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Sound Mixing and *Apocalypse Now:*
An Interview with Walter Murch

FRANK PAINE

Image and sound are linked together in a dance. And like some kinds of dance, they do not always have to be clasping each other around the waist: they can go off and dance on their own, in a kind of ballet. There are times when they must touch, there must be moments when they make some sort of contact, but then they can be off again. There are some films where the contact is unbroken: the image leads and the sound follows—it never deviates from what you actually see, what is directly indicated. Other films are way out there—what you are hearing has only the smallest physical relationship to the image. Yet there is—there has to be—some kind of connection being made, a mental connection, Out of the juxtaposition of what the sound is telling you and what the picture is telling you, you (the audience) come up with a third idea which is composed of *both* picture and sound and resolves their superficial differences. The more dissimilar you can get between picture and sound, and yet still retain a link of some sort, the more powerful the effect.

The relationship is always shifting, though, in any film. Sometimes it is very close and then it will open way up and the sound will do something completely off the wall, and then zoom back in again. But that's where it starts to be like a dance. I mean, they're dancing together and then they go off, and then they come back, and cross, and go in different directions again.

An example of this is something we tried to do in *Apocalypse Now.* At the very beginning of the film, Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) is in a hotel room in Saigon. He wakes up and looks out of the window, and what you hear are the off-screen policeman's traffic whistle, the car horns, motorbikes, the little fly buzzing in the windowpane, etc. Then he sits down on the bed and starts talking, in narration, about how his heart is really in the jungle and he can't stand being cooped up in this hotel room. Gradually, what happens is that all of those street sounds turn into jungle sounds: the whistle of the policeman turns into a cricket; the car horns turn into different kinds of birds; and the fly turns into a mosquito. You are watching

Willard sitting in his hotel room, but what you are hearing is a very strong jungle background. One reality is exchanged for another. The thread that links them is the fact that although his body is in Saigon, his mind is in the jungle. That's what Willard really wants to get back to. By gradually making that shift you've presented the audience with a dual reality which—on the face of it—is absurd, but one which nevertheless gets at the dilemma of this particular character.

The first thing in approaching a new project is to make a list of sounds which you think might be necessary or effective, but which were not in the film when it was shot. Think as deeply as you can about the characters in the film and the environment in which they move. Find moments at which you can, gracefully, add to the character, or his motives, or the story, or whatever, and not interfere or detract. There are times when too much texture would simply get in the way. There are other times when you can, deftly, put little things in there that don't seem like you put them there but which, nonetheless, add up: somebody closes the refrigerator door and there is a little tinkle of glass from inside—that means the refrigerator is full. The function of sound at this level is very close to art direction. Where does this guy live? Is it close to a freeway? Add some traffic. What kind of doors does he have in his apartment? Hollow core with Schlage locks? Put them in. Etc.

The other thing is to think of the sound in layers, break it down in your mind into different planes. The character lives near the freeway, so you've got this generalized swash of traffic sound, but then occasionally a plane flies over: these are the long, atmospheric sounds. On top of these you then start to list the more specific elements: the door closes, the gunshots, the bats that live in the attic—who knows? Isolated moments. Once you've done that, once you can separate out the backgrounds from the foregrounds, and the foregrounds from the mid-grounds, then you go out and record those specific things on your list separate from everything else. You record the freeway without the planes; then just the planes. You record the bats squeaking without any other kind of background noise. And then you build it up, one sound track superimposed on another, like one of those little Easter eggs which has different planes of stuff in it—little ducks in the foreground, then the bunnies, the grass, and the sky. And hopefully it will all go together, and it will look like a coherent whole that not only seems to exist on its own, but which connects with certain things in the story, certain things in the character. Since each of those layers is separate, you can still control them, and you can emphasize certain elements, and de-emphasize others the way an orchestrator might emphasize the strings versus the trombones, or the tympani versus the woodwinds.

There's a difference in approach between the traditional Hollywood way of putting a sound track together and the way that it is done in

England. On *Apocalypse,* we worked pretty much with the English system. The fact is: if you have to do a certain amount of work in a certain limited amount of time, you have to employ more than one person. You can't do it all yourself. So, how do you allocate the jobs? The way in Hollywood has been to hire one person as sound supervisor, and that person selects all the sound: where the sound will go, what kind of sound it is, and records it if necessary. And then he says, "Joe, come in here." And Joe comes in, and he says, "Here's reel 8," and he gives Joe the picture and then this stack of sounds. "I've marked on the picture where all of these sounds should go. Cut 'em in." And Joe says, "Right." Joe goes away, and a week later, he comes back with all of those sounds cut in. Joe is reduced in his responsibility. It's more of an assembly line procedure. He has certain bolts that he has to screw on to the frame at certain points. There is a certain amount of initiative that he has, but it's contained. He also doesn't see the whole film, or rather he doesn't work on the whole film. He works on Reels 2 and 8 and 12. And so he doesn't really get into what all of the intermediate reels are all about. That's Fred and Mack and Peter's responsibility.

The English system is to swing around and look at the problem horizontally, rather than vertically. Which is to say, each sound editor will weave one thread of sound through the fabric of the entire film. One sound editor will take all helicopters in the film, another sound editor will take all the gunshots in the film, another all of the boat sounds, and another all of the jungle sounds. That way each of the editors, within his own domain, is able to think of and work with the film as a whole. He is able to research, say, all of the available helicopter sounds that there are and make sure that they have a tonal and textural variation throughout the course of the film, the way red threads in a rug would. So it's not just the same stupid red thread, but here is a little crimson, here is pink, depending on what's lying next to it. And inevitably in a film, you might have recorded maybe one really great sound—a helicopter, for instance. There's just something about the way it was recorded that's great. If one person is doing it, he will say, "It really should be here. This is where the greatest helicopter sound in the film should be, right here." And he'll put that there. If it's all being done by different people, they all want that same helicopter sound, and they all try to cut it in. Theoretically, the sound supervisor is supposed to supersede all of that and say, no, it should go here, but it's better, I think, for one person to be in charge of that thread. It's like having concertmeisters in an orchestra. The lead violinist, who thinks only about the violins. And when the conductor wants to talk about the violins, he talks to the concertmeister. And so each of the sound editors is a concertmeister of his own string section, which may happen to be the helicopters. He will develop that as a coherent whole within itself over the course of the film. Also, just for their own well-being

and sanity, as individuals who work on a film with a great deal of commitment for a long time, it's better that they work on the whole film than that they feel like they're punching in and punching out each day, just being given the bolts to be put on the film. After a while, I think people become brutalized by that kind of treatment, and they lose any kind of interest or contact, which is something that begins to reinforce itself within the traditional Hollywood system, where you have only so much time; there isn't that much commitment to the film. The way the thing is geared, the sound editors don't have the total vision of what the sound is all about. They can certainly see the film as a whole, maybe, once or twice, but they are not working on all of it all the time.

There are disadvantages to both systems, nonetheless. The disadvantage of the English system is that you may get moments where the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. And the person who's doing the helicopters has constructed this elaborate thing, but so has the guy that's done the jungle, and they're going to be competing. You still need, in the English system, some one person who has the overall thing, who says, "I know there's a lot of helicopter action here visually, but I don't want a lot of heavy helicopter sound there. So let's just cut in what is minimally necessary. Because although we see helicopters there, I want the jungle to be really dominant." And so you have to have somebody who can step back and look at the total effect of the sound over each of these individual departments. Otherwise, you'll have conflicts.

We talked about the layers of sound for the editing of a film. But I think it's generally misleading to say, "Well, that sequence had eighty tracks, it must be great." Ideally, for me, the perfect sound film has zero tracks. You try to get the audience to a point, somehow, where they can *imagine* the sound. They hear the sound in their minds, and it really isn't on the track at all. That's the ideal sound, the one that exists totally in the mind, because it's the most intimate. It deals with each person's experience, and it's obviously of the highest fidelity imaginable, because it's not being translated through any kind of medium. So, at a certain point, there were 160 tracks for *Apocalypse*. That is an awful lot, but on the other hand, if somehow I could have achieved the same effect with no tracks, I would have been more impressed. Or one track. If there had been one sound that did all of that, so mysteriously, I would be more impressed. But what that means is: thinking very, very deeply, and being very, very lucky in getting exactly the right thing. And if you can do that, then the number of tracks is meaningless. But, generally speaking, it doesn't happen very often, if ever, to get that one thing. That's just an abstract ideal that I always strive for.

I believe that there have always been sound films, since the invention of films, and there will always be silent films. You can look at tele-

vision shows today, or even some features, and there really is no "sound" in them. There is talking, and there's music, maybe, but the part of the brain that is interested in sound and texture and the meaning of sound as music is totally uninvolved. The sound in those films is conveying little pellets of information—the door closed, the person said this—and there's no duality, no stretching. So there are silent films today: they've got sound tracks, of course, but emotionally, they're silent. Whereas you can look at Chaplin's silent comedies and certain other films and they depend tremendously on the sound: the sound that the wardrobe made when it fell on him. You can "hear" all of the dishes break. Those films are using sound. They're asking you to imagine the sound of things. So they are sound films, even though they are completely silent. You try to track yourself along the boundaries between those two things—that's where you swing between zero tracks and 160 tracks.