DESIGNING A MOVIE FOR SOUND

A Sound Designer Argues For Allowing Sound
To Influence Creative Decisions In Other Crafts

by Randy Thom

When I try to explain what a movie sound designer does, or might do,
it's always difficult. Most people think of a sound designer as someone
who fabricates sci-fi and other exotic sounds. But that doesn't describe
very accurately what Ben Burtt and Walter Murch, who originated the
term, did on 'Star Wars' and 'Apocalypse Now'. On those films they found
themselves working with directors who were not just looking for neat
sound effects to attach to a structure that was already in place. By
experimenting with sound and playing with sound all through production
and post production, what they found is that sound began to shape the
picture sometimes as much as the picture shaped the sound. The result
was very different from anything we had heard before. The films are
legends, and their soundtracks changed forever the way we think about
film sound. Films as different from 'Star Wars' as 'Eraserhead' and 'The
Elephant Man' benefited from similar early attention to experimenting
with sound.

What passes for "great sound" in films today is too often just loud
sound. High fidelity recordings of gunshots and explosions, and well
fabricated alien creature vocalizations don't necessarily add up to
great sound design. A well orchestrated and recorded piece of musical
score has minimal value if it hasn't been integrated into the film as a
whole. Giving the actors plenty of things to say in every scene isn't
necessarily doing them, their characters, or the movie a favor. Sound,
musical and otherwise, has value when it is part of a continuum, when it
changes over time, has dynamics, and resonates with other sound and with
other sensory experiences.

What I propose is that the way for a filmmaker to take advantage of
sound is not simply to make it possible to record good sound on the set,
or simply to hire a great sound designer/composer to fabricate sounds,
but rather to design the film with sound in mind, to allow sound's
contributions to influence creative decisions in the other crafts.

Sidney Lumet said recently in an interview that he had been amazed at
what they had been able to accomplish in the mix of 'Apocalypse Now'.
Well, what was great about that mix began long before anybody got near a
dubbing stage. In fact, it began with the script. And with Francis
Coppola's inclination to give the characters in that movie the
opportunity to listen to the world around them.

Starving The Eye: The Usefulness Of Ambiguity

One of the ways viewers/listeners are pulled into a story is that they are led to believe there are interesting questions to be answered, and that they, the audience, may possess certain insights useful in solving the puzzle. If this is true, then it follows that a crucial element of storytelling is knowing what not to make immediately clear, and then devising techniques that use the camera and microphone to seduce the audience with just enough information to tease them into getting involved. It is as if our job is to hang interesting little question marks in the air surrounding each scene, or to place pieces of cake on the ground that seem to lead somewhere, though not in a straight line.

Sound may be the most powerful tool in the filmmaker's arsenal in terms of its ability to seduce. That's because "sound," as the great sound editor Alan Splet once said, "is a heart thing." We, the audience, interpret sound with our emotions, not our intellect.

Editing Picture With Sound In Mind

One of the many things a film editor does is to get rid of moments in the film in which "nothing" is happening. A desirable objective most of the time, but not always. The editor and director need to be able to figure out when it will be useful to linger on a shot after the dialog is finished, or before it begins; to stay around after the obvious "action" is past, so that the characters in the scene have an opportunity to use their ears. Of course it helps quite a bit if the scene has been shot with these useful pauses in mind. Into these little pauses sound can creep on its stealthy toes, or its clanking jackboots, to tell us something about where we have been or where we are going.

Walter Murch often edits without listening to the sync sound at all. This approach can ironically be a great boon to the use of sound in the movie. If the editor can imagine the sound (musical or otherwise) which might eventually accompany a scene, rather than listen to the rough, discontinuous, often annoying sync track, then the cutting will be more likely to leave room for those beats in which sound other than dialog will eventually make a contribution.

Sound's Talents

Music, dialogue, and sound effects can each do any of the following jobs, and many more:

   * suggest a mood, evoke a feeling
   * set a pace
   * indicate a geographical locale
   * indicate a historical period
   * clarify the plot
   * define a character
   * connect otherwise unconnected ideas, images, or moments
   * heighten realism or diminish it

* heighten ambiguity or diminish it
* draw attention to a detail, or away from it
* indicate changes in time
* smooth otherwise abrupt changes between shots or scenes
* emphasize a transition for dramatic effect
* describe an acoustic space
* startle or soothe
* exaggerate action or mediate it

At any given moment in a film, sound is likely to be doing several of these things at once.

But sound, if it's any good, also has a life of its own, beyond these utilitarian functions. Its ability to be good and useful to the story, and powerful, beautiful and alive, will be determined by the state of the ocean in which it swims, the film. Try as you may to paste sound onto a predetermined structure, the result will almost always fall short of your hopes. But if you encourage the sounds of the characters, the things, and the places in your film to inform your decisions in all the other film crafts, then your movie may just grow to have a voice beyond anything you might have dreamed.

So, what does a sound designer do? He/she cuts dialog, records music, performs foley, edits the film, directs the film. Anybody who shapes sound, or even considers sound when making a creative decision in another craft, is designing sound for the movie, and designing the movie for sound.

This article is part of a longer essay.
The full-length version may be available at the Earcircus web site.