ABSTRACT

Post-modern perspectives in film theory increasingly question both an assumed ‘natural’ and harmonious relationship between real world sound and vision, and an assumed dominance of ‘vision over other senses’ in the ‘audio-visual contract’ of dominant cinema. Prompted by a call to ‘disengage sound thinking and its technical and aesthetic applications from its naturalist rut’, this practice/research project asks: How can rendered acoustic sound create a liminal and emotive sense of time and place in sound led audio visual installation?

The term ‘liminal’ was originally used in anthropological contexts, but since the 1960’s ‘liminal’ has been applied generally in relation to theatre and performing arts and used to describe altered states of being/consciousness outside of linear experiences of time and/or space, during which subjects may experience altered perceptions of reality.

The term acoustic refers to the physical qualities of a sound determined by its spatial properties, and in the real world, the volume, reverberation and amount of ‘noise’ (harmonic frequencies) surrounding a key sound, are indices of a sound’s spatial context.

‘Car’ – 5-minute audio/visual installation, considers real world sound as a ‘multi sensorial’ experience. Chion explains that, ‘we experience the world in a composite of sensations and not disassociated elements’. This assertion is based on the notion that the sonic world is inextricably interwoven with our other senses – touch, smell and vision.

The influence of this concept on a personal practice is in rethinking the conceptual boundary between reproductive and rendered sound recording to achieve a more precise composite representation of time and place.

Thematically, ‘Car’, represents a familiar daily drive through a major city interchange and attempts to create a synchresis of sensory responses to a single space from the pleasurable (autopian) perspective of the car. Acoustic auditory collisions between city and country, figure and landscape are rendered to exploit the further binary of material and liminal space.

‘Car’ is one of four sound-led film essays that represent experiments in ‘Reduced listening’. This concept advocated by all major writers on film sound questions the supporting and passive role of sound in relation to vision and describes an unnatural process of conscious or forced listening in order to make accessible the emotive, material and aesthetic values of the sonic world anew.

‘Car’ is presented as a surround sound audiovisual installation to specifically draw attention to the definition of film space as one of parity between the visual screen and the ‘Superfield’ (the physical space surrounding the visual screen). The Superfield serves to enforce reduced listening through acousmatic treatments of sound.

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Exhibition requirement: ‘Car’ – Small Dark or Low lit room. DVD player. LCD screen 50”. (4 speakers and Amplifier Supplied by Andy Williams)
HOW CAN RENDERED ACOUSTIC SOUND CREATE A LIMINAL AND EMOTIVE SENSE OF TIME AND SPACE IN SOUND-LED AUDIOVISUAL INSTALLATION?

Soundfilm

Recent studies in Film theory have re-energised debates around the relationship between sound and vision in film. Altman in particular questions the legacy of early writings on cinema that privileges vision over sound and which established a definition of cinema as one, 'with or without sound, while sound without image is no longer cinema'[1].

Equally, the hegemony of cinema naturalised a fixed notion of cinema that focused on sounds ‘role’ rather than ‘function’. Altman describes this as ‘ontological speculation’[2], and invites us to re-visit and re-examine sounds’ ‘function’ in film to include its early beginnings, through close textual analysis. This process, it is argued, would reveal sound’s functionality in story, plot and narrative without which meaning would be depleted.

Chion, in relation to film practice, also expounds that it is by addressing film sound, that ‘cinema, re-problematising itself as a simulacrum, can find new vitality’[3]. Influenced by the call for ‘a new way of thinking about film sound’[4], this research begins an investigation of sound-led, phenomenological approaches to the representation of the real world.

Within the context of a fast evolving moving image media, cinema continues to be a very ‘particular’ spectator experience, to which surround sound is cited as a key contributor. The ‘Superfield’ liberated by Dolby digital technology, capitalises on our ability to visual sound spatially and makes conscious a sound space and sound dynamic[5] that ‘extends the ‘visual’ image beyond the boundary of the screen.

Acoustic sounds and noises that occupy space outside the visual frame create an aesthetic and materiality that display both autonomy from, and linkage to vision, (the former notably resisted by earlier monaural cinema). Arnheim identifies the function of low-key atmospheres and incidental sounds in particular, to construct three-dimensional spaces and evoke subtle associations and emotions[6].

It is the exploration of acoustic landscape, simultaneously bound to and separate from the visual screen that invites a redefinition of ‘film space’ as one of parity between screen and auditorium.

Car, thematically explores acoustic auditory collisions between city and country, figure and landscape, from the subjective viewpoint of the car. The time/space frame is guided by ‘stories of sound’, experienced every day and remembered over time and is inspired by a sentiment of John Smith (Blight, Lost Sound) that, ‘if you look hard enough, all meanings can be found or produced close to home’.[7]

In this exercise, rendered acoustic ambient and incidental sounds equate synchronicity with materiality and the representation of liminal space with asynchronous, acousmatic sounds. Calvacanti explains that ‘asynchronous sounds “introduce non-literal suggestions”, whilst “images provide literal statements” [enabling] “cinema to achieve a more exact rendering of reality, in particular, emotional reality.”[8]

In many respects sound-led film may be described as experiments in ‘Reduced listening’ - the process of ‘unnatural’ but ‘fruitful engagement with the emotional, physical and aesthetic value of a sound’. [9] Balaz explains that everyday auditory experiences negate scrutiny of a sound’s individual qualities for its own sake, and that ‘we rarely hear the sounds of nature and of life without seeing something. We are not accustomed [therefore] to drawing conclusions about visual things from sounds we hear’. [10] Artists such as Tarkosky (Mirror’74), and Jarman (Blue’93), exemplify the process of ‘Reduced’ listening in their work and when compounded with the visual image, is capable of revealing new dimensions to human experience and nature.

However, in acknowledging the dynamic between sound and image in cinema and the inevitable magnetism of the visual screen, sound/film theorists remain convinced that the process of ‘Reduced listening’ will benefit new narrative synergies between sound and image and introduce the spectator to new ways of ‘seeing’ sound film.

A key challenge set by this research has been to build a convincing case for a film sound aesthetic that presents authentic and ‘truthful’ representations of lived experience, while inviting a mind-set of reduced listening.
Reproductive and Rendered sound

Filmmakers and audiences alike often share the pre-supposition that faithful and accurate recording of real sound will provide an equally real reproduction. The basis of this assumption lies in the idea of ‘a sound … which exists un-violated or wholly prior to ‘transformation’ - a firm ground that is more real than its recording.’

Although professional sound recording strives to reproduce simulacra of optimum definition, and rightly so, high definition ‘reproductive’ sound alone cannot lay claim to a greater sense of truth or reality than ‘rendered’ sound. Rendering is distinguished from ‘reproductive’ sound by its various post-production treatments. (This includes the creation of ‘original’ simulacra not found in the real world, such as special effects and music, which become real.)

Understanding sound as simulacra in the context of recording the real world is subject to the same debates of authenticity, objectivity, and subjectivity that dominate scrutiny of the visual image.

In discussing auditory media, Baudrillard defines the boundaries between ‘artifice and real world’ as ‘uniquely blurred’ and the ‘very nature of sound at odds with the concept of boundary’.

The evolutionary process of sound rendering is clearly measurable by its technological advancements. However, recent studies by Altman and Doane, and critiqued by Belton, view rendering as ideological - a ‘progression towards self-effacement’, explained by Altman as the, ‘erasing of any extra sound that might have been captured on the sound track’.

For Belton, there is irony in the pursuit of realism by such an increasingly high tech and ‘unreal’ process. In fact, the purity of sound, stripped of its acoustic connection to a particular locale, often makes it seem ‘artificially quiet and pushing beyond realism’. To recapture a sense of authenticity, noises and sounds, first considered as intrusions, are reintroduced because ‘a certain amount of noise has become necessary to signify realism’.

Irrespective of the issues posed by an over zealous post sound technology, rendering sound and the artistry of acoustic composition has proved itself as a means by which the ‘feelings associated with the situation’ may be conveyed, and subjective ‘senses of realism and truth’, achieved.

Understanding sound as simulacra also questions the notion of a sound event as a singular phenomenon. ‘Each individual will hear ‘a different narrative’ that carries a spatial signature, assigned as it were, with the particular circumstances in which it was heard.’

This idea of real world sound as a multiple event reflects Chion’s re-working of film sound in relation to lived experience, in which he states, ‘we experience the world in a composite of sensations and not disassociated elements’. This assertion is based on the notion that ‘real’ sound is experienced as ‘clumps of agglomerated sensations’, where the sonic world is inextricably interwoven with our other senses – touch, smell and vision.

It is the representation of a multi sensorial definition of lived aural experience that Chion et al. state, ‘is the function of cinema sound’.

Car, attempts to create a synchresis of sensory responses to a single stretch of road by bringing together immediate and familiar acoustic rhythms of city traffic, remembered auditory observations and the sensation of disconnectedness that comes with driving a familiar route. In this exercise, rendered acoustic ambient and incidental sounds equate synchronicity with materiality and the representation of liminal space with asynchronous acousmatic sounds to achieve integrity of subjective realism.

The writer has learnt that the ideological progression of rendering technology towards ‘self effacement’ is a misguided route to achieving ‘authentic’ sound simulacra and that the imperfections and natural intrusions in acoustic environments have proved to be integral to film sound realism.

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1‘Synchresis (from synchronism and synthesis) - the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears at the same time.’ Chion, M.
Equally sound is subjective and multi-sensorial and thus a reproductive approach to direct sound recording will not create a ‘true’ representation of lived experience. Sound’s innate artificiality requires artificial means by which meaning is made and rendering is an authentic method by which the truth of the auditory world may be accessed. Acoustic environments are in a continuous state of flux; unique and arbitrary symphonies of the everyday. There is no definitive acoustic mix that says ‘city’ or ‘nature’ as there is no fixed and ‘original’ state of reality. It is never the literal, original ‘sound’ that is reproduced in the recording, but one perspective on it, a sample, a reminder of it.

The concept of auditory lived experience as multi sensory and multi perspective begins to broaden the perspective on subjective realism and the creative possibilities of acousmatic treatments of off-screen film space. 

The magnetism of the film screen is profound and further experimentation with off-screen auditory space is tempered by a greater understanding of the ways in which sound enriches vision. Synchronicity does not mean that sound merely duplicates a pre-existing meaning in image but meaning is made by synchrony.


Film Sound theory and practice Columbia Univ. Press 1985

[9] Chion, M. AudioVision Sound on Screen, p.31
[10] Balaz, B. Theory of Film Sound, in Weis, E. & Belton, J., Film Sound: Theory and Practice, p10
[14] ibid.p.66
[16] ibid.p.67
[18] ibid.p.96
[19] ibid, p.107
[21] Chion, M. AudioVision: Sound on Screen, p.112
[22] ibid.p.112