

“Mes films sont fragiles”¹

essay by Dr Robert Casteels

‘Nuages, wolken, clouds’

In this essay, I will examine the relation between music and image in the movie *Clouds-letters to my son*. Marion Hänsel's eighth full-length film defies classification: it is more than a minimalist film without actors and plot, or a stunningly beautiful nature documentary, or a poetic essay on human relationships. For 76 minutes, film director Hänsel embarks the spectator on an oneiric journey across continents, through natural and artificial clouds, in skies and in paintings. At the end, the spectator leaves the cinema hall with a peaceful mind and desire to rediscover our celestial canopy.

Formal structure

Clouds unfolds like a book that comprises a preface or the opening credits, four chapters² and a coda, or the closing credits.³ This ‘book’ comprises the following components: the visual presentation of gaseous masses, a voice-over that reads eleven extracts from virtual letters, improvised music by Michael Galasso, sounds from nature and moments of total silence. To reveal the structural relation between sound and image, I use letter symbol ‘A’ for the presence of music, ‘B’ for nature sounds and ‘C’ for moments of total silence.

Literary structure	Sequence of ‘A’ of ‘B’ and ‘C’ ⁴					
Opening credits	C1					
Chapter 1: from the space						
Letter 1	A1	B1	C2			
Letter 2 (near miscarriage)	C3	A2	B2	C4	B3	C5
Chapter 2: evening						
Letter 3 (perspective on death)	C6 B4 C7					
Letter 4 (first separation)	C8	A3	B5			A4 B6
Letter 5 (parental separation)	A5		C9		B7	
Chapter 3: storm						
Letter 6 (fragility of my films)	A6		C10		B8	C11
Letter 7 (mother to son)	A7		B9	C12		
Letter 8 (son to mother)	C13	A8	B10	C14	B11	
Chapter 4: night						
Letter 9 (snowy mountain)	C15					
Letter 10 (Tate Gallery)	A9		B12		B13 (A10)	
Letter 11 (on departure)						
Closing credits	A11					

Only text 1 and 7 are followed by the same sequence. All other sequences are different, whereby a sense of variety is created. Such a formal construction could not have been improvised or left to a stroke of luck. Discounting the opening and closing credits, music only occupies 35 per cent of the total length of the movie.

Music by Michael Galasso

Hänsel tells⁵ that she was very impressed by the haunting music that American composer Michael Galasso composed for the movie *In the mood for love*.⁶ Galasso watched the still unedited *Clouds* and gathered musicians to record hours of improvisations in a studio in Brussels. Closing credits tell us that Galasso composed for no more than a chamber music formation comprising koto, cello, countertenor voice, bass clarinet and violin.⁷ Specific musical

gestures or leitmotifs⁹ do not appear in *Clouds*. The music of A8 does not portray the physical movements of clouds. A10 and B13 appear simultaneously and form so to speak a musical *stretto*, but again, the music does not mimic the circular clouds that we see on the movie screen. Hänsel was sensitive to avoid the pitfall of redundancy. Rather than depicting what the eye can see for itself, music influences the spectator's inner thoughts.

	Duration	Empirical description ⁹
A1	84"	Superimposition of violin lines on a D major hexachord
A2	124"	<i>Pizzicati</i> , long pedal notes, embryo of melody played by strings
A3	147" ¹⁰	Countertenor voice, bass clarinet and membranophones
A4	146"	G minor descending <i>ostinato</i> by voice and koto with wooden chimes, geophone, suspended cymbals, maracas and finger cymbals
A5	72"	<i>Pianissimo</i> electronic sounds resulting from ring modulation
A6	226"	C minor <i>portato</i> string chords with distant pan flute solo punctuated by membranophones
A7	134"	Solo koto revolving around pivotal pitch g
A8	137"	G minor rhythmic <i>ostinato</i> dialogues between <i>battuto</i> violin and membranophone supported by bass clarinet pedal notes
A9	154"	Warble of fluttering sounds by flute, koto, violin, wind chimes and finger cymbals on <i>ostinato</i> pitch g pedal note by the koto
A10	238"	D major (with sharp four) koto solo with electronically produced rocket and tambourine sounds
A11	150"	E major <i>ostinato</i> of ascending quavers

The style is mostly minimalist with gentle *ostinati*. The language is tonal, in minor keys with the exception of A1 and A11. The subtle mix of sounds produced by electronics and by live instrumentalists blurs the borders between music and nature sounds. This creates a greater sense of aural unity.

Sounds of nature

The following table shows the description and sequence of the nature sounds:

	Sounds made by nature:	Sounds made by men:
B1	rain	-
B2	bird songs	-
B3	wind	-
B4	successively: wind, storm, rain	-
B5	-	indefinite soft metallic sound
B6	distant songs of birds	
B7	tropical rain	-
B8	wind blowing around sky-scrapers	-
B9	-	flying plane, pylons, train
B9	fire	-
B10	-	belching factory towers
B11	waterfalls, far-off, then near-by	-
B12	snow	-
B13	wind, then geyser	-

Total silence

According to Hänsel,¹¹ the duration of the music composed by Galasso originally amounted to 66 minutes. She tells¹² how she reduced the amount of music to keep space for silence, sounds of rain and wind. The movie starts in silence (C1).¹³ Like a good composer or playwright, Hänsel keeps the spectator interested by building up an expectation and then contradicting that same expectation. The music stops at the start of the volcanic eruption. We see lights of a gigantic city (C5), cars (C7) and sky scrapers (C11), but hear nothing except total silence. The very absence of sound renders these manifestations of urban civilisation even noisier. Inversely, during the falling snow of C12 when silence is expected, the voice-over takes the spectator by surprise. The longest silence of C15 leads the spectator into the world of paintings.

"My movies are fragile" says Hänsel. Artistic masterworks may at first seem effortless and simple. Elaborate but seamless structures support creative inspiration. Emotion then sets the spectator in motion. That is the magic.

¹ Quote from *Clouds*.

² As suggested in the DVD of *Clouds* published by Cinemien Homescreen.

³ Re Hänsel's voracious appetite for literature, see: Aubenas, Jacqueline. *Marion Hänsel* (Bruxelles: Commissariat général aux Relations internationales de la Communauté française de Belgique/Wallonie-Bruxelles et Service général de l'Audiovisuel et des Multimédias, 2003): 81, 83, 88.

⁴ The numeral after the letter symbol simply indicates the sequence, i.e. C2 follows C1, etc.

⁵ Aubenas, Jacqueline. *Ibid.*: 75.

⁶ *Fa yeung nin wa* (2000) directed by Wong kar-wai.

⁷ The composer himself plays the violin. In Aubenas, Jacqueline. *Ibid.*: 75. Hänsel mentions the presence of percussionists from Brazil.

⁸ In contrast to *The Quarry*.

⁹ Done by listening, as to the best of my knowledge, a score of the music of *Clouds* does not exist.

¹⁰ With interspersed silences.

¹¹ Aubenas, Jacqueline. *Ibid.*: 75.

¹² From the interview in the DVD *Clouds*.

¹³ As does *The Quarry*.

¹⁴ Titles of themes are given by the composer himself.