

# In Defence of Vulgarity: The Place of Sound Effects in the Cinema

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sound effect noun [usually pl.] a sound that is made artificially, for example the sound of the wind or a battle, and used in a film/movie, play, computer game, etc. to make it more realistic

What is a sound effect? The dictionary definition, as ever an intriguing starting point, states two cardinal points around which people have customarily routed their understanding of sound effects over the years. [1] Firstly, a sound effect is a sound that is made artificially. It is not a sound that is to be found in nature, it is, indeed, artificial. [2] The second point is that it is used to make films/plays/etc. more realistic. In other words, a sound effect is something that is used in works of fiction to add realism.

The aim of this piece is to ask some basic questions about the nature and place of sound effects in the cinema. Traditionally, the other two components of the soundtrack -- music and dialogue -- have both enjoyed the luxury of a body of opinion that largely indicates they are as worthy of scholarly and professional attention, as providing a film with prestige, and as a source of revenue. [3]

But what about sound effects? What is their place in this hierarchy? Is there a discernable tradition? How are they placed in relation to music and dialogue? I would like to begin by placing side by side (Fig. 1) the discourses that have characterised the ways in which both filmmakers and scholars have understood music, dialogue and sound effects and the implications of these. For reasons of convenience, I will refer hereon to the practice of creating sound effects as "sfx" and revert to the fuller definition "sound effects" only when considering instances of specific sounds.

SFX	MUSIC	DIALOGUE
Unestablished tradition:	Established tradition:	Established tradition:
"bastard" origin	single origin (Music)	single origin (Literature)
Collective effort	Individual effort	Individual effort
Unrecognised critically	Recognised critically	Recognised critically
Technical	Artistic	Artistic
Sensual	Sensual/Intellectual	Intellectual/Sensual
Lack of prestige	Prestigious	Prestigious
Vulgar (everyday-ness)	Refined (exceptional)	Refined (exceptional)

Fig. 1: Comparison between sfx, music and dialogue, the three key elements of a soundtrack.

## On Tradition

Both music and dialogue can build on well-established traditions concerning their standing in cultural and critical terms. There would be no question about their "respectability" and legitimacy because composers and writers belong to music and literature. [4] This allows them to invoke cultural prestige: the "romantic" composers of the 1930s, a figure perfectly embodied by Erich Korngold (*The Adventures of Robin Hood* [1938], *The Prince and the Pauper* [1937], *The Sea Hawk* [1940]), benefited from being able to cite nineteenth-century romantic composers as their points of reference and inspiration (Korngold was, in fact, the son of a music critic).

With sfx, the situation is more complex and articulated. Clearly, there is not a single origin or tradition. Ben Burt, Walter Murch, Gary Rydstrom and Randy Thom are four of the most celebrated and successful sound designers. [5] At some point in their career they have all worked under the same roof, namely that of Skywalker Sound. However, when asked about their sources of creative inspiration, they mention four rather different traditions. Burt has the mind of a historian knowing well how the art of sfx has developed from the early days of *King Kong* (1933). In some important sense, movies themselves are Burt's key source of inspiration. Murch has often mentioned how influential the *Musique concrète* movement was for him. The main tradition he originally drew from was, therefore, a French music movement that encouraged musicians to think of music in a much "looser" way than customary, where any sound can be music and any instrumental sound can become a sfx. Rydstrom has clearly indicated in interviews that the work of sound pioneers working in animation has been a major influence on his work. As for Thom, his background in radio was instrumental in getting started and becoming seriously interested in sound. Later, close contact with Murch alerted him to the possibilities of the *Musique concrète* approach. These distinctions are somewhat artificial: Rydstrom was Burt's understudy, just as Thom was Murch's. The continuing dialogue amongst sound designers, a defining feature of the field, ensures that boundaries are rather porous. Cinema, music, animation and radio are but four of the many traditions from which sound designers have drawn and serve to emphasise the "bastard" origin of contemporary sfx practices. [6]

## On Critical Recognition

Whilst this multifaceted origin signals one of sound design's strongest suits, namely that of being willing and able to draw inspiration from other creative media, it also highlights the differences with music and dialogue. There simply is not a well-documented history of sound, its origins and traditions to build on from both a creative and critical perspective. [7] This lack of scholarly and critical attention to the development of sfx and its traditions has led to a situation where sound designers cannot but defer to other more recognised traditions in order to gain critical status. This issue is illustrated by the kind of exposure that Walter Murch has enjoyed over the years in relation to some of his successful colleagues. Murch has always been very apt at invoking culturally prestigious traditions. In particular, *Musique concrète* has provided him with both a home for his interest in sound in the early years and a platform from which to make his voice heard. Unlike Murch, Gary Rydstrom has often pointed to animation as the most important source of stimulation for ideas. One of the key traditional sources of sfx artists, animation has provided countless examples of experimentation and creativity over the decades from Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* to Disney films through a myriad of other examples. The skills and talent of people like Mel Blanc, Daws Butler and Tex Avery have been an inspiration for many sound designers.

However, the term "cartoonish" is routinely used in everyday language and critical discourses as a pejorative to indicate something childish and unsophisticated, something "unrealistic." In this sense, the fact that cartoons are aimed primarily, though not solely, at children reinforces this perception of the cartoonish as less of a fully grown adult form and more of a means to an end, namely that of making children laugh. Conversely, *Musique concrète* provides sound designers with an immediately recognisable, well-established and respected tradition originating in music. In this case the term (it is symptomatic that we do not translate it into English for fear that it would lose something of its essence: its French language usage suggests a certain "reverence") is synonymous with sophistication and intellectual caché.

What is relevant here is that the two traditions are far less removed from each other than it would otherwise appear from critical accounts. *Musique concrète* and animation both show a substantial willingness to "mix things up" and to employ sounds in a way that transcends their origin. Thus, an everyday sound can become a musical note in *Musique concrète* just as engagingly as a character's voice can become a source of sfx in animation. Indeed, the breaking down of boundaries separating sfx, music and dialogue is one of the most important features of contemporary sound design. Yet, these links and the potential that they can unlock for both filmmakers and scholars are largely overwhelmed by the existing critical infrastructure whereby the intellectual and the sensual are to be kept as separate and the former is widely regarded as superior to the latter.

This evidently artificial separation holds a great deal of power over filmmakers too. The arrangement of credits is perhaps the most visible manifestation of a commitment to filmmaking practices that almost invariably separate sfx and other related activities not just from composing and screenwriting, but also from most other decision-making situations where the involvement of sound people would ensure a much more effective use of resources.

### **On Collective Effort**

A further defining feature of sfx is that of relying on a collective effort. Although this is true for all filmmaking crafts, composers and screenwriters have often managed to retain the "aura" of the individual artist. It is rare in industrial and critical accounts of filmmaking to see the name of composers like John Williams, Randy Newman or John Barry next to those of the sound designer, the music editor or anyone of the other creative personnel who contribute to the way in which music ultimately functions within any given film. Writers have also enjoyed a similarly privileged treatment. People like William Goldman, Frank Darabont, Lawrence Kasdan and others have routinely been identified as the individuals behind the writing of films such as *Chinatown* (1974), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Big Chill* (1983), to mention only a few examples. This distinction is not absolute since, in most cases, writers shared billing with other writers; moreover, the public is usually unaware of their names and contribution unless they are also involved in a directorial role (as in the case of Darabont and Kasdan). It is also important to note that despite this evident attention to the work of writers, most filmmakers, directors especially, have reiterated at some point or other their commitment to images "rather than words." This is one of the most powerful views of cinema: filmmakers write using light, a picture speaks a thousand words, and so forth. Since there is broad agreement amongst critics, scholars and filmmakers that cinema is a visual medium then writing can easily be seen as a diversion from the true nature of cinema. This critical stance has been championed over the years by many influential filmmakers and theoreticians, as this 1958 "manifesto" editorial published by *Film Quarterly* strongly illustrates:

For one thing, we are in favour of cinematic movies, still believing that the film is an art form in itself, not merely a convenient means of mass-distributing novels and plays (...) The filmmaker is too often only an attendant at an elaborate transmission-belt, the product of which is a visual bodying-forth of events originally described in words. Words cram the soundtrack and flood the ears (...) Maybe the ear is more powerful than the eye? Maybe you cannot follow tight visual action too well with an arm around your girlfriend or a hand on the beer can? However, to all such sophistic doubts we pay as little heed as possible. (Editor's notebook, 1958: 63-64) [8]

When dialogue is included in the equation, it often loses out to music in the opinion of many filmmakers whose views are encapsulated by these stark words: "The purest moments of cinema are for me when music and image combine without dialogue or other interruptions." [9] The situation concerning music is also far from being "clear cut." Although composers employing instrumental, symphonic "traditional" scores (such as John Williams, John Barry, and Hans Zimmer to mention just a few) have enjoyed a considerable degree of critical clout, soundtracks employing more contemporary music, especially pop or rock music (again, there are many examples, including films ranging from *Velvet Goldmine* [1998] to *The Matrix* [1999]) have often come under attack for their lack of sophistication, loudness and vulgarity in a similar fashion to what I am describing in relation to sound effects.

Despite these ambivalent critical attitudes, screenwriting and music composing continue to be largely understood in the imaginary collective as enterprises requiring little more than a pen, some paper and preferably a considerable amount of creative "genius." Their importance in the filmmaking hierarchy is also mirrored by their position in a film's credits, often the result of decades of contractual disputes. [10] In the case of sfx, the general understanding of sfx design and mixing as a collective effort involving many different people who all bring their own creative effort to the mix makes it far more difficult to invoke (prestigious) concepts such as authorship and individual genius than it is in the case of music and dialogue. Since historically critical attention and prestige has focussed on the individual effort, collective creative endeavours can become easily marginalised.

### **On the Technical vs. Artistic**

The former aspect also influences another important dimension, namely the distinction between the technical and artistic portions of a soundtrack. The word technology comes from the Greek and means the logic organisation of skills. In this sense, all aspects of human enterprise ought to be seen as employing (hopefully) technology. However, the more contemporary understanding of the term focuses primarily on the use of machinery. This has obvious connotations involving labour relationships and human development. Technology/machinery has often been represented as the ultimate evil, the hydra-like monster capable of devouring job after job that used to be the domain of humans. Indeed, several memorable films have built their narratives around this concept. Films such as *Metropolis* (1927), *King Kong*, *Modern Times* (1936) all the way to *The Matrix* follow this seemingly elementary paradigm: technology is bad for jobs and working conditions, and it is bad for humanity. Technicians have thus come to be understood as the lesser part of the creative process, though an important one nevertheless. Technicians operate machines and this is a mechanical, indeed repetitive job. The term technician has therefore come to signify in the mind of scholars, critics and most filmmakers a job where creative ability and inventiveness take back stage to machinery and its ability to, effectively, "do the job for them." This is opposed to the understanding of the artist as employing human resources (his/her mind, ears,

etc.) to create his/her art. Any consideration of the simple truth that technology is of fundamental importance to composers and writers too, just as it is to directors, editors and any other filmmaking job, is not enough to shift the basic paradigm: art and technology are two separate entities; those who engage primarily with the former are called artists, those who deal with the latter are technicians.

To state the obvious, music and dialogue are perceived as being an almost entirely artistic enterprise, though sfx is fundamentally understood as being a technical matter. Its postulation: sound designers are technicians, writers and composers are artists.

### **On the Sensual vs. the Intellectual**

One of the most enduring views of sound effects is that they operate at an emotional and sensual level rather than at an intellectual level. Dialogue, on the other hand, is commonly indicated as the portion of the soundtrack that deals more directly at an intellectual level, in particular in the sense of being the most crucial source of story-propelling information for the audience. In short, sound effects are understood as customarily providing ambience, mood, scope and size, but not information, characterisation and plot development, something traditionally understood as the domain of film dialogue. Asked which element amongst effects, dialogue and music is the most important in films, veteran supervising sound editor Norval Crutcher (*Terms of Endearment* [1983], *Witness* [1985], *Sea of Love* [1989]) shows no hesitation: "The dialogue. Sound effects and backgrounds are only enhancements to the movie. The dialogue -- that's what we go to the movies for."

Music would appear to fluctuate between sound effects and dialogue, although again mostly operating on a sensual/emotional plane. In the former case, the emphasis is on music's twofold potential: "Unlike a closed, non-referential mathematical system, music is said to communicate emotional and esthetic meaning as well as purely intellectual ones." (Meyer, 1961: 44) In the latter instance, the view is that: "The function of the music is to 'tell' the audience how to feel, from moment to moment". (Holman, 1997: xvi) and that "Music best enhances a film when it evokes and modulates a specific emotional response in the audience to the unfolding story without the audience being aware of it." [\[11\]](#)

However widely shared this view of the role of sfx may be, it is virtually impossible to prove it in any meaningful way other than through resorting to issues of personal taste.

Characterisation takes place at many levels: the main protagonist's house décor, the clothes he/she wears, the way he/she speaks. But the ambient sound of his/her apartment, the sound his/her car makes (or shoes, clothes, watch, whatever comes handy) will also add up in the mind of the audience as a way of learning about character. How can it be possible then to differentiate between the sensual/emotional and intellectual? The only way this becomes possible, in critical terms at least, is by reiterating another dogmatic position: sensual engagement and intellectual involvement are two separate things. However, which composer would willingly suggest that his/her music is not attempting to engage an audience fully, at both an emotional and intellectual level? What actor would happily agree that the way he/she delivers his/her lines make no difference to the sensual impact that dialogue will have on an audience? Similarly, what sound designer would claim that his/her selection of sounds is not part of an attempt to engage audiences at both an intellectual and emotional level? I am being self-consciously polemical here for a reason: the separation of the sensual and the intellectual is a highly political choice. Blockbusters and Hollywood cinema at large have often been differentiated from European cinema on this count: Hollywood as sensual, European cinema

as intellectual. Blockbusters as sensual rollercoasters, European films as intellectually engaging. This has a postulation: sensual as vulgar and less worthy of artistic merit, intellectual as sophisticated and worthy of being identified as art. Critical attitudes of this kind have inevitably had a bearing on the way filmmakers, scholars and critics have routinely understood the role and importance of sfx, especially in relation to the different traditions of sfx I referred to earlier.

Many sound designers and composers have highlighted the lack of dialogue (often giving rise to adversarial relationships) amongst screenwriters, composers and sound designers, whilst also highlighting that area as being potentially one of the most fruitful to explore, as these words from Gary Rydstrom emphasise:

I like it when the composer can have the time to come to the final mix, as long as they are not there just to... well, you don't want to do this, but sometimes you feel like you are there to "protect" your work which is not really important. You should be there to see how it is all coming together and see what you can do to make it better. I think one of the areas that can most improve in making a soundtrack is for the sound effects department and the music department to work better together, because that relationship between sound effects and music is such an important one for the mix. (Sergi, 2004: 175)

Practical reasons are usually invoked to explain why this situation is so widespread: often the people responsible for the three "sections" come on a project at different times, they work in different locations and by the time they finish their contribution they move on to a different project. However persuasive this explanation may be, it is useful to remember that, as Rydstrom's words above remind us, these obstacles are not inevitable. The current modus operandi of mainstream cinema relies on the assumption that images are the business and art of a filmmaker. Most, if not all, work practices are then arranged accordingly.

### **Sfx as Vulgar**

Once again, we return to the original question: what are sound effects? The very definition of what sound effects actually are and how they are understood from a cultural standpoint is unclear. It is significant that the dictionary should feel the need to address this "confusion" directly. In a little inset, titled "Which word? Noise/Sound" the dictionary states that: "Sound is a general word for anything you hear" whereas "Noise is usually loud and unpleasant." Indeed, the definition of *noise* is "a sound, especially when it is loud, unpleasant or disturbing." This distinction between noise and sound is an interesting one on many counts, but especially so in the case of two issues: a) the current debate around the question of whether movies are too loud and b) the relative positioning of music and dialogue in relation to sfx within a soundtrack.

The "movies are too loud" diatribe is a rather complex issue that has been expertly discussed by other commentators. [\[12\]](#) The key issue with regards to this piece is not whether there are some movies that are too loud (that is always been the case, not just in contemporary cinema), but whether the debate surrounding the loudness issue and the relative artistic merits of sfx is part of a wider critical framework where sound, technology and popular cinema are singled-out as the antithesis to quality cinema (the latter being populated by films that privilege silence over noise, if noise is the right term of course). In other words, in a critical

context such as the one illustrated above, loud becomes shorthand for vulgarity, where loud is also overwhelmingly associated with sound effects rather than music or dialogue. The problem with this critical approach is that it fosters an attitude towards films whereby the question "does it make narrative sense for the film to be loud here?" is eschewed in favour of the over-simplistic "is this film too loud?" This in turn inevitably leads to a condemnation of most, if not all, blockbuster, action films (of all kinds, including war films, adventure films, etc.), and most animation. Ultimately, this attitude cannot but generate a profound suspicion of sfx as vulgar, unsophisticated and inferior to music and dialogue. [13] However, it should be perfectly feasible to imagine a film where a battle scene is shot from the point of view of a soldier who is shocked into a state of panic whereby the sound surrounding him becomes either deafening to the point of being unbearable or it is as though "blocked out" in an attempt at internalising what is happening around him/her. The former strategy will most likely require loudness the latter quietness, but it is a matter of choice, not one of legitimacy since both approaches could equally function well (for instance, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* [both 1998] have recently employed exactly one or both of the approaches described above, despite otherwise being very different films).

The dictionary deals directly with the relationship between sfx and dialogue and music when attempting to differentiate between the different "meanings" of the word sound and its use. A first definition, that could clearly be seen as applying to sfx, states that sound is "something that you can hear: a high/low sound; a clucking /buzzing/scratching sound; the different sounds and smells of the forest; she heard the sound of footsteps outside." A further definition that would seem to apply to sfx is under the heading of sound "From Television/Radio." Here the dictionary states that sound is "what you can hear from a television, radio, etc., or part of a film/movie: Could you turn the sound down? – The sound quality of the tapes was excellent – a sound engineer."

Two main features emerge from these definitions. Firstly, there is no immediate perceived need to identify the agency of these sounds. They come from somewhere out there (a forest, a bird, etc.) or from a piece of machinery (a television, a radio). Secondly, the connotation of sound in these definitions is one concerned with its physical and technical properties, not its artistic qualities. Thus, the sound quality of the tapes was "excellent" but no mention of the actual sound itself is felt to be necessary. Indeed, the reference to the "sound engineer" immediately works to link the physical and mechanical reproduction of sound with a "technical" job. The most striking contrast to these definitions comes when the dictionary attempts to define sound under the heading "of musicians." Here sound is defined as "the effect that is produced by the music of a particular singer or group of musicians: *I like their sound.*" In this case, the emphasis is squarely on the artistic qualities of the sound produced and the effect that it has on an audience. Sound thus becomes less than a mere physical phenomenon and becomes a synonym for human creativity. [14]

In other words, in cultural terms music is a different kind of sound than sfx. This is an obvious statement, but whereas the former is understood as originating from the need for expressing a "style", thus emphasising the role of people behind that "sound," the latter is seen as an inevitable ordinary occurrence. The snag, of course, is that sfx are neither inevitable nor ordinary. Indeed, the process of selecting which sounds will actually be used in any given scene is one of the primary tasks for a sound designer. It is unfeasible (and undesirable) to try to use all sounds that could possibly be mapped onto what is being seen on the screen so a selection is inevitable since confusion, rather than clarity, would ensue. This process of selection is, indeed, one of the most highly creative areas of the job of sound men

and women: before a single sound is created, recorded and mixed, creative decisions are made that will influence how a film will ultimately sound and the soundtrack's relationship to the image track. Yet, over the decades since the introduction of synchronised sound, effects have indeed been understood as "obvious," as this statement from Alberto Cavalcanti, one of the most sympathetic filmmakers where sound is concerned, emphasises "The doorbang, the telephone bell, the roar of the aero engine, the wheels of the train, the rushing of the waterfall. Such obvious sound images pass practically unnoticed. By now they are quite banal." (Cavalcanti, 1939)

Part of the problem could be traced back to the primacy in contemporary western culture that forms of verbal communication have enjoyed over non-verbal forms of communication. Complex verbal communication (i.e. a language) -- or deviation from it, as in the case of abstract thinking -- is what distinguishes us from animals; the ability to express oneself clearly and effectively is a highly sought after skill amongst all employers; the inability to communicate properly verbally is also cited regularly as one of the key reasons for the success or failure of relationships of all kinds (parental, marital etc.), and so on. Clearly the fact that language has a structure and rules works in favour of identifying verbal communication as having a rigour and sophistication that are not easily matched in non-verbal forms of communication.

In film sound, dialogue employs verbal communication, music uses both verbal and non-verbal (but crucially has a recognised "grammar" of its own in terms of structure and phrasing), whereas sfx would appear to be a purely non-verbal form of communication. [15] Hence, audiences are asked to engage at an intellectual level mostly through dialogue, music occupying a potentially similar primary position, although in practice often providing emotional engagement for audiences. [16] Sfx on the other hand, lacking a recognised structure, a "language" as it were, has to be content with the kind of sensual activities traditionally linked to non-verbal forms of communication. Here again the distinction between verbal and non-verbal, intellectual and sensual, sophisticated and vulgar appear indefensible, unless of course we are bound to understanding cinema solely as a means to convey literal meaning, in which case we could dispense with all sfx and most music, and rely overwhelmingly, if not entirely, on dialogue.

Most importantly, the fact that sfx, music and dialogue interact in a soundtrack should also render any attempt at separating the three impossible to defend on scrutiny. When sounds and images are locked in the "final mix" sound mixers may curse the fact that writers did not think through the implications of their screenplay and that composers disregarded the need for integrating sfx and dialogue somewhere in their symphonic score. They may also be critical of over-zealous or inexperienced directors who wish to have every single image on screen mapped out on to an equivalent sound. However, no matter what the difficulties, sound people will always be aware of the fact that, somehow, all these aural contributions need to coexist on the soundtrack and that this must serve the needs of the narrative.

### **Looking for a Way Out**

The current situation is so deeply rooted in decades of over-simplification and under-theorisation about sfx that it is difficult to imagine how the situation could be reversed for the present generation of men and women working in sound. The possibility for the improvement of the relationship between sound and image need necessarily go through a long period of reevaluation. This will have to include greater, improved dialogue between educators and



filmmakers. The present situation is as much a product of scholars and early theoreticians as it is the outcome of industrial practices. The fact remains that the way the present system works is hardly the most effective: why waste time and money in post-production when things could work much more smoothly by simply including sound earlier in the decision making process (i.e. in pre-production)? The answer is not only one of money or other practical issues but also one that feeds off the kind of cultural prejudice towards sound (especially sound effects) that I have tried to highlight here. This situation is compounded by the fact that, as a form of communication, sound effects are somewhat stuck in a limbo. They are not commonly understood as a verbal form of communication as they are neither necessarily vocal (like spoken language or dialogue) nor necessarily structured grammatically (like sign language or music). One simple example may illustrate the situation here. Watching a foreign language film usually means having to read subtitles. However, subtitles never include a "translation" of sound effects, only spoken language. The difference is evident when subtitling for the deaf is available. This includes a description of sound effects as well as dialogue: descriptive sounds are literally translated in various languages, as they need to express specific issues/narrative points/etc. to deaf audiences. In an only apparently paradoxical situation, it would appear that the deaf community has adopted a more sophisticated attitude to sfx than the average filmgoer. [17] In other words, sound effects are often regarded as something other than language or, more puzzlingly, as a universal form of communication not in need of translation. The rhythms of sound effects vocalisation, such as the voices of dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993) or the "voice" of toys in *Mary Poppins* (1964) almost invariably follow the pattern of the language that film is shot in: when the little bed side table in the "little bit of sugar" number "talks" to Mary Poppins it clearly sounds like a *thank you* not a *merci*, a *grazie*, or a *gracias*. The sound the little table makes is composed of two distinct sounds/words, each of roughly the equivalent length of the words *thank* and *you* and spoken with the same intonation with which a person would indeed say *thank you*.

To complicate things further, sound effects are not commonly thought of as a non-verbal form of communication either since non-verbal communication has come to mean visual (e.g. body language, dance, painting). In other words, sound effects would appear to be without a home in the realm of communication: they cannot be regarded as verbal nor can they be understood as non-verbal. What are they then? How are we to study and understand them? It will require a great deal of research and experimentation on the part of both scholars and filmmakers before we can reach a fuller understanding of how sound effects work, their grammar and structure, and their ultimate impact on narrative and on audiences. However, a few things are clear even at this early stage. Firstly, we -- and by "we" I mean scholars and sound professionals alike -- need to begin mapping a history of the art of creating sound effects in terms of its origins, influences, traditions and not simply from a technological perspective. Secondly, we need to engage in a constructive dialogue that may help us understand better how sound effects actually work. Finally, and most importantly, we need to ensure that this work feeds into a wider attempt at reconciling sound and image: the separation of the two, a separation that can be traced all the way back to the early days of cinema, has always been closely linked to the inability to understand cinema as an audio-visual medium. Without a proper understanding of how sound functions such a proposition is doomed to remain in the realm of good intents.

### **In Defence of Vulgarity**

There remains one thorny issue, namely the understanding of sound effects as an expression of the crude, the mechanical/repetitive, the unsophisticated, that is, as an expression of

vulgarity. I do not wish to suggest that the problem for sound effects is that of changing people's perception to "elevate" sound effects out of the vulgar and into the realm of sophistication. Nor do I wish to attempt a similar operation concerning the distinction between the technical and the artistic and simply reiterate the claim that sound designers are not technicians but artists. Quite the reverse: leaving aside the fact that value judgment concerning what is vulgar changes dramatically from one generation to the next, the importance of the vulgar in the culture of every nation is well-documented and it is only when linked to issues of social acceptance that it becomes a problem. Just as old dialects are constantly being reevaluated in cultural terms precisely because of their vulgar origins (where vulgar takes its original meaning of coming from "the people") and for their ability to provide an insight into the vernacular of a people, similarly the vulgar nature of sfx should not necessarily be looked at as a negative. Indeed, sfx could arguably be understood as one of the last remaining opportunities to explore the vernacular of cinema, unencumbered by decades of superimposition of structures and grammars of sorts. Similarly, I would like to suggest that claiming that sound designers are artists may be counterproductive mainly because in so doing we immediately devalue the role and importance of technology and technique in favour of personal expression and style. This distinction is, yet again, a fictitious one: in cinema, there cannot be personal expression without technology just as there cannot be style without technique. In distancing themselves from technology and technique, sound men and women may in fact be eschewing the very backbone of their profession and, as a consequence, effectively discounting their work. If recognition is to come for their work it is not going to come by reminding the public what they are not.

One of the reasons why film is still regarded as a visual medium is not because of some intrinsically universal quality but because of the image crafts' ability to allow audiences to appropriate and make their own the vernacular of those crafts. Scholars and critics feel right at home when using terms that professionals use: pan, close-up, frame, dolly, p.o.v. etc. This is the antithesis of sound where, music aside, scholars, critics and everyday audiences are at a loss as to how to talk about the most basic aspects of the soundtrack. In other words, whereas the image crafts have been successful in allowing their specialist language to permeate through the boundaries of their profession, the same cannot be said for sound, especially in the case of sound effects. The latter therefore suffers from a lethal combination of cultural exclusions. Their modus operandi and specific language (two key elements for the understanding of any practice) are unknown to the public at large but also to scholars and critics, for the most part at least. More damagingly, all interested parties seem to share an understanding of sound's vernacular as vulgar in the worst possible version of the term: as crude, underdeveloped and lacking sophistication. Instead of considering sound effects as perhaps one of the few remaining truly popular and "everyday" idioms left in contemporary cinema, most scholars, critics, audiences and filmmakers see it as the unsophisticated technical part of filmmaking that is functional at best and downright objectionable at its worst.

## Notes

[1] There is remarkable similarity in the dictionary definition of what a sound effect is in virtually all the dictionaries, both in print and online, that I have looked at.

[2] It is striking to note that the term artificial has synonyms such as "false," "imitation," "insincere," "unnatural," "contrived" and "hollow." Artificial then becomes a way to address

sfx as a negative, highlighting its degree of separation from nature and the original in a reiteration of critical discourses that have been dominant since Aristotle.

[3] Revenue can be generated "directly" in the shape of the marketed music score CD of a given film or "indirectly" through the additional income often brought about by winning prizes such as an Oscar for Best Screenplay or Music Score, etc.)

[4] The fact that many composers and writers should regard film music and screen writing as an "inferior" or secondary enterprise (often seen as a "money cow") to the more worthy novel or classical piece is less a direct criticism of the actual act of composing and writing for the screen and more a reflection of the continuing debate regarding the merit of popular culture versus high culture.

[5] I am using the term sound designer in a rather loose fashion in this article for the purpose of clarity to indicate all sound men and women engaged in the process of creating sound effects for a specific movie.

[6] Clearly a similar argument could be made concerning the bastard origin of some, if not most, music forms. The difference here is that whilst music can refer to high art by employing prestige composers and music (especially opera and classical music) sound effects cannot for lack of a specific history of development and a paucity of critical recognition.

[7] In this sense, sound and sfx meet at this crossroad of neglect. Indeed, this is another indication of how the fate of sound and sfx are inextricably linked: the former cannot hope to be fully understood and appreciated so long as the latter remains unexplored. To know and write about music and dialogue is simply not enough.

[8] Interestingly, the editorial drew a very strong response that was published by *Film Quarterly* in their following issue: Jackson Burgess and Herbert Feinstein, Correspondence & Controversy: Mightier than the Eye? *Film Quarterly* 12 (3), (Spring, 1959), pp. 63-64.

[9] Interview with Kevin MacDonald, director of *Touching the Void*. *British Film Institute*. Available at: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/filmmusic/detail.php?t=d&q=28> [Accessed 3 February 2006]

[10] See the discussion of the credits war between directors and writers in Alan Lovell and Gianluca Sergi. *Making Films in Contemporary Hollywood*. London and New York: Hodder Arnold, 2005.

[11] Interview with Roger Corman, *British Film Institute*. Available at: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/filmmusic/detail.php?t=d&q=10> [Accessed 8 February 2006]

[12] There are several articles, news reports and studies on the matter. CBC, *Canadian Broadcasting Company*, ran a series of news items and broadcast on this topic in 2003. It now dedicates a section of its website to the topic: [http://www.cbc.ca/consumers/market/files/health/loud\\_movies/index.html](http://www.cbc.ca/consumers/market/files/health/loud_movies/index.html) Ioan Allen, vice-president of *Dolby Laboratories*, has written one of the more eloquent pieces on the issue of loudness (the article won the Society for Motion Pictures and Television Engineers journal article of year award in 1999) that can be found at

[http://www.dolby.com/assets/pdf/tech\\_library/54\\_Moviestooloud.pdf](http://www.dolby.com/assets/pdf/tech_library/54_Moviestooloud.pdf) Newspapers have published also several letters from readers and articles. A representative example of the latter, titled "Loud and Louder," can be found in *The Guardian* (UK) at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,929078,00.html> [All accessed 10 February 2006]

[13] The question is not whether it is legitimate to ask questions concerning the loudness of movies but how those questions are formulated and for what purpose. Is there sufficient evidence supporting claims that movies have become "too loud?" Is it clear beyond doubt what "loud" actually means? Indeed, is loudness the most appropriate measurement to ensure correct reproduction as opposed, for example, to distortion? Is "loud" in movies necessarily bad?

[14] Interestingly, the Latin word the English word sound comes from, *sonus*, meant both sound and noise, but also character and style. In other words, the Romans were careful to stress that a sound has character and style, not just physical properties. Indeed, Latin has over sixty words that refer to the concept of sound in some form or other, testifying to the difficulty in finding one single definition of what remains a very complex event.

[15] When I use the term communication, I do not mean it in the sense of communicating "meaning" but rather as a way of engaging an audience with whatever aspect of the narrative is paramount to convey. That can indeed be meaning, but it could also be emotional, sensual, and so on.

[16] It is a relatively common practice in film soundtracks to employ songs containing lyrics that refer directly or indirectly to the narrative hence introducing a verbal component to music.

[17] Obviously, there is little paradox here since the deaf community has historically been profoundly engaged with sound related issues.

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