

Sound as an Equal Partner in Film Production: Can Academic Instruction Change Industry Practice?

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ABSTRACT. Although previously neglected, or relegated “to minor status” (Chion 1994: xxv), the importance of sound in film studies is now universally acknowledged. The varied and complex relationships that exist between sound and image are being constantly examined in the context of an equal partnership. This rich body of new scholarship seems to have had little effect on the process of film production, where sound has not achieved equal status with image. Practitioners of film sound have complained about the lack of true collaboration between the sound and image departments, and how this diminishes the potential for complex, interesting and integrated sound design. Models of collaborative filmmaking, as evidenced by the creative output of Walter Murch working with George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, remain as exceptions to the prevailing filmmaking process. That process is often reflected in film production pedagogy, and this paper argues that pedagogy has an important role in addressing the sound/image imbalance. An initiative titled “Sound Across the Curriculum” has been proposed to investigate pedagogical approaches to better integrate sound across the entire filmmaking curriculum. By integrating and elevating sound as an equal collaborator within film production pedagogy, it is hoped that in time, industry practice will also be affected. Some pedagogical approaches addressing the goals of sound across the curriculum are presented in this paper.

KEYWORDS:
film sound pedagogy,
film production, sound
design, collaborative
filmmaking, director
of sound, pre-sound
design, sound
shot, sound across
the curriculum.

Introduction

Why does the serious consideration of the creation of a film’s sound design often only occur once the image track has been created? It is a common lament from film sound professionals that they are not involved soon enough, or not at all, in creative decisions in other important areas of film production. Essentially, the sound area in general is not often given consideration as an area for creative collaboration. A common perception is that sound will simply react to image and often a sound designer is not involved until picture editing has already commenced, and where their ability to influence

or creatively contribute to the story has been diminished. Once image and narrative are fixed, the sound design possibilities are similarly constrained. What role can film production pedagogy play in addressing the “...schism between sight and sound that is replicated at each stage of the production process?” (Sider 2003: 7). I hope to add to the discussion of this question that was begun at the “Music and Sound Design in New Media” conference held in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Sound is no longer a neglected area of scholarship in film studies, and the privileged status of image is largely giving way to a more balanced approach between the domains. Chion’s (1994) “Audio-Vision”, Altman’s (1992) “Sound Theory, Sound Practice” and Gorbmann’s (1987) “Unheard melodies: Narrative film music” are but three of many important examples of this increasingly large body of academic writing. The placement of sound as an equal partner to image in film theory acknowledges the “audio-visual totality” (Jordan 2010: 3) of the medium and concurs with the (chronically overused) quote attributed to George Lucas, that “Sound is 50 percent of the movie-going experience”.¹ While not the first director to articulate the importance of sound, the collaborative model of filmmaking that he, Francis Ford Coppola, Walter Murch and others at American Zoetrope fostered, was in the late 1960s and even today, a somewhat rare example of truly collaborative filmmaking. The newly created American Zoetrope aimed to “continue the flexible, collaborative model they had practised in film school at the University of Southern California (USC) and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)” (McGrath 2015: 8). Sound designer Walter Murch’s collaboration on Lucas’ THX1138 (1971), produced by Coppola, is a notable early example of this and of the powerful use of sound in cinema.

The collaborative filmmaking at American Zoetrope, based in San Francisco, was geographically and philosophically removed from the prevailing studio system of Hollywood, and more akin to a European mode of filmmaking (Andriano-Moore 2017: 6). The inflexible union and studio structures in Los Angeles restricted meaningful collaborative filmmaking between domains. The newly minted film graduates of USC and UCLA, having not gone through the prevailing union apprentice system, were very much on the outside. Coppola, Lucas, Murch and their contemporaries desired to make movies as they had made them in film school and they found the freedom to do this in Northern California. Where, as Murch recalls, “...from the beginning of American Zoetrope, all of us, George, Francis and myself, were interested in pushing sound to be a greater contributor to the story” (Blair 2010: 3). *The Conversation* (1974) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) are two notable examples of the close collaboration between the domains from preproduction onwards.

1 Although quoted extensively the original quote remains elusive.

From Murch we have the term “sound designer” that he describes as someone with the overall responsibility for the soundtrack from preproduction to the final mix, with creative input throughout. Sound designer Alan Splet, and his collaboration with David Lynch on films from *Eraserhead* (1977) to *Blue Velvet* (1986), fits into Murch’s conception of a sound designer, but represents, as with Murch, a rare example of this. Although the term is now in wide use, its definition has become quite ambiguous and typically refers only to aspects of audio post-production. As Sider reminds us, “Murch’s concept of sound design never really took hold” (Sider 2003: 6) and with it the possibilities of true collaboration between sound and image in the service of the narrative have diminished. The powerful and complex ways in which sound can transform image, and the potentials of sound-image relationships, go relatively unexplored in mainstream cinema. The influence of recent film sound scholarship has yet to be fully realised within film production, and arguably also in film production pedagogy (Greene 2018: 19).

In 1999, Oscar winning sound designer Randy Thom (1999) wrote an article titled “Designing a Movie for Sound” in which he enunciates his thoughts on what sound design is, and then describes the “bleak realities faced by those of us who work in film sound” and some ways to address it. In short, he laments the lack of time and consideration devoted to sound in all phases of film production and how this limits the possibilities for complex and interesting sound design. His proposals for how to integrate sound into all areas of filmmaking touch on practical and aesthetic considerations alike and have relevance to film sound pedagogy. Production sound mixer John Coffey’s (2014) “An Open Letter from your Sound Department” written with help from many notable film sound professionals (including Randy Thom) echoes, from a production sound perspective, many of these same concerns and likewise has ideas on how to mitigate them.

The separation of film into sound and image that stills prevails in professional film production, typically also occurs, in various degrees, in film school. Curricula will generally include some “sound”-focused classes and many “image”-focused ones. The amount of overlap between domains varies, depending on the nature of each course. Other factors, such as its technical, practical or theoretical focus and place in the curriculum also play a role. Still generally, the bifurcation of sound and image remains a prevailing pedagogical model in film schools.

It is my contention that the “bleak realities” that Thom describes, can be addressed, at least in some degree, in the way film sound is addressed and taught in film schools to filmmakers. More specifically, how film sound is integrated into classes that are not sound focused, and that occur in a practice-based film production program.

Sound across the curriculum

At the start of 2017 I began to develop in the film program where I teach², an initiative dubbed Sound Across the Curriculum (SATC) that is concerned with developing ways to better integrate film sound into all areas of the film production curriculum. This was in response to my observation that many of the fundamental concepts about sound and its relationship to image, that were taught in my audio production and post-production classes, were not being fully applied when my students created their films. Specifically, sound was often not considered seriously until the post-production process had begun. The issues that Thom and others had raised, were to a small degree, in evidence in the filmmaking process of my students. Getting them to think more about sound in the process of writing and creating their films would hopefully lead to better and more sophisticated use of sound, and an even more collaborative approach to filmmaking. Breaking down the barriers between the domains so that instead of “decorating the picture”, sound will enter “into a dialogue with it” (Sider 2003: 6). To achieve this, relevant film sound concepts need to be addressed and reinforced across the curriculum, and potentially new tools and pedagogical approaches developed.

In September of 2017, I attended the Music and Sound Design in New Media³ conference in Vilnius, Lithuania where I presented the SATC idea as part of a talk titled Pedagogy of Sound Design: Teaching film sound analysis to filmmakers. The concept was well received and the resulting discussions confirmed that what I had been experiencing at my film school was common in other film schools around the world. At the conference was veteran Hollywood sound supervisor Frederick (Val) Kuklowsky who suggested that the initiative should be developed for wider dissemination. We commenced working together towards this goal and were encouraged by the executive of CILECT⁴, the international organisation of film and television schools (the conference was held as part of the European section of CILECT), to develop the initiative. We introduced SATC at the CILECT North America conference Sound and Storytelling held at Chapman College in Orange County, U.S.A in March, 2018. We proposed researching current best practice in film sound pedagogy as well as developing pedagogical guides for all filmmaking areas. We also discussed the issue of a common film sound

2 General filmmaking program: School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

3 <http://filmsoundmedia.lmta.lt/program/>

4 Centre International de Liaison des Ecoles de Cinéma et de Télévision – CILECT has over 180 member schools worldwide. See: <http://www.cilect.org>

language that all areas could employ. The ability to discuss sound with a common and agreed upon vocabulary is essential to ensure meaningful dialogue between filmmaking disciplines. Additionally, there can be different film sound terms used by theorists and filmmakers (Greene 2018: 21). This is an area of on-going research as part of SATC.

Prior to the conference, we sent out a survey to the participants asking general questions about how film sound was taught in their film programs. The short survey⁵ asked about how many required and elective film sound classes are in their institutions' general filmmaking curriculum, as well as opinion questions. The questions most relevant to this discussion were:

- ◆ In your opinion, how well integrated is sound into other (non-sound focused) classes in the curriculum?
- ◆ What area of the film curriculum do you think would benefit the MOST from having sound more integrated into it?

We received 29 responses from schools in 15 countries, over 75% from film programs within universities and the remainder from dedicated film schools.

The results of the first question are shown in Figure 1 below. Almost 50% of respondents thought film sound was poorly, or somewhat poorly, integrated into non-sound focused classes and less than 17% thought that film sound was very well or excellently integrated.

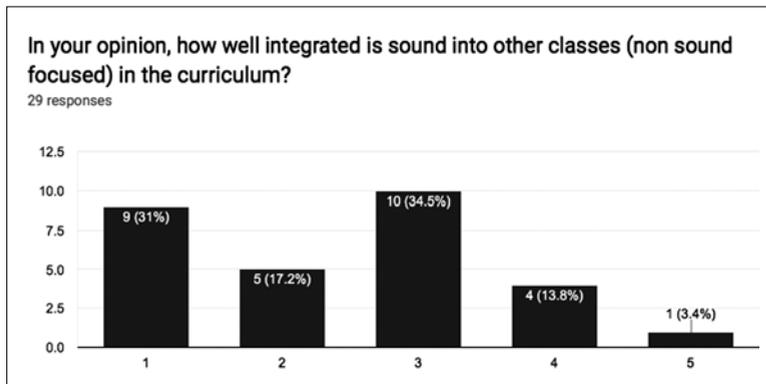


Figure 1. Respondents chose from a scale from 1 (poorly integrated) to 5 (excellently integrated)

⁵ The complete survey is available here: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1FAIpQLScte8IWfEUrvR-13kto2O1jM9eM5eaI0OsNL26shFkexWGZow/viewform>

The results to this question add weight to the conclusion that the integration of sound into the wider curriculum is not as effective as it might be in many film schools. The second question addressed which areas could benefit from better integration and the results are shown in Figure 2.

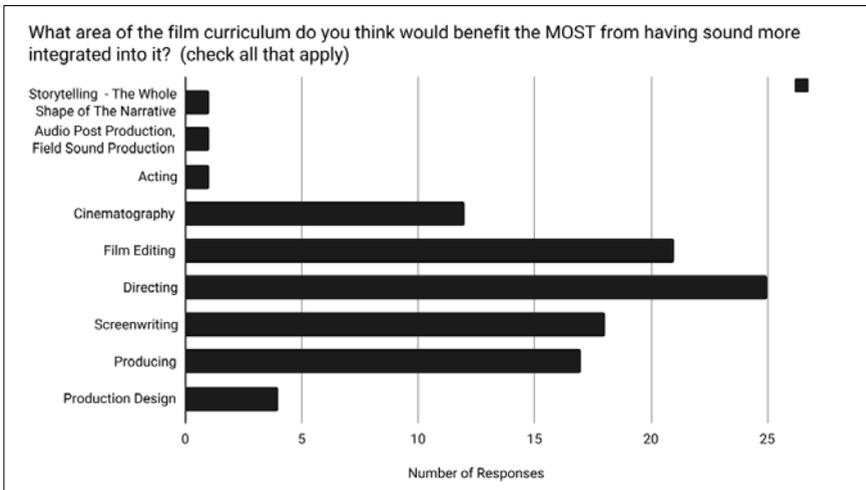


Figure 2. Respondents could check more than one area

The results show four areas in particular that would benefit the most or need better integration within the filmmaking curricula. They cover pre-production through to post-production and indicate pedagogical areas that will be researched first.

As already indicated, new pedagogical approaches or techniques might need to be developed but equally, effective existing pedagogical techniques will be researched and incorporated into SATC research output. Sharing successful teaching strategies and methodologies in relation to film sound and its integration within the curriculum is an important component of this endeavour. With that in mind, I present some pedagogical approaches, some in development, and some already in practice, that speak to the goals of SATC.

Pedagogical approaches

One of the problems with students not conceiving of their sound design in pre-production is the absence of what I call “sound shots” once the shoot has finished and the edit has commenced. A sound shot is a shot that indicates something about the sound

world by showing the source of a sound. A sound shot may show a character listening to, or reacting to a sound, or by implying the presence or absence of a sound. Sound shot analysis is a simple pedagogical tool developed to explore visual grammar as it relates to sound and the relationships between the two. Specifically, what do we need to see, to hear what we need to hear? It is a simple addition to a typical shot by shot analysis of a scene. It helps to show how sounds, especially off-screen sounds, are often motivated visually, and importantly, how the image track can impact sound design possibilities.

I have seen in student work, and experienced professionally, situations where sound design strategies (for off screen sound in particular), desired by the director, were not realistically supported by the image track. Thom (1999) articulates a good example:

we may want to have a strange-sounding machine running off-camera during a scene in order to add tension and atmosphere. If there is at least a brief, fairly close shot of some machine which could be making the sound, it will help me immensely to establish the sound.

Sound shot analysis is a pedagogical tool that can be utilised in many filmmaking disciplines and can be useful to forge a dialogue about sound and image relationships. Most importantly, it stresses the importance of conceiving of the sound design in pre-production.

An obvious place for enhanced integration of film sound is the picture edit. Ideally, both areas are in constant dialogue as the film is shaped to completion. George Lucas states the importance of this saying:

I've always had the sound editor working alongside the picture editor so that when we're looking at cuts, we're looking at things with [proper] sound, so we don't look at it in isolation. We can incorporate sound editing into the picture editing work and actually look at the cuts with those ideas intact so we can say, "That works" (Black 2004: 3).

Unfortunately, the ideal that Lucas describes is not common practice and the traditional wall between the editing and sound departments is a significant barrier to overcome.

An approach to teaching editing was presented by Norman Hollyn⁶ at the aforementioned Sound and Storytelling conference. In his presentation "Sound Design Before Sound Designers come into the Process", he articulated that his film editing students are taught the aesthetics of sound design and are required to perform basic sound design as part of their picture edit. From adding ambiences and missing sounds to cleaning up dialogue, they are required to create a basic soundtrack, free of audio

6 Professor of Editing at the School of Cinematic Arts, University Southern California, U.S.A.

distractions. The editor is creating in effect a “pre-sound design”, which has a number of advantages. Importantly, the students are required to integrate sound more completely into their editing process and that in turn informs their edit and helps to structure it. For instance, something as simple as adding extra frames at the end of a scene to allow time for an effective audio transition now becomes an obvious thing to do, where in the past it may not have been. Deciding if the edit “works” is really only possible if the image and soundtrack are working together. Now that all major editing software allows for sub frame editing, it is easier to manipulate sound, and quality sound libraries allow swift access to suitable sounds. The “pre-sound design” that this pedagogical approach offers has application in other disciplines.

Pre-visualisation of the image track is a standard in the pre-production process, while pre-sound design or “pre-sounding” is not. The application of pre-sound designing has interesting pedagogical potential, and in the program that I teach we are researching ways of implementing it in pre-production. For the coming semester (August 2018), we will incorporate “pre-sounding” within a scriptwriting class. Our intention is to have the students record scenes they have written and to add simple sound design according to the script. The pedagogical goal is to allow the students to hear how their written words translate into a performance and importantly, to be able to experiment with removing words or lines, to manipulate pacing, timing and other aspects of performance. We hope that having the students hear their film first and imagining how it might sound, will lead to them incorporating sound into the earliest stages of their filmmaking process, ultimately becoming standard practice.

Inspired by a presentation by Jorg Lensing⁷ at the Music and Sound Design in New Media conference, we are planning to establish the director of sound as a standard position in all film productions in our program. This is a person who is responsible for all aspect of a film’s soundtrack from pre-preproduction to final mix. While similar to Murch’s original conception of a sound designer, although perhaps more akin to the role of director of photography. The sound director position has existed in the Hollywood system as someone who “followed sound from the initial budgeting and scheduling, through the final 2-track print master...” (Yewdall 2012: 57). However, this position no longer exists⁸. Facilitating communication between the sound department and the other film areas is an important aspect of the position, but equally important is communication

7 Professor of Sound Design: Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany.

8 In Indian filmmaking, there is the position of Director of Audiography, who heads the sound department and is responsible for the planning and execution of the production sound recording and audio post-production.

within areas of the sound department, including music. Pedagogical benefits are many and will be fully examined in Professor Lensing's article in this volume. We envision all student productions will include someone acting in this role and that every student will function as a director of sound, at least once in the course of the film program.

Conclusion

The divide between image and sound that has been closed in film studies largely remains in film production and film-making pedagogy. Dissolving the barriers between sound and image, and integrating them more completely across the film school curriculum, might also start to alter industry practice. Film sound practitioners have been calling for this, and to be recognised as storytellers in their own right. That sound should not simply be asked to react to image but as, Thom wrote, "rather to design the film with sound in mind, to allow sound's contributions to influence creative decisions in the other crafts" (Thom 1999). The sound across the curriculum initiative, although in its infancy, has already attracted interest from film schools across the world. The pedagogical approaches offered are not meant to be in any way prescriptive, but rather presented as tools to be used and adapted as is relevant for an individual class or program. They represent a small starting point on a long journey. The hope is that through incremental changes in pedagogical approach or methodology, the status of sound as an equal collaborator will be the norm, and constant dialogue between sound and image in the film-making process an expectation.

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Garsas kaip lygiavertis partneris kino produkcijoje: ar akademinis mokymas gali pakeisti pramonės praktiką?

SANTRAUKA. Dar neseniai buvusio „žemesnio statuso“ (Chion 1994: 25) garso svarba kine šiandien pripažįstama visame pasaulyje. Įvairiapusis ir sudėtingas garso ir vaizdo santykis dabar traktuojamas kaip dviejų lygiavertčių partnerių sąveika. Tačiau šios naujos išvados, regis, dar neveiksmingos kino kūrybos procese, kuriame garsas vis dar neprilygsta vaizdui. Kino garso operatoriai pasigenda tikro bendradarbiavimo tarp garso ir vaizdo komandų. Kaip teigia Walteris Murchas, dirbęs su Georgu Lucasu ir Francisu Fordu Coppola, toks bendras kino filmų kūrimas vis dar lieka išimtimi kino pramonėje vyraujančio darbo modelio kontekste. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad kino pedagogika turėtų atkreipti dėmesį į garso ir vaizdo disbalansą. Siūloma iniciatyva „garsas mokymo programoje“ (*Sound Across the Curriculum*) galėtų gvildinti pedagoginius metodus, padedančius visapusiškiau integruoti garso discipliną į bendrą kino produkcijos mokymo programą. Tikėtina, kad garso integravimas ir prilyginimas kitiems kino gamybos proceso parametrams pedagogikoje laikui bėgant paveiktų ir kino pramonės praktiką. Straipsnyje pristatoma keletas garso mokymo programoje taikytinų metodų.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:

kino garso pedagogika,
kino gamyba, garso
dizainas, jungtinė
kino gamyba, garso
režisierius, ikigarsinis
dizainas, garso kadras,
garsas mokymo
planuose.