How Sound Design Shapes the Audience’s Response in Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia*
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Abstract: The US Academy of Motion Picture Awards breaks down film sound into discrete areas of technical proficiency: sound mixers and re-recording mixers, aesthetic sound editing or design, and sound effects editing. Unsurprisingly, when the audience is asked to report on the sound of a movie, the elements most commented on are the volume and the music. Little critical attention has been given to the use of sound in the hands of the sound designer. In this paper, Damian Candusso, Sound Effects Editor on Australia, peels back the layers of sound and effects that he used to design the dreamtime and landscape sequences for the film Australia. The concept of the ‘objective correlative’ (Eliot 1950) describes the way in which the sound designer assembles the auditory elements then acts as a creative catalyst in synthesising these into an emotional effect. This offers a rare insight into the way in which the audience is positioned by the subliminal artistry of sound design.

Keywords: Australia, Landscape, Identity, Indigenous, Soundtrack

Introduction

The debate about the cultural impact of Baz Luhrman’s Australia is preoccupied with narrative and images. Yet a more powerful determinant of how we are ideologically positioned by the film goes unexplored. Holman (1997) suggests the auditory ‘object’, composed of disparate elements of dialogue, music and sound, evokes an emotional response, yet the separation and analysis of these elements are beyond the perceptual capability of the audience. How then do we critically analyze films in terms of sound? Theo Van Leeuwen (1999) has analyzed the way the audience is positioned by dialogue and music in media texts. There is a body of critical discourse based upon film history, lyrics, musical composition and theory. However, these critical approaches overlook the subliminal, emotional responses evoked by the sound design. This paper will isolate the creative process of designing the sound for the film Australia, in order to illustrate how sound is used to evoke particular audience responses.

Discussion

Sound is used to position the audience from the opening moments of Australia, even before visual images, dialogue and characterization begin. Behind the black screen the audience hear ethereal singing, native birds, cicadas, nature sounds and the gradual swell of string instruments. Then as daylight dawns on the distant silhouette of an aboriginal elder and a small boy, murmurs of tribal language rise and the audience are introduced to the boy through his voiceover in Aboriginal English. Before they even engage with narrative or vision their auditory senses have been used to invoke a three dimensional sense of space, environment, nature, spirituality, confidentiality and initiation. The pace of the unfurling sounds has subconsciously indicated a layered, complex sense of time.

The ability to recognise the way sound positions the audience is fundamental to critical analysis. If we are unaware of the techniques and methods of sound design, we take as ‘normal’ the response to the embedded ideologies in auditory texts. Van Leeuwen examines the role of systems of music and sound in creating sociocultural responses in the audience.
‘Music makes us apprehend what are, in themselves, non-emotional meanings in an emotional way, that binds us effectively to those meanings and makes us identify with them. The process in which the ideological power of music is vested, is of course all the more effective if we are denied access to conscious knowledge of just what it is that we are emotionally identifying with.’ (Van Leeuwen 1988, 28).

It is interesting that in *Australia* this positioning, in relation to space and environment, is given primacy over the usual western linear construction of story. Film audiences are accustomed to openings that place the viewer in the middle of the plot with a strong central character battling a series of fast-paced chronological events. The opening of *Australia* relies upon sound alone to intimate that the audience are embarking upon a journey through country in which the oral indigenous traditions are central. Stephen Muecke (cited in Campbell 2004, 7) has suggested the metaphysics of indigenous beliefs centre around ‘an ontology of space rather than time’. Although the film is tightly paced in a linear sequence, the sound design is able to create an alternative metaphysical relationship with the audience.

When designing sound effects on *Australia*, Damian Candusso was sensitive to the ideological implications of his sound choices. He was responsible for the sound effects that conjured associations with place and cultural history. He designed the story related weather elements and the indigenous soundscapes, referred to by the sound crew as ‘dreamtime specials’. The scene of the Kuraman crossing contains elements of sound design which are orchestrated in a way to hint at the dreamlike and almost unconscious state of the characters. Here the audience listens to distant dreamlike voices as the boy, Nullah, follows King George. Although very subtle, these voices were constructed quite deliberately for this scene.

Supervising Sound Editor Wayne Pashley captured ‘wild line’ recordings of David Gulpilil during the Automated Dialogue Replacement (ADR) process and recorded his Yolngu Mathain dialect in an almost palette-like pastiche format. Candusso took these voiceovers and edited, manipulated and sonically treated these within the ‘surround space’ to enhance the sensation that King George was calling the characters to trust in him as he led them through the hostile Kuraman desert. These vocals were pitched and processed in such a way as to hint at being ethereal voices of guidance.

When indigenous dialects were used in the film, permission and advice was sought from the Aboriginal elder, David Birumbirum. Film makers are much more aware of cultural protocols and permissions than ever before. In the filming of *Mad Dog Morgan*, thirty years earlier, David Gulpilil contributed songs and dances to the sound track from his native Arnhem Land even though the story was shot in northern Victoria. The director Phillipe Mora, in the documentary *To shoot a mad dog* (1976), comments on his discovery that the actor was skilled in bush craft, singing and dancing. ‘Once I realized that he knew all of this I did just write it into the film because I thought it was another dimension to the film.’ Gulpilil felt uncertain about the knowledge he was sharing on screen. ‘I gave a special credit to David at the beginning of the film for his didgeridoo music and his songs. These hadn’t been used, as far as I know, in a major motion picture ever before. David was concerned about his tribal elders because apparently some of the dances and some of the songs were tribal and were not supposed to be heard by outsiders. I can’t recall the exact details but I know David was concerned about it.’ (1976, documentary 26”18”). This responsibility no longer rests with the actors. Now these ethical and cultural dilemmas are the primary concern of Directors and Producers as audiences bring heightened awareness of indigenous rights. In December 2008, when Nicole Kidman made the cultural faux pas of playing a didgeridoo on the German chat show *Witten Das?*, the care that was taken with the indigenous elements of the soundtrack for *Australia* was negated by hostile media attention. During production, the sound team had been cognisant of the cultural observances and sensitivities which determined their use of dialect, lyrics and environmental sounds.
The selection, inclusion and elision of sounds, songs and language make a political statement. Yet this powerful positioning may be unrecognized by the audience. The audience may associate some lines of dialogue with particular movies or characters and carry these into the cultural vocabulary of their everyday lives. Do audiences consider the implications of the message over the sound qualities of the voice? A catchphrase the audience has retained from Australia is Nullah’s use of the expression ‘dem cheeky bulls’. Perhaps this evokes the universal positive parental response to the early speech of young children, but it may also serve as nascent recognition of the validity of Aboriginal English.

Depending upon the film genre, the audience may occasionally recall specific sound effects. Sound elements for Science Fiction are frequently recorded from sources that bear no material resemblance to their associated object. We are thrown back to our oral tradition of onomatopoeia to describe the invented sound but ‘Swoosh’, ‘vroom’, ‘whip’ all seem inadequate to describe the emotional response the sound elicits. It is easier to make the sound than to name it. This characteristic of sound, the lack of adequate vocabulary to describe effects, has hampered the critical discussion.

Holman (1997) in describing psychoacoustic properties of sound perception, moves from the language of frequencies and sound pressure levels to the Gestalt approach ‘of separating auditory objects into figure and ground, terms borrowed from painting’ (Holman 1997, 43). He suggests the audience has difficulty in making such separations because:

People do not have the same facility with the variety of sound objects presented in films without training, and this is the core idea. It explains why sound is so valuable to film makers. Its relative subtlety compared with picture elements allows filmmakers to manipulate an audience’s emotions in a way that is not obvious. A flip side to this effect is that it produces a frustration to those who specialize in sound, because if their work is “good” it will never be understood by a wider public than specialists. (Holman 1997, 41)

However, Chion (1994) and Brophy (1999, 2000, 2001) provide critics with a more holistic alternative. They use the term ‘synchresis’ which brings together sound, sight and audience response. Damian Candusso provides an example of how this works in Australia, by stripping back the sound elements from the scene of the Zero Bombers. Baz Luhrmann gave a production note to Candusso over the sound design of the Japanese Zero bombing scenes. He wanted the audience to associate the arrival of the planes with a sense of foreboding and fear. Rosenbaum (1978, 40) hypothesizes that sound ‘appeals more to unconscious and collective impulses’. In the Australian culture the appearance of a shark has a strong emotional resonance. Baz Luhrman wanted a sound that could evoke that type of fear response without resorting to the cliché use of cello sawing.

The first time the audience learns of the impending attack on Darwin by the Japanese, their ears are prepared by a whisper of wind. The plane approach has no engine sounds, only the sounds of the wings slicing through the air. Luhrmann wanted the first plane to replicate a shark surfacing with only the fin piercing through the water surface. He accomplishes this visual metaphor as the tail fin of the Zero slices through the sky-blue cloud. Candusso says, ‘It isn’t until the plane turns off to the right of screen that we start to hear the actual sound of the engine, the roar of danger – the sound of the Zero pealing away’. Absence or presence of sound can dramatically shape audience anticipation. The sound does not give away the shot before we see the plane, in fact it adds to the curiosity. The eerie sound of the wind makes the scene more menacing, it creates a sense of empty space about to be inhabited’. In this instance the sound has foreshadowed the action on an emotional level before the visuals have arrived. There is something scary about the sound of the unknown, the suspension of sound.

Sound can also be used to underscore the theme of the film. There is a theme of spirituality throughout Australia, which pervades the landscape, weather and ‘dreamtime specials’. The
audience is asked to accept many incidents of “magic” within the story. This is not only evident when they first see King George teaching Nullah to sing the fish at the billabong but also when they first meet Nullah at Far Away Downs. The audience are led to believe that Nullah possesses the power to make himself invisible. They first witness Nullah as a magical child when Lady Ashley is drawn to the veranda on her first night at Far Away Downs. She has awoken to the faint sounds of aboriginal singing, a layering of the deeper voices of adults with traditional instruments and Nullah’s higher pitched ethereal song. Nullah has been told by King George that Lady Ashley is ‘the rain’ and Nullah says he will sing her to him. Lady Ashley steps outside to the sound of crickets and a distant aboriginal chorus while, beneath the steps, Nullah hides as ‘the magic man’. Afraid of the unfamiliar sounds, she retreats indoors to find Nullah has entered her home and is waiting for her beside a table.

Candusso reveals that the design of sounds for this scene was primarily based upon winds and elements of sound which are affected by winds. The viewer sees billowing curtains and a flickering candle flame. Candusso used a variety of wind sounds, varying their timing, intensity, timbre, frequency and pitch as well as using wind chimes to hint at the magic within Nullah. These elements add a sense of mystery to the character. The audience return to the everyday world when Fletcher leaves the veranda, and at this point the winds dissipate. The audience response to Nullah has been orchestrated by environmental sounds. These sounds can then become an aural motif for the magical appearance or anticipated arrival of a character. They signal the willing suspension of disbelief at an autonomic level.

Although a body of literature exists on film history, music, dialogue and scripts, the full range of sound design – the combination of music, speech and sound effects – is absent from critical discussions of film aesthetics. One reason is that traditional critical approaches separate the experience into artificially independent components of music, sound effects and voice, all of which are considered secondary to image (Rosenbaum, 1978). The industry divides the components into distinct departments. This can lead to insularity and the development of specialized language inaccessible to ‘outsiders’.

Randy Thom (1998) writing for the Motion Picture Editor’s Guild, notes an over emphasis on high fidelity and the technical aspects of sound production within the industry. This is still the case with recent blockbusters such as Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (Bay, 2009) which runs for 147 minutes with a constant CG battle and a bombardment of sound effects. Thom (1998) bemoaned the fact that films were seldom written and developed with sound in mind from the beginning. Scriptwriters and directors, he suggested, were not sufficiently trained in sound design techniques at film school. The linguistic and visual schemas are still privileged by our education systems. Film production has been dominated by these ‘non-sound’ crafts, so that sound design is rarely able to influence how the film is shot, or how the visuals are edited. Sound is in a reactive stance once the script, shooting and first editing are completed. In the traditional linear model of production, sound recording occurs at the production stage and sound design is completed in postproduction. This industry practice is gradually changing.

Damian Candusso has been sound editor and designer on a number of award winning films over the past fifteen years that have taken account of sound design right from the conceptual stages of the project. George Miller, director of the Academy Award® winning Happy Feet understands the power and contribution that sound can make as an aid to story telling. Often in pre-production Miller liaises with his supervising sound editor and sound crew in order to gather feedback on what he wants in his sound tracks. Ben Burt, when working on Wall-E (Stanton 2008), was asked for character sounds during the storyboard reel process by director Andrew Stanton (Milsom, 2008). With animation, sound can be used to aid the development of visuals, a result of the visuals being created pixel by pixel, and not reliant on filmed footage. This uniquely allows the visuals to follow the sound.

The centrality of sound in the planning and pre-production is more common in contemporary animated feature films. For live-action films, Francis Ford Coppola and Walter Murch were the
first to form a sound design partnership at the stage of script development. In *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979) the characters were able ‘to listen to the world around them’ (Thom, 1998, 4). For example in the classic scene where the American helicopters approach from the sea, the Designer cuts to silence beneath the visuals of a peaceful Vietnamese village then begins the soft introduction of domestic sounds and slowly raises the distant sound of chopper blades to foreshadow the arrival of the helicopters. The audience senses what is coming and feels a poignant response to the juxtaposition of domestic harmony and the terror of war all through sound without dialogue, music or main characters. Sound is not only an addition during postproduction; it is integral to the story telling earlier on in the film making process.

Increasingly, Sound Design is being recognized as of equal importance to the narrative as cinematography, music or dialogue. The approach to the sound design of *Australia* was no exception. Sound design encompasses the sound effects and the soundscape elements including the atmospheric background ambiance, which characterizes the scenes of a film. Music and dialogue are not considered as 'sounds' in this context. When all elements of the film are finally combined, many of the sounds that make up the initial sound design are barely noted below the level of the dialogue or music. As a consequence, many of the subtleties within the sound design are not foregrounded but contribute at a subliminal level to the overall soundtrack of a film (Holman, 1997).

In *Australia*, the sounds of different winds, animals and insects intertwine in an emotional journey across an environmental backdrop. This transforms, as the audience witness the death of Lord Ashley, into mysterious underwater drones. Memory often dictates the sounds one expects – the sounds of underwater bubbles and muffled movement – however, the sound designer may have selected actual recordings from surprising sources to create the scene. Candusso chose a whale song to flow behind Lord Ashley’s drowning in *Australia*. The sound has no physical correlative in the created world of the scene. It has an emotional resonance, an objective emotional correlative. Even though we cannot recollect these sounds, since they do not attach to images or confirm our expectations, the aesthetic impact of these aural elements lingers.

Although many of the sounds chosen for this sequence are simple environmental recordings, what is important is the way in which pitch, manipulation of the recordings and the volume levels of these sounds play out. Like dancers, the sounds follow and take the lead from each other in a carefully orchestrated choreographed manner. Not only do the sounds intertwine with each other, much time is spent creating sounds that morph unnoticeably from one sound into another sound throughout the scene.

In describing the way a poet brings together the sound of language to evoke a particular response in the reader, T.S. Eliot (1950) borrowed the term ‘objective correlative’ from the American landscape artist Washington Allston (Dana 1850). Eliot describes it as:

> a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot 1950, 548).

He describes the artist as a ‘transforming catalyst’ in whom the sensory objects are responded to, seized and stored ‘until the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together’ (Eliot 1950, 535). The result may be the evocation of one emotion or a combination of several feelings.

Damian Candusso is immersed in the landscapes he seeks to evoke as auditory sensory experiences in the film. He is not based in a metropolitan sound studio with a library of pre-recorded sounds but works from a studio and campus in the heart of the Riverina in regional Australia. The collection of landscape recordings for *Australia* began several months before shooting and led him to windmills in drought stricken paddocks, chicken sheds in county towns and livestock sale yards in rural New South Wales. Wayne Pashley recorded many atmospheric ambiences from the shooting locations on set and these provided a solidified bed for localising
the soundtrack. This collection of authentic recordings immerses the artist in the sensory world he is attempting to recreate through sound. However, even Eliot (1950) acknowledged that the ‘objective correlative’ was a combination of emotional triggers, not all of which originate from the source. The ‘materiality’ of sound is only one technique in the sound designer’s palette.

Candusso illustrates this in the sound design for the scene called ‘the death of Daisy’. Nullah’s aboriginal mother drowns in the water tank. The sounds assembled for the scene related to the corrugated iron tank, the turning metal windmill, the water pump, the clanking metal float, the gushing water pipe, the water sounds of waves, bubbles, splashing and underwater acoustics. The muffled water sounds and altered frequencies during the underwater struggle conveyed a sense of depth and volume. Yet these sounds alone could not convey the drama of the situation. The sounds intensify from a series of clicks and squeaks and trickles, to the swoosh of windmill blades, quickly paced cuts from underwater sounds to bumping and clanking, the low drone of a didgeridoo the clicking of a ratchet and clicking of sticks.

Candusso’s brief from Pashley was to create the water as a ‘monster’ just like Fletcher, from whom Daisy is hiding. The bubbles become a muffled roar that grows and dissipates. Candusso searched for a combination of sounds and a mix of acoustic techniques to suggest that Daisy was being eaten by the gurgling water, by a beast consuming her. This has some cultural resonance as there are many aboriginal stories about water creatures that consume unwary swimmers. As Daisy is drawn from the water, Candusso uses the sound of winds that herald approaching storms to whip up the haunting effect of an ominous death wind, tying her back to the earth, back to the land.

Candusso has documented his creative process and thereby is able to bring the unconscious element of sound to the foreground for critical appraisal. If, as Sonnenschein (2002, 206) suggests, ‘each culture carries its own soundtrack formed through the environment, religion, work ethic, social life, language and musical expression’ then the work of the sound designer for film is to catalyze these elements into an emotive palette of meanings. The audience response is a dynamic component of the dance between image, language and sound. Only by becoming more attuned to the soundscapes and techniques of the sound designer can we be critically aware of how we are influenced and ideologically positioned by the sound in film. As more sound designers and editors discuss the construction and evolution of their work, the audience will become more informed and conscious of the art behind the artifice. This may go some way to redress the oversight that Holman (1997) has alerted us to.
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