

Libero Colimberti

London College of Communication

MA Sound Arts 2008

Unit 3: Self-Evaluative Report

Introduction and retrospective

The path of my research during this year's MA course has explored many fields of research and experimentation, starting from the practice of eavesdropping and finishing with the relationship between sound and image in movies. What characterized most of the pieces and experiments this year was a common sense of grotesque, always developed in uncommon settings.

There have been two main pieces of work completed in relation to the course. The first piece, called 'Muzak' is essentially an audio piece composed of recordings of some girls in a toilet, while some weird and unexpected background music was being pumped into the room.

The practice of candid recording allows one to capture genuine behaviour from people. An awareness of the intimacy of the place of recording transmits a fuller feeling of awkwardness to the listener and gives them the sense that they are being intrusive.

To some extent these themes are included in the other significant piece of work produced within this course: the final project entitled 'Frame' aka 'the Picture-less Movie'. This piece consists of, as the title says, a short film without any image, just telling a story through its sounds.

I came to the radical idea of making a film without any picture, after an intense experimentation in the relationship between audio and video (mainly in the field of sound post-production) that in many ways led to hyper-real outcomes that most people may already have seen in Hollywood movies.

The experiments have been many: I played with swapping the role of music and sound effects, I tested how much percussive sounds can be acceptably out of synchronization to an image on a screen, and finally, experimented with the usage of non-diegetic sounds (off-screen sounds).

I came to a moment in which I got stuck in my experiments and I was definitely in need of a radical turning point in my research. From this impasse, I reached the idea of attempting to build up a film experience that would exclude the sense of sight, in which the narrative could be followed and perceived only through its soundtrack.

The sounds chosen for this project were those of a field recording I made about one year ago, while shooting a short film in Stoke Newington, London. I recorded the yelling of a man who was threatening to commit suicide by jumping from the second floor of a building, and the pleas of a woman who appeared to be his partner. I kept this non-intentionally recorded evidence on file, until the moment that I was sure I could use it for creative purposes.

The final piece: frame

The two research questions that led my research and experimentation were:

- Can a movie have no picture?
- Can a genuine performance tell a story without any sound?

The final piece I did for the course, 'Frame' is a short film without any picture. On the visual side, it consists of a black frame running for almost seven minutes, with a countdown time code strip running backwards from seven minutes to zero.

The blank frame is contained in a 'letterbox' that consists of two thick black strips on the top and bottom edges of the frame, resizing it to the cinematic convention of a 16:9 ratio that squashes the section in which the picture would normally appear into a compact rectangle. The black of the top and bottom strips had a darker grading compared to the black of the frame.

In contrast to some sound art that relies upon multi-channel mixing to communicate its message, the audio content of this film is monophonic, since the original recording was made likewise. The sound is one of a pure genuine experience, and it doesn't need any specialist spacing to convey the most fundamental emotions to the audience. The quality of the recording ended up being really good, although the dialogue is not always fully audible, so I took advantage of the choice of the video in order to put subtitles throughout the story, in order to make all the dialogue much more understandable.

The event was recorded by pure chance, but as in many non-staged events, it is meaningful enough to be defined as a stand-alone incidental story only lacking a narrative mode. The idea of making a short film without a picture from that recording came for different reasons. I have been always fascinated by what the perception of a genuine violent action could generate in a viewer's mind, and in the most realistic action movies scenes, it is mainly the sound that emotionally moves the audience.

Thus, the idea of a black frame with the recording of that evening as soundtrack was the only, but at the same time, the best choice for creating thrilling and enjoyable evidence of that story, without an artefact re-staging of the actual story that occurred.

All art is image making, and all image-making is the creation of substitutes.
(Gombrich, 1963, p. 9)

This statement is to some extent relevant to both the absence of image in the film and to the uniqueness of the performance, and definitely enforces my theory. The idea of starting from the real recording of those two people arguing is the productive criteria that keeps my short film nailed down to the emotional reality of the facts, without the need, as Gombrich would have said, to create any 'substitute' for it.

On the other hand, if we assume that this piece could really be called a movie, and trying to see everything as if it were a film shot in the classic way, it is the lack of awareness of the 'actors' about the fact that they were 'acting', that

provided the most genuine performance possible. Again, it would seem to be a waste to create a substitute for it.

Following this logic, the concept of screenplay and plot are null since they could only be written down in retrospect. This approach recalls the piece 'Muzak', especially due to the practice of hiding a recording device, in order to obtain genuine performances.

It may sound pretentious, but I believe that following this criteria, 'Frame' could be considered the only movie that simply and honestly represents reality.

First curation and staging at the IMT gallery

It was planned that this film could be shown and adapted to many different occasions. Both the finality of projecting this film classically in a cinema, and its probable creative staging in an exhibition context, have substantially affected the practical realization of it. Many details, especially on the visual side, have been adapted to both of these potential viewing contexts.

The only public showing of this piece so far was in the context of the exhibition related to the conclusion of the MA Sound Arts course that took place at the IMT gallery in London, between the 27th and the 29th of November 2008. The curation was taken care of by Electra and IMT.

I was really enthusiastic about the way that my piece was staged in that space, and I was pleased with the input that I received from the curators. The way I decided to show the picture-less movie, was by projecting it in a loop from a DVD player. Initially, I liaised with the curators concerning where exactly would be best to project the film, and I asked to do it in the toilet of the gallery, due to various strategic and creative reasons. The details in the realization of the film that were practically affected by this first screening were primarily on the visual side.

The toilet of the gallery had a nice shower screen that immediately inspired us to experiment by projecting the film onto it, pointing the projector at an unusual angle, so as to create multiple reflections of the film all around the bathroom.

In order to smooth and enrich the appearance of the reflected spots (that were much more beautiful than the straight projection) I had to intervene by grading the black of the frame comparing to the top and bottom strip, making it slightly paler, a shade of dark gray. The aim was to preserve the difference in colour between the central and external sectors in the reflected image, so to maintain the impression of an empty film rolling on the walls.

Other random reflections were produced by some pieces of mirror stuck to the wall, and the tiles of the toilet themselves. The other tweaks concerned the position of the time code strip in the projection, in order to give it the right position to be reflected in various points of the toilet so it could be always seen, no matter what position the viewer had in the room, with the practical effect of keeping the suspense alive.

The choice to loop the film in the toilet was made taking into consideration the fact that a potential viewer would step in the room at an arbitrary moment of the film, and possibly would get nothing of the story at first glance. By keeping the toilet engaged for long periods, the piece allows the

possibility of creating a sort of embarrassment in the moment when somebody else would have knocked on the door, requesting to use the room for its 'old' function. Furthermore, the experience of listening to a couple arguing, already suggests awkwardness due only to the fact of experiencing a highly intimate yet violent encounter.

Staging in a cinema?

This short film was also intended to be projected in a traditional cinema, a context that would create a significantly different viewing experience for a different audience. The 'plot' of the story itself flows in a mirror structure comprised of *crescendo* and *diminuendo* phases, going up at the beginning and down towards the end, touching his highest pitch of tension right in the middle of the seven minutes.

I haven't yet had the opportunity to project this movie in a cinema, but I am tempted by the idea of submitting it to short film festivals in the near future; it would be interesting to hear what the reactions could be from cinematic audiences.

Contextual research and inspiration

Why in cinema do we speak of 'the image' in the singular, when a film has thousands of them? The reason is that even if they were millions, there would still be one container for them, the frame. What 'the image' designates in the cinema is not content but container: the frame.

(Chion, 1994, p. 66)

The title of my piece is integrally related to the framework of conceptual research I conducted alongside the making of the piece, and this relation is fully expressed in the above quote from a famous book of the musician and theorist of sound for cinema Michel Chion.

I think that the meaning of Chion's words is related to our century-old cinema viewing history, and my sound experimentation led to a demonstration of the truth of this concept. I felt that I could drive people's expectations in a cinematic way using only the cue of an empty black frame, whilst the story was left to be told though sound alone.

It seems to me that cinema is the most diffused vehicle of a virtual reality, in that it evokes a sensorial experience that is difficult if not impossible to fully deconstruct. Thanks to the mechanism highlighted by Michel Chion, it subtly affects both the creation and the perception of many other creative practices.

Louise Lawler is a sound artist who made some sound installations called 'A Movie without the Picture', with human sounding birdsongs around the United States almost three decades ago: this is what Craig Owens states about her work in his essay 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism' (1983). He questions:

...what the picture is supposedly a substitute for, what it replaces, what absence it conceals? And when Lawler shows "A Movie without the Picture," as she did in 1979 in Los Angeles and again in 1983 in New York, is she simply soliciting the spectator as a collaborator in the production of the image?

(Owens, 1983, in Foster, 1985, p.73)

So why and for what purpose did Lawler call her piece 'A Movie without the Picture'? How was she pretending to encourage the spectator to collaborate in the production of the image for it? The answer is simple: calling her work a 'Movie', she suggests an imaginary frame (the same talked about by Chion), in front of which every spectator's expectation is re-interpreted in a cinematic way. It is filtered through an indefinite perception of time, and this perceptual shift into the cinematic dimension is of course triggered by sounds.

Criticisms and comparisons

Many criticisms were levelled against this piece, asking if a radio drama could not have been enough to tell such a story.

Having had this question asked maybe too many times, I start considering it even a bit too predictable. I think that this story could have been told by a voice via radio, but this would have turned it into nothing more than a news report, since the most beautiful element of the short film, that is the true recording of an actual event, wouldn't have been usable at all unless someone would have spoken over it, consequently ruining the suspense.

So the definitive answer to this question is 'yes', but not in such a thrilling way. The usage of subtitles is vital for the preservation of the original recording, so it is much more than an aesthetic choice, it is basic to my production criteria, and regarding comprehension, it does a similar job to that of a voice over.

I think that the same kind of discussion would have come out in reference to the last masterpiece from the director Derek Jarman, 'Blue', also a feature film without picture. Jarman made this film in the last period of his life, in which he was slowly dying of AIDS, and was robbed of his sight due to complications related to the disease. It is to some extent a fictional documentary about his expected death, with a blue frame that runs from the beginning to the end.

In terms of a soundtrack, we have narrating voices, recordings with sounds of the city, the hospital to which he used to go to twice a day for his therapy, and a beautiful music score that often brilliantly blurs in together with the sound effects.

So there is this more or less documentary plot, which is narrated over the blue frame by actors and at times, Jarman himself. Thanks to these narrative voice over segments, it could make sense to broadcast the audio content through the radio medium without any problems of comprehension from the listener; the only problem would be that the audience would miss the obsessing colour blue (that is constantly referenced by the voices) that dominates the screen throughout, that is meant to be vital to the director for the full receptiveness to the feelings of this film.

A comparison between 'Frame' and 'Blue' is therefore strange. The choice of not having any picture is taken in both for different aesthetic and narrative reasons.

I think that the narrating voice on Jarman's picture-less movie has a similar finality to that of the subtitles on mine, helping the audience by explaining what happens in the story. However, it splits our sensorial experience into pieces, or time chapters I could say, with the main effect of contriving our full sensorial participation to the story, by at least filling the gap left by the narrative limits of sound.

'Blue' is a post-production film, while 'Frame' is exactly the opposite. The first has its birth in post-production, in the latter it is post-production that adapts real contents to an audience. Effectively, it seems that in 'Blue' the audio content is consequence of the obsessing blue panorama, whereas in 'Frame' the lack of picture is a consequence of the sound.

Final considerations

I think that success of the cinematic medium is strictly related to the human desire to idealize cinematic events and characters. It presents simplified models and comprehensible encounters that are appealing to our imagination. However, this idealization is a two-way process, acting through our memory to affect our behaviour. It is fuelled much more through sight rather than hearing (ideal – related to the greek verb *idein* = to see). In my opinion, our visual memory is much more rationally constructed than our sonic memory, since the occurrences, the objects and the people that we store in our minds are archived and later recalled much more voluntarily via the picture that we have of them, than through their sound or their voice.

So, to some extent, my piece 'Frame' might be then considered paradoxically interpreted. It can be read as an attempted de-construction of the most established cinematic assumptions, just due to the fact that it strongly highlights the limits of a sound-based narration. Thus critiquing the most realist narrative medium that the human mind has invented, cinema, by adopting its very form.

I think that the effect of having a film with no picture logically causes the immediate reliance of the spectator on the sense of hearing, in a manner similar to blind people who have their other senses (and in this case also their sonic memory) refined due to their lack of the sight.

By this logic, the image that 'Frame' transmits to its 'blind-for-one-film' audience, is weak and transitory, and maybe only a blind person could like it as a self-standing film and remember it. Sometimes I think that I am the only person who would still go to the cinema even if I were blind!

These above mentioned reflections don't mean to undervalue the emotional role of the sound in a film; on the contrary, they aim to provoke people to pay greater attention during its creation. This is because the subtle contribution of an appropriately matched sound can turn a film into an amazing sensorial experience.

I like the idea that 'Frame' is a provocation to all those - and sadly there are many amongst those who actually produce cinema - who simply take their sound for granted.

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