

Confessions Of An Occasional Sound Designer

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by Randy Thom, C.A.S.

I spend a lot of time thinking about movie sound, and why it is that we who practice the craft are so often ignored, taken lightly, or ritually tortured by the people who hire us. The only envelopes they seem interested in pushing are speed and volume. "We gotta do this one really fast, boys! It's gonna be loud as a train wreck! And, by the way, we'll be making lots of six-frame picture changes right through the final mix. But you guys are masochists anyway, right, or you wouldn't be sound guys!"

Though we in sound usually assume that we are the most oppressed craft in movies, it may not be the case. I can't think at the moment of anybody who could compete with us, but give me a while. The assumption is that sound is something you collect while the cameras are rolling, being careful not to be a pest, and that no attention needs to be paid to sound before that point or after that point until all of the big decisions about the structure of the movie have been made. Then the composer is hired, and the sound editors timidly assume their positions (or is it "the" position?).

Of course, it has never been thatway on the movies best known for wonderful sound. I heard an old interview with Sidney Lumet rebroadcast the other day on NPR. By the end of it I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. When asked to name the most tedious process in film making, he said "the mix." It's really just a "technical" process, he said. But then he thought to add something to the effect that there were occasionally exceptions, like "Apocalypse Now," on which they seemed somehow to do great things in the mix. Wow, I thought. Here is a guy who has directed some truly wonderful films, and who seems to have not a clue about the possibilities for using sound in storytelling.

Having worked on "Apocalypse Now" as a sound grunt during most of its post-production, I am here to testify that the reason it is one of the great sound tracks in history is that the entire film was structured in a way that allowed, and even encouraged, the sound to be great. It is simply not true that great sound was "added" to the film at the end of the process. Sound, and its possibilities, were a part of most of the major creative decisions made on "Apocalypse Now." And that was due in large part to the presence of Walter Murch, who was one of the editors of the film. But it wasn't only Walter. The people-chemistry on the movie just made it a very sound-conscious film. It was also a time when Francis was intensely interested in exploring sound.

When are film makers going to learn, and when will some of them remember,

that film making and all of its crafts are really all one thing, one process. Each craft should be encouraged to inform and influence every other craft, and be open to influence from others.

If sound has a claim on the "most oppressed" title, this is the reason. The work we do in sound is influenced by virtually every other craft: writing, acting, directing, cinematography, production design, set decoration, editing, costumes, etc. But sound is almost never given the opportunity to influence any of those other crafts. Without the kind of synergy that happened on "Apocalypse Now," we get movies that are loud and have plenty of flash (which is what tends to pass for good sound in recent years) but little depth and little soul.

It seems a shame that in this industry, where so much lip service is paid to the idea of collaboration, that so little of it actually happens. But here's to the occasional exception! And here's to hoping I get a chance to work on it!

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