26). With an enviable knack for providing the perfect degree of summarization, Walker's analysis unfolds through an examination of the measured vocal deliveries by John David Washington (who plays the protagonist, Ron Stallworth) and Terence Blanchard's score. The significance of Max Steiner's music for GONE WITH THE WIND (USA 1939, Victor Fleming) is eloquently teased out – chiefly Blanchard's allusions and engagement with Civil War-era folk and minstrelsy songs.

While Walker's candor facilitates a close, accessible, and refreshingly frank analysis, the margins of my copy are filled with suggested references. Although she certainly averts any claims of performative citing (of the 47 endnotes for chapter two, less than half a dozen list peer-reviewed work), Walker regularly infers eminent theories and theorists. On the one hand, film music scholarship no longer needs to fend for its legitimacy (an anxiety perhaps extended longer than necessary through gratuitous referential entanglements – are we entering a post-Gorbman or post-Chion[3] era?). On the other hand, Walker

[3] Chapter four's ›spin‹ on Michel Chion's ›spatiotemporal turntable‹ is a notable exception (Walker, 130; Chion 2019 [1993]).

risks bypassing the vital contributions to the field that students, in particular, ought to be made aware of. Echoes of influential scholars may appear conspicuous to those in the know and misleading to those who are not. That said, the idiosyncratic avenues through which Walker explores BLACKKKLANSMAN and her precise illustration of how the film's sonic logic beckons us to evaluate its message in light of current racial injustices can in no way be undermined by such omissions – they could only be enhanced.

In its study of NOBODY KNOWS (Japan 2004, Hirokazu Kore-eda), chapter two is framed through the pedagogical and feminist lenses of bell hooks (1994) and Sarah Ahmed (2017). Combined with her own perspective-shifting experiences of motherhood, Walker explores how ›lifeshocks‹[4] can attune new and profound habitus that alter our understandings of cinema. She adapts four culminative modes of listening – downloading, factual, empathetic, and generative – from a business-leadership context to her classroom to foster »a level of awareness that exceeds the film's diegesis *and* [our] own direct experiences« (emphasis preserved, 77). Having taught NOBODY KNOWS for over a decade, her analysis intertwines responses that the film has provoked in her students »to feel the completely involving impact of the film's unique sonic logic« (61). In so doing, she teases out »the archetypal sounds of childhood« (66), contributions from the Japanese acoustic guitar duo Gontiti, and the recurrence of a song first overheard from a playground and later sung by the protagonist Akira in a »musical effort to manage his grief« (69). Throughout her illustrative analysis, Walker employs Daniel Frampton's ›filmind‹ more clearly than in his »manifesto for a radically new way of understanding cinema«[5] as »a fully expressive medium« (2006, 99). She achieves this feat by simply pondering what a film asks of us when we listen generatively. In the case of NOBODY KNOWS, following Akira's singing, Walker suggests that »the film invites us to consider those times in our own lives when we might have power to pay attention *and* to intervene« (emphasis preserved, 70). She highlights the »eloquence of the nonverbal sounds« made by the siblings – the protagonists who are neglected by their parents and society within the narrative, but who are »privileged by the film's sonic structures« (71). Closing the

4 Borrowing from activist Sophie Sabbage (2018), Walker refers to confronting moments – and our responses to them – as ›lifeshocks‹ (14).

5 As stated on the cover of Frampton's *Filmosophy*, in which he outlines the filmind as a quasi-autonomous being.

chapter, Walker shares her post-screening classroom exercises along with her students' responses to signify »the importance of *our* bearing witness to the children's suffering, and our hearing better than the onscreen adults« (emphasis preserved, 75).

Chapter three makes the case for empathy and how music can extend a film's essence far beyond its runtime. Walker outlines approaches to teaching films that may subject students to »severe distress, trauma, and shock« but that may also »validate what they have already lived *and* hopefully expand greater knowledge of the world through hearing what the film says« (emphasis preserved, 81–2). Walker's code of classroom ethics and pedagogical methods are laid bare (84–6) before a close reading of DANCER IN THE DARK (USA 2000, Lars von Trier) is presented.

Through an almost exclusive and entirely uncritical reliance on Doc Childre and Howard Martin's 1999 self-help book *The HeartMath Solution* in this chapter, serious questions of critical engagement arise. Like the infamous Mozart Effect[6] or the rife claims that music tuned to A = 440 Hz is harmful and A = 432 Hz is healing,[7] HeartMath[8] has come under scrutiny as a pseudo-science that could benefit from an evaluation using the tools of post-modernist or post-truth critiques. Many of the ›peer-reviewed‹ laudations of HeartMath come from Stephen D. Edwards, who – at the time of writing – has published no less than 27 articles on the matter. His 2019 contribution opens strangely: »Along with the creativity of vast technological advances, humanity's endemic destructiveness continues. Planetary healing needs motivated this research.« In particular, it was Edwards' emphasis on HeartMath's objective of ›Global Coherence‹ that reminded me of the healing claims made by 432 Hz subscribers and the scope for abuse from programs that exploit vulner-

6 Essentially, the Effect claims that listening to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's music makes you smarter (something exaggerated by the press following the publication of the original study by Frances H. Rauscher et al. in 1993). For one of the many scientific rebuttals against the original unreplicable study, see Jakob Pietschnig et al. (2010), and for a sociological reappraisal highlighting the pernicious classist aspects of the claimed benefits of the Mozart Effect, see Clémentine Beauvais (2014).

7 See Ruth E. Rosenberg (2021) for a deliberation on the popularization of the 432 Hz phenomenon.

8 Now an ›institute‹, HeartMath sells various devices and software packages at a premium to help customers »[a]ccess a healthy and high-performance state called heart coherence, where your heart and brain are in sync – this helps you prevent or reduce stress, anxiety, and overwhelm, improve health and performance, and clear your thinking for more effective choices to live a healthier, happier life.« See: https://store.heartmath.com/innerbalance (10.07.2025).

abilities in people seeking to ›improve‹ their lives – such as El Sistema.[9] I imagine that these are neither the kinds of scholarship or associations that Walker wishes to prompt. That being said, the deep-breathing exercises that underscore the HeartMath technique can be beneficial – just as listening to a Mozart Piano Concerto performed by the Berlin Philharmonic at its favored A = 443 Hz can, or how listening to Javanese gamelan can (a defining attribute of gamelan is that each set is ›tuned to itself‹ and done so in a manner that does not correspond with Western conceptualizations of temperament); or indeed listening to a child create a song of their own without paying any credence to a starting (or ending) pitch. It is difficult to refute that listening to music, meditating, and engaging with films can be beneficial in an abundance of meaningful ways. These are more the kind of inferences that Walker draws upon. With a thoroughly persuasive and unapologetic rhetoric elsewhere, Walker's reliance on Childre and Martin's dubious HeartMath to confer what she already knows (»I have often intuited that all our hearts will begin to beat differently in response to emotionally loaded films that we see/hear together« [80]) seems like a disservice to the overall sageness of *Life 24x a Second*, and it threatens to undermine chapter three's otherwise poignant case study of DANCER IN THE DARK.

Chapter four confronts grief through three case studies that in the face of death can offer »many forms of life in their distinctive sonic structures« (141): LIFE OF PI (Canada 2012, Ang Lee), IRIKU (Japan 1952, Akira Kurosawa), and A STAR IS BORN (United States 2018, Bradley Cooper). In exploring films that teach us »about being positively transformed by sadness« (107), Walker combines the approaches established in the preceding chapters with psychology, »since death and grief are great levellers, humbling us all in the pain we cannot avoid as human beings, this is reason enough to join disciplinary forces« (108). Walker's comprehensive study of Mychael Danna's original score for LIFE OF PI is among the most musically rich analyses featured in *Life 24x a Second*. Here, her inquiry links Danna's compositional syntax with the protagonist's post-trauma coping strategies.

[9] El Sistema was first established in Venezuela in 1975 and is now active throughout several continents. Its mission is to enact social change by supplying instruments and musical training to disadvantaged children. Just as El Sistema has its benefits, it also has an enormous propensity – and, unfortunately, well-documented instances – for corruption and abuse of power. Their exploitation of self-improvement correlates with HeartMath ideologies. See: Geoffrey Baker's ethnographic exposé *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* (Oxford University Press: 2014) or Baker's condensed and updated feature for *Classical Music*: »El Sistema at 50: The rise and fall (and rise again?) of Venezuela's controversial music programme« (2025).

Conversely, Walker's analysis of music in IRIKU demonstrates the protagonist Kanji Watanabe's protracted turn to accepting his own terminal illness and how the film's »visual and sonic details are aligned in honoring his legacy« (121). Walker listens to IRIKU so that she may »live better in [Wantanabe's] memory« (131). Moreover, Walker applies this lesson to her own grief, sharing the influence and memory of the book's dedicatee Danijela Kulezic-Wilson – an esteemed and sorely missed scholar of film music and sound († 2021).

Moving from the entire soundtrack of LIFE OF PI to comparisons of two songs in IRIKU, Walker then focuses on a single piece in A STAR IS BORN: »the final song about Ally continuing to live after the trauma of Jackson's death« (135). Walker shows how each of these films musically reveal how their protagonists »make meaning from loss«, with Ally »turning her private grief into a public act of ritualized mourning, refusing to be constricted into silence by the double taboo of her husband's destruction by addiction and suicide« (136). As with IRIKU, Walker enacts lyrical analysis and assesses the vocal performances, noting how Ally's »rising voice reminds [her] of the strength that comes with confronting grief without expecting to fully recover from it« (139). In closing the triple case studies of chapter four, Walker notes how she is empowered by the musicalized resilience of the films' protagonists – that she too »can be emboldened in the face of grief« (141).

Chapter five is aptly titled »Turning the Microphone Around«. Here, Walker privileges the voices of her students and alumni. A tapestry of their responses to her survey »How do films feed our lives, reflect our lives and help us live better« (reproduced on pages 145–6) form the basis of this chapter, which is organized through 13 affecting subheadings: Black Lives Matter; Communications; Compassion; Coping; Emotionality; Greater perspective; Heightened capacity to hear; Identification; Mental health; Ongoing reverberations; Personal growth; Professional development; and Multiple levels of meaning. Walker's candor is reciprocated by her former students, who note resonances between films they find meaningful. Her alumni find solace or validation through careful audioviewing; students who – in their powerful and anonymized words – are »caring for a terminally ill family member« (153), in »a toxic relationship« (154), privy to »the horrors and

comradery of war« (156), »trying to find their way in post 9/11 America« (159), »dealing with feelings of abandonment« (163), relating to »the creepy nature of prejudice in everyday life for African Americans« (165), experiencing »personal traumas regarding mental health« (168); and »attempting to be open and exploratory in relation to my sexuality« (174). Such insights are precious reminders to dignify the duty of care that we have to our students whose battles we may never know, but that we nevertheless have the potential to alleviate or unwittingly exacerbate.

The sixth and closing chapter is relatively short, but among the most poignant – especially in its tribute to Kulezic-Wilson. Here, Walker embroils HeartMath, lifeshocks, generative listening, and psychology in sharing the deeply-personal impacts that CALL ME BY YOUR NAME (United States 2017, Luca Guadagnino) and PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE (France 2019, Céline Sciamma) have had on her – explaining how they »mattered to [her] when Danijela was alive, but they mean even more now that she has died« (189). Walker frames the analysis of these films within her own grief and its paralyzing effects (181–2). Noting her perception of temporal shifts in the throes of mourning and coupling it with one psychological study,[10] Walker assesses how the closing scenes of CALL ME BY YOUR NAME and PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE »use music to achieve their remarkable transformative power, along with sustained long takes« – how they seem to »slow down time *yet retain its purposefulness*« (emphasis preserved, 182). Both films recapitulate music heard earlier in the narratives, »communicating the scale of the whole film as well as the present moment and the imagined future that goes beyond the plot« (186). Walker values these films because they »can teach us about the importance of slowing down to heal ourselves« (182).

[10] The bibliographic details for Sylvie Droit-Volet and Sandrine Gil's psychological study »The Emotional Body and Time Perception« are misattributed to *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (2009, 364, 1943–1953, https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0013), which are the details for their co-authored »The time–emotion paradox« article. »The Emotional Body and Time Perception« study is actually from *Cognition and Emotion* (2015, 30/4, 687–699, https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2015.1023180). It is initially unclear whether Walker confused or conflated Droit-Volet and Gil's collaborative articles. After verifying, it turns out that the lengthy extract (on 182) is from the abstract to their 2015 article.

In ›talking back‹[11] to the modus operandi of academic work (namely disciplinary norms that tend to preference objectivity over subjectivity), Walker hopes that her methods »will resonate for the reader, but without assuming that they automatically will« (21). This foretold my own responses to a book that frequently tested my ability to suspend skepticism in favor of better compassion. Yet whenever Walker's sincerity and sheer empathetic loveliness teetered towards cloying, my qualms were averted by heart-wrenching disclosures and compelling evidence of classroom successes.

Although Walker set out to chart her own course, clearer sign-posting of existing research and better situating of her work among contemporary practice would be welcomed – particularly from the disciplines of film music studies, pedagogy, and ethnography – as would more critical stances towards her atypical references (namely HeartMath, but also the vast array of non-peer-reviewed sources). A significant risk was braved in these regards, but those who meet Walker's self-stated ›unorthodoxies‹ in the spirit with which they are intended will reap substantial rewards. Ultimately, this is a book that will elicit (re)watchings of the case studies, prompt us to listen to films anew, and to re-evaluate both our pedagogical praxes and how we position ourselves amid our work – achievements not to be underestimated.

Overall, I interpret Walker's approach, insight, and resultant findings as a welcome counterpoint to increasingly perceived threats toward the arts and humanities like, for instance, the misuse of artificial intelligence; the commodification of students in higher learning institutions; and therefore the existential crises of departmental closures or stringent budget cuts that seem disproportionate in comparison to many of our STEM, medicine, law, and commerce colleagues.

Before closing, some non-content-related considerations are offered. *Life 24x a Second* is handsomely presented by Oxford University Press in hardback and paperback editions (it is also available as an e-book from € 20). It features well-selected stills from all the major case studies, enticing epigraphs to open each chapter, and a well-compiled index. Points

[11] The idea of ›talking back‹ is especially prominent in chapter two where Walker reclaims the term as »a subversive and necessary ideal« (24).

of frustration arise from the frequent (but very minor) typos and the deficient bibliography of less than one page.

If readers emerge from *Life 24x a Second* motivated in any small way to adapt Walker's ideas, surely our work – and our interactions with students, colleagues, cinema, and society alike – will grow more conscientious. Further to her rich and singular analysis of films and film sound tracks, Walker proves in *Life 24x a Second* that compassion and academic integrity are not only compatible, but mutually beneficial.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

Babel, Anika: Elsie Walker: *Life 24x a Second. Cinema, Selfhood, and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press 2024. In: *Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung* 19 (2025), S. 155–165, DOI: https://doi.org/10.59056/kbzf.2025.19.p155-165.

Kieler Beiträge zur Filmmusikforschung (ISSN 1866-4768)