

Introduction

Sound in the Cinema and Beyond

By Randolph Jordan

The explosion of academic interest in sound studies over the past decade has ensured that I can no longer begin a special sound-oriented issue of a journal such as this by declaring the topic a “neglected domain.” Serious inquiry dealing with sound from a wealth of disciplinary perspectives has definitively taken place. In many ways, being free of the cachet that comes with obscurity is very appealing; I no longer have to justify my interest in sound, and can comfortably take it for granted that the auditory dimension is now deemed worthy of exploration in its own right.

This is a film journal, and my own work is grounded within the discipline of film studies. Yet I am also profoundly interested in the function of interdisciplinarity in contributing to the kinds of work that we do within the confines of disciplinary boundaries. The concept for this issue, entitled *Sound in the Cinema and Beyond*, is to bring together recent work on sound-related issues that illustrates important points of connection between the study of film and work being done in other areas of the arts. So while each essay in this issue discusses sound in some way or another, what is ultimately more important is how the

subject of sound here acts as a bridge between the discipline of film studies and a more general field of artistic practices. This isn't to say that the discussion of sound in these essays takes on a secondary role to that of interdisciplinarity; each individual piece has valuable things to say about sound in the contexts established by each author. Rather, it is the goal of the issue as a whole to convert the enthusiasm that each of these authors shows towards the study of sound into a vehicle for breaking down barriers between film studies and other disciplines so that each of these approaches might ultimately help inform the other. There has long been talk of the death of cinema at the hands of new technologies along with increasing interest in other forms of audiovisual art. My hope is that this issue will help illustrate the continuing vibrancy of the cinema proper *alongside* the vast arena of other art forms which make significant use of sound.

Key to the continued vibrancy of the cinema is, in my opinion, increasing adoption of the production practice that sound designer Randy Thom has dubbed "designing a movie for sound" (Thom 2003). Essentially, what he means by this is that filmmakers should be thinking about sound from the script stage onwards so that it might be an integral part of what has long been considered primarily a visual medium. In effect, Thom is calling for a blurring of the boundaries between levels of production that have often kept sound out of the picture until the very final stages. By breaking down these barriers, filmmakers can bring sound into every aspect of a film's design, and end up with a more integrated product as a result. I suggest that the same model should apply for those of us who study film

and, by extension, the whole realm of audiovisual art. As was expressed by Gianluca Sergi during his keynote address at last year's edition of the *Sounding Out* conference at the University of Sunderland in the UK: instead of establishing sound as an area of special interest (by creating sound panels at conferences, sound courses at universities, etc.), academics should simply bring sound into their everyday discussions, whatever their areas of specialization may be (Sergi 2006). Effectively, this would mean bringing sound into discussions where it has previously been left out. For film scholars, this approach might be called "designing the study of a movie for sound." The goal of this would not be to emphasize sound over other concerns, but rather to recognize, as Thom would have filmmakers do, that film is necessarily an audiovisual medium. Just as stories are more effectively told when the sound half of a film is considered during its earliest stages of production, so too is a theorist's examination of a film more effective when the sound half of that film is considered an integral part of the analysis. By that way of thinking, a "special sound issue" such as the one you are currently reading might still pander to the idea that considerations of sound alone require a privileged, rather than integrated, position within the academy. Yet the goal of this issue is to point to the value of integration and the benefits of crossing boundaries in order to bring disparate areas of interest into contact with one another. If read from a general position rather than one specific to the cinema, it is just such boundary-crossing that Thom's manifesto speaks to.

So the REAL theme for this issue is “blurred boundaries.” Though not a particularly original one in this day and age, this theme is nonetheless appropriate to the concept of designing films for sound, which on a more general level can be understood as a call for integrated practices that break down artificial distinctions between lines so often drawn by practitioners and theorists alike. So in this issue we present a series of essays and forums exploring the dissolution of boundaries, be they between sound and image, theory and practice, or the divisions of labour in the production of audiovisual art. Also under consideration here are: the dividing lines between score, appropriated soundtrack material, and sound design in the cinema and beyond; the distinctions film theorists and practitioners make between the inside and outside of the diegesis; conceptual differences between musical instruments and media technologies; and phenomenological differences between the experiences of interiority and exteriority. It just so happens that all of these essays have sound as one of their main objects of interest, though for all of us sound remains only one object of interest among many.

As an illustration of the kind of boundary line that these essays often seek to dissolve, this double-issue of *Offscreen* is divided into two main sections. The first presents three feature essays and two forums dealing with the cinema proper. Here you’ll find a collection of ten short celebrations of favourite moments of film sound, followed by feature essays on the soundmaking practices of the Coen Brothers, Gus Van Sant, Hildegard Westerkamp, and Ryan Tebo. This section then concludes with another collection of short essays addressing the continued

relevance of the word *diegesis* and its related terminology. The second section presents three more feature essays and one more forum, this time addressing matters that fall outside of the realm of cinema and into the larger sphere of sound art and audiovisual performance. Here you will find discussions of audiovisual integrations in Visual Music and laptop performance, the hybridization of musical instruments and media technologies, and the role of headphones in changing the way we think about interiority.

All of the entries in this issue share a common desire to celebrate forms of art that make significant use of sound as part of their proceedings. My hope in creating a line between the two sections of the issue is that this line will promptly become invisible. Those interested specifically in the cinema, which are likely to be the bulk of our readers, will hopefully find sufficient cause here to branch outside this discipline and consider what similar discourses are at work in the larger sphere of audiovisual production. Similarly, for those coming at this issue from an interest in sound media, they might discover a new interest in films which strive for models based on audiovisual integration rather than outdated ideas about film's visual essence. And for those with an inherent bias towards interdisciplinary studies, the role of sound in this issue will hopefully act as the connecting thread between the variety of approaches on display here. So with these things in mind, let's take a closer look at what you'll find in the pages that follow.

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The issue begins with a forum celebrating the role of sound in the cinema, bringing together ten short essays by a variety of film scholars detailing auditory moments from the history of cinema that they have found to be worthy of discussion. From *The Jazz Singer* through to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, with a number of stops in North America and Europe along the way, this collection reflects a variety of interests in film sound: Evens, Gorbman, and Phillips each appreciate the role of silence in their chosen excerpts; Batcho, Shingler, Totaro and Whittington offer selections which establish alternate realities through elaborate soundtracks that play with the boundaries between interior and exterior experience; Weis considers three distinct approaches to audiovisual relationships as demonstrated by her selections from three acknowledged masters of the art; Habib discusses the profound role that listening plays for the characters in his chosen film; and Wright rounds the forum out with some thoughts on a very particular sound effect that transcends the boundaries of a single work and can be heard as a motif spanning the past fifty years of Hollywood sound design. Taken as a whole, this forum reflects approaches to filmmaking that consider sound to be an integral part of their overall design. As such, this set of essays serves as an ideal opener to this special edition of *Offscreen* dedicated to the pursuit of audiovisual integration in the cinema and beyond.

Then we move to a more detailed consideration of films designed for sound in the first set of feature essays, each of which traces slightly different modes of design. We begin with Randall Barnes who takes us deep into the concept of “designing a film for sound” using *Barton Fink* as a case study for examining the close working relationship between writer/directors Joel and Ethan Coen, sound designer Skip Lievsay, and composer Carter Burwell. Barnes draws on a variety of interviews with this long standing collaborative team - including some conducted by the author himself while completing his dissertation research - in order to flesh out the production methods of a group of filmmakers clearly as concerned with the expressive power of their film’s soundtrack as with the image. He takes us from the level of the script, through the shooting, and on into the sound mixing stage in order to elucidate the processes by which these filmmakers integrate sound into the larger work. In so doing, Barnes illustrates a model that he suggests could be a template for better sound design practices within the Hollywood system. At the same time, Barnes offers some intriguing analysis of the finished film which demonstrates why attention to *Barton Fink*’s sound design is important for both practitioners and theorists alike.

Next you’ll find my discussion with Hildegard Westerkamp about the use of her soundscape compositions in the films of Gus Van Sant. My questions to her reflect my interest in how her work operates on two simultaneous levels within these films: that of appropriated material originally designed for a non-cinematic context, and that of sound design which could easily be mistaken for

material produced especially for these films. The result of this dual-layered positioning is an intriguing hybrid of the effects of a compilation soundtrack and dedicated sound design, and her answers to my questions offer valuable insights into the re-positioning of her work within this context. I then draw on these insights as I examine two important shots from the end of *Last Days* which I believe are reflective of Van Sant's "Death" trilogy as a whole. Ultimately my aim here is to illustrate how certain concepts that Westerkamp deals with in her own work are similar to those explored by Van Sant, making his appropriation of her work decidedly appropriate. As such, Van Sant's engagement with Westerkamp's work offers a very special example of how films might be designed with sound in mind.

For the last feature essay in the cinema section, Brett Kashmere examines Ryan Tebo's recent documentary *Whoever Fights Monsters*, a film which deals with the nature of improvisational music through a unique approach to the filmmaking process itself. Though the film features footage of eight contemporary improvisers doing their thing, which for some filmmakers would satisfy the improv quotient of a documentary on the subject, Tebo has gone many steps further than the standard for the genre: he has created a film that is not only *about* improvisation, but is itself constructed *as* an improvisation - or more precisely, as a *particular* improvisation. Tebo arrived at the structure for the film - right down to details of shot length - by patterning his audiovisual editing strategies after the structure of Ornette Coleman's classic 1961 album *Free Jazz*.

Kashmere explores Tebo's process while offering insightful commentary on the relationships between jazz improvisation, filmmaking, and the way they have come together in this film. The result is a marvelous look into the potential for filmmakers to take the idea of "designing a film for sound" to levels rarely glimpsed in cinemas past or present.

Finally, to complete the section of this issue dedicated to the cinema proper, we have a forum addressing an ongoing debate regarding the continuing relevance of the term *diegesis* and its attendant distinctions between *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* sound. This forum arose out of various discussions that have taken place on the *sound-article* email list hosted by filmsound.org, the now legendary site created by Sven E. Carlsson which has become the internet's foremost resource on matters of film sound. These discussions were often founded upon a basic split between theorists and practitioners, the latter generally feeling that this terminology is of little value in the actual making of films. Many such practitioners expressed the idea that such terminology is strictly the domain of academics who like to use elitist jargon while over-interpreting their objects of scrutiny. I can certainly understand where such sentiments might stem from. I have no problem believing that industry film sound people don't use the terms *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* while working on their projects. And I certainly have no problem agreeing that some academics are guilty of throwing jargon around unnecessarily. Yet as an academic who also practices the art of sound recording and mixing (though admittedly on a non-professional level), I can't help but think

there is some value in holding onto the terminology founded upon the concept of the diegesis.

So I invited opinions on the matter from members of the *sound-article* list and beyond. The resulting forum presents five takes on this terminology and its usefulness to the theory and practice of film sound. Henry M. Taylor kicks things off by reminding us that the use of this terminology in film theory has been somewhat misappropriated from its origins, while ultimately conceding that its successful adaptation has earned it a vibrant place amongst film scholars, clearly illustrating its continued relevance. We then follow with three essays that point to interesting areas of film sound that this terminology helps us to flesh out: Martin F. Norden examines the role of diegetic sound as provider of narrative commentary, a role that belies its often perceived status as indifferent part of the story world; Mark Kerins asks how the auditory construction of the diegesis has changed in the era of multi-channel sound; and I postulate what value there might be in distinguishing between two kinds of diegetic sound not often discussed. And the last word goes to Academy Award-winning sound designer Randy Thom. He brings a view from the side of industry, taking a position that reflects the opinions held by many of the folks working as professional sound people: that this terminology simply isn't needed when filmmakers discuss sound during the production process. However, he takes it one step further, offering up an intriguing hypothesis as to why the term is irrelevant when considering the actual uses to which film sound is so often put. As such, Thom crosses the boundary

line between theorist and practitioner, ultimately suggesting that the reasons why sound designers don't use these terms might well be the same reasons why theorists should put them to bed once and for all.

When all is said and done, this forum serves as an interesting view of the boundary that exists between film theorists and those who produce our objects of study. For some, these lines are not to be crossed. However, as many of the ideas presented in this forum suggest, there may yet be methods of reconciling the ways in which theorists and practitioners think about their work. In the end, perhaps issues of language need not stand in the way of celebrating those cinematic moments so enjoyed by theorists and practitioners alike.

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Now to the second section which explores the world of audiovisual art that lies beyond the cinema. We begin with Mitchell Akiyama's piece, reaching into the realm of sound conscious filmmaking and then leading us out into the world beyond its borders, a world where artists strive to find new models for the joining of image and sound. In so doing, Akiyama takes us on a journey through the world of live audiovisual performance, from its historical beginnings through to its modern day implementations in the world of laptop concerts. Much more than a valuable history lesson, Akiyama strives for an assessment of the issues that artists have long been struggling with – in the cinema and beyond - when trying to

find more organic solutions to the joining of sound and image. Along the way he engages with questions surrounding the relationship between performance and recorded material, synaesthetic experience and its potential exploration by new media, and the work of numerous contemporary audiovisual performers in search of the state of the art: a new audiovisual language.

Then, in the first essay of this issue to eschew considerations specific to audiovisual relationships, Jonathan Sterne nevertheless continues with the more general theme of blurred boundaries by considering the hybridization of media technologies and musical instruments that we have become so used to in today's world of basement recording studios and stadium DJ concerts. Yet his approach here is to address issues raised by such hybridization while taking us back in time to the genesis of this boundary crossing which, he argues, *predates* the origins of sound recording itself. His aim is to point to a problem with the way that media/instrument hybrids have been, and continue to be dealt with by academics: the imposed distinction between *instrument* and *medium* that practitioners have long since abandoned. As Sterne suggests: "It is time to catch up with the people we study." This essay provides a starting point for doing just that, offering some valuable tools for future considerations of the dissolved lines between practices of recording, reproduction, and the creation of music. In turn, perhaps these tools might well be adapted for changing the way that theorists deal with artificial distinctions so frequently made between sound and image in the cinema and beyond, helping us move into an area where audiovisual art can be understood as

a hybridization rather than continuing the trend of dealing with sound and image as a complementary pair.

In our final feature essay, Charles Stankievecch keeps us firmly rooted within the realm of sound. Yet like the other essays in this issue, he too is interested in the blurring of a boundary line: that between the experiences of interiority and exteriority as mediated by headphone technologies. Bracketed by the phenomenological inquiries of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as well as the psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Lacan, Stankievecch examines the concept of interiority through a discussion of the audiowalks created by Janet Cardiff and George Miller. Their work makes an excellent case study for considering issues relating to interiority within the context of sound-art practice. Ultimately Stankievecch offers some fascinating points of entry into the discourses surrounding the body as a site of mediation between interiority and exteriority, and the role of headphone technologies in collapsing this mediation.

Finally, for the closing forum I invited short contributions from practitioners of audiovisual art working outside the realm of cinema proper to offer some thoughts on the current state of the art, and what the future might hold for artists interested in achieving higher levels of integration between sound and image. Fred Collopy begins by taking us back to the golden age of instrument invention that gave birth to the emerging form that has come to be known as Visual Music. He suggests that with the dawn of modern computer technologies in the 1970s, we have returned to an age where the invention of new audiovisual

instruments is on people's minds. He hopes that with many of the difficulties of centuries past now overcome by contemporary technology, we may yet find a new form of audiovisual art that can stand the test of time. We then move to two essays which offer prescriptions for getting beyond the conventional trappings of audiovisual art, and perhaps move us towards the new form suggested by Collopy. Michael Betancourt begins by identifying conventions of sound-image relationships in Visual Music that have tended to be the reverse of what has arisen within the cinema: image is subservient to sound rather than sound being subservient to the image. In both extremes, conventions of tight synchronization on certain aspects of sound/image relationships have become the dominant formal strategy. He suggests alternatives that fall somewhere between these two poles. Then, Barry Spinello ventures into the realm of cognitive perception. He draws on the idea that our minds do NOT separate sensory information according to the five senses in order to suggest ways in which the practice of audiovisual creation might best resemble the lack of sensory boundaries that exist on the level of mental processing.

What the essays in this final forum ultimately have in common is a desire to see the increasingly artificial distinctions between "sound" and "image" broken down so that we might strive towards a level of integration that would finally yield an art form in which the treatment of the heard and the seen is inherently equal. There are glimpses of such an art form throughout the history of cinema and its parallel media, yet many would argue that the ultimate goal of perfect

equilibrium is still a long way off. Ultimately these essays point to what might best be called "designing art for audiovisual integration." For those interested in such a goal, this forum offers suitable closing thoughts for this special issue of *Offscreen*. In turn, the kinds of solutions to the problems of audiovisual integration might well be reflected upon when thinking about ways in which the myriad of other boundaries set-up throughout this issue might also be constructively broken down.

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