10.5920/soundings.04

Auralising Action Space: channelling a sense of play in documentary sound design

Simon Connor

Many thanks to Ken Turner for giving his time and personal interviews regarding the sound of Action Space and Alan Nisbet, and for permission to use the included archive photos. Also thanks to the University of Sheffield for giving access to these photos and to the Action Space sound archive referred to within this article.

10.5920/soundings.04

Walter Murch's traditional sense of the the sound designer working within cinema was responsible for ensuring sonic consistency through every stage of the production process, in short 'sound from start to finish' (Wright, 2013, p. 139). The role extended beyond the technical responsibilities of the soundtrack to more artistic and aesthetic considerations, famously exemplified by his work in Francis Ford Coppola's films of the 1970s such as *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (Buhler, Neumeyer, & Deemer, 2010, p.391). This required a successful coordination of the main components of the 'multiplane soundtrack'; the dialogue; sound effects and music, or what could be identified as Rick Altman's *'mise-en-bande'* system (2000, p. 341).[1] The definition however has increasingly been resisted and, according to Wright, become more diversified in modern day Hollywood (2013)[2], with what Jeffrey Ruoff describes as having inherent 'mass production techniques and precise divisions of labour' (1992, p. 221). Alternatively, the financial restrictions and minimal crew typical of low budget documentaries or guerrilla-style filmmaking can require those with responsibility of sound to take a more holistic approach to the sonic world of the film (Jones and Jonliffe, 2006). This encompasses both technical and creative practices, embracing the notion of play and experimentation, and requires an overarching understanding of the entire soundtrack. *Action Space* (Wahl, 2016) is such an example of this guerrilla-style of documentary filmmaking, with a small budget and skeleton crew. The film explores the work and ideas of the arts collective Action Space, between the years 1968 – 78, and how their work in education, the arts and cultural and public uses of space are relevant today. With a particular focus on *Action Space*, this chapter explores the importance of play in documentary film sound design from a practitioner perspective. My role as sound designer and recordist covered several responsibilities including production sound, recording the featured musical performances, archive digitisation, sound collage and the final film mix. Here I aim to reveal how the Action Space's do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic, and ethos of learning through play, influenced my approach to shaping the sound world of the film.

Action Space Collective: 1968 – 78

Founded in 1968 by artists Ken and Mary Turner; Action Space aimed to bring art out of the exclusive gallery system to the general public and everyday communities. This coincided with a broader movement, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, by many anti-establishment artists who were dissatisfied with elite institutions, galleries and the art market, and wanted to reach out to previously ignored audiences such

10.5920/soundings.04

Figure 1: Music in Action Space. © Ken Turner

Figure 2: An early Action Space inflatable. © Ken Turner

10.5920/soundings.04

as underprivileged groups or local communities. This was coupled with a search for creative forms of expression beyond traditional methods of drawing or painting (Walker, 2002). Artist collectives such as Fluxus, founded by George Maciunas and largely based in New York, used music, performance art and participatory events to engage with the masses whilst rallying against notions of 'high art' (Higgins, 2002). In London, the collective Inter-Action founded by Ed Berman 1968, used a range of alternative theatre, workshops, film and the travelling Fun Art Bus to bring arts closer to the community (Unfinished Histories, n.d.). Though other artists at the time were exploring participatory pneumatic works, such as Graham Stevens' '*Walking on Water* series in 1966, or Jeffery Shaw's *Pneutube* in 1968, the Turner's approach was to emphasize the act of play, education and the arts through engaging with the public in these extraordinary inflatable environments. (Chau, 2012, Shaw, 2018, Turner, 1971). These were simply constructed, mobile and easily erected. The group could quickly and easily set up in council estates, parks and other public spaces to engage with communities, as explained by founder member Mary Turner:

> We took what we had, structures, pneumatic and rigid; techniques were developed in sound, movement and drama, and we created outlets for ourselves in parks, streets, and playgrounds. The work was an experiment in living as well as striving to find an art relevant to wider public. (Turner, 1971, p. 12)

Engagement with the public was facilitated through the creation and erection of these inflatables, they were structures to enter and explore. The domed and arched structures of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) created an otherworldly environment, leading to a heightened perception of space, colour and sound. As members of the group were mainly artists and musicians, sound and music were an integral part of the experience.

Action Space (2016): The Documentary

Action Space the documentary is a film by Huw Wahl, son of one of the founding members of the group; Ken Turner, and explores the beginnings and ideas of Action Space. Archive film and audio material are key components of the film and are combined with present day footage and commentary from contemporary theorists and the group's key members. A major part of the film is the design and building of a new inflatable structure which acts as a conduit to house four key performances relating to the act of play.

10.5920/soundings.04

Figure 3: During production of *Action Space*: the documentary. © Huw Wahl

The film's modest production budget was £7,500, with most of this being allocated to the building materials of the new inflatable. The core crew totalled three people; director Huw Wahl; producer Amanda Ravetz and myself as sound designer. *Action Space* was a 'passion project', in that we were each attracted and motivated by the project's creative appeal. Unlike a large budget or Hollywood production; no crew member received payment for their contribution, there were no strict divisions of labour, job descriptions, contracts or union restrictions. My personal interest stemmed from the vast potential for sound exploration through recording unique spaces and performances and unearthing the treasures of the Action Space reel-to-reel audio archive. Being free of bureaucratic or supervisory restrictions allowed an unburdened freedom to explore, enabling a more creative approach to capturing and shaping the sound of the film.

Though we were both accustomed to working with short film, the director and I were relatively new to the world of feature length film, having previously worked together on only one feature; *To Hell With Culture* (Wahl, 2014). We had developed a good collaborative working relationship and the lack of industrialised regime in *Action*

10.5920/soundings.04

Space allowed a more fluid experimental approach. We were almost 'learning through play' ourselves, an approach very much in the spirit of the founding of the Action Space collective.

In the first instance, my role covered the typical technical responsibilities for sound commonly found in documentary, involving location sound, working as boom operator, striving to record dialogue as closely and as cleanly as possible, and capturing the unfolding events that appear in the frame of the camera (Ruoff, 1992, pp. 224 – 225). This tethering of camera and sound person can often require a 'highly choreographed' dance in order to capture the unfolding events but remain out of each other's way, as highlighted by both Raymond (1973, in Ruoff, ibid) and Rogers (2013, p. 5). However, it was also necessary for me to untether myself from this partnership and to go beyond the strictly technical role of audio reinforcement in order to seek out other sonic perspectives for the film. As Grierson highlights as far back as 1934, 'the microphone, like the camera, can do better things than merely reproduce' (1966, p. 158). Sound in documentary has much creative potential beyond the technical requirement of synchronously reinforcing the unfolding action. During pre-production for *Action Space*, discussions about the soundtrack were formulated and the director encouraged a more abstract process to recording the production sound. To bring alive the multisensory world of *Action Space* it would be important to capture aspects of the tangible, the materiality of the sounds of making, the unique spatial characteristics of the inflatable structures and to evoke the sensation of being inside such a place.

The remainder of this chapter will address the following key processes that contributed to the finished soundtrack from a technical and creative perspective, before attempting to explore the desired and achieved effect on the viewer-listener:

- Capturing the sounds of making.
- Exploring the acoustic space of an inflatable structure.
- Capturing the musical responses of play and improvisation.
- Sounds from the Action Space archive.

Capturing the Sounds of Making

The film's main shooting period focussed on the planning and building process of a new inflatable in Ambika P3 Gallery, a huge warehouse size space hidden under Westminster University. Involved in the build were 12 student volunteers, original members of Action Space including Ken and Mary Turner, and members of the inflatable

10.5920/soundings.04

company Architects of Air. The space was alive with activity during this filming period, a multisensory experience of vibrant colour, the buzz of conversation, the cutting of scissors, the unrolling of PVC, and the smell of glue as the inflatable began to be assembled. One of the sonic themes of the film was to represent the tangible — the sound of pencil put to paper, and the cutting, rolling and gluing of materials. These sounds of making were collected throughout the building process: the scoring, and slicing of scissors; the pressing, folding and squeaking of plastic; the drag of heavy vinyl across the coarse concrete warehouse floor; the ripping and unrolling of tape; and the smearing of glue. Alongside this could be heard the excited chatter and murmur of voices, collaborating, deliberating, designing and refining the ongoing process. The gallery floor was alive with an orchestration of all these simultaneous sounds, awash with reverberation from the surrounding bare walls and high ceilings, blurring all into a din of activity.

Sounds were recorded individually at close distance with a highly directional shotgun microphone to capture the nuances and sonic details. Recording at such close distances captures an unnatural level of detail, almost hyper-real, a perspective usually unavailable to the naked ear. This is made easier through digital technology that allows one to easily capture footage that is ripe for malleability, transformation and processing (Rogers, 2013, p. 3) and allows one to enhance the details, reinforcing what Chion calls the 'Materializing Sound Indices', defined as:

> . . . the sound details that cause us to 'feel' the material conditions of the sound source, and refer to the concrete process of the sound's production, They can give us information about the substance causing the sound, — wood, metal, paper, cloth — as well as the way sound is produced . . . (Chion, Gorbman, & Murch, 1994, p. 114).

It was important to capture this heightened sense of the tactile, the physicality of the building materials and tools, to evoke the experience and environment. As highlighted by Donaldson, sound 'makes a vital contribution to the evocation of other senses, for example, the sound of wind rustling leaves invites the feel of air on our skin, or the sizzle of food cooking conjures taste' (2017, p. 32). The power of such detailed sound can often enable a multisensory experience for the audience. It was also important to capture the sense of the reverberant and busy atmosphere, a working, social and creative environment. Perhaps imbued with the sense of play and creativity that surrounded me during the build, I experimented with placing the

10.5920/soundings.04

shotgun microphone inside a roll of PVC, waiting to be cut to size, pointing towards the busy factory-like floor. The slight movement of the microphone within the tube created a pulsing modulation in pitch and timbre, a low drone, punctuated by bursts of activity into the reflective and reverberant space. In the film's final edit this brief moment allows us to attune our ears to the unique *spatial signature* (Altman, 1992, p. 24), awash with the sound of ripping tape, the cutting of scissors and chatter of excited voices. These actions came from an opportunistic sense of play, seeking out new perspectives, experimenting, playing with the sound world of the film. This was perhaps imbued subconsciously with the ideology of the Action Space collective, who championed the importance of discovery through play and experimentation.

This approach is akin to that of Hollywood sound designers of the 1970s who often found their iconic sounds through unusual resonances and unique sonic phenomena in the real world. Sound designer Ben Burtt used very similar processes of recording through lengths of tubing to create some of the iconic sound effects for *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) (Lo Brutto, 1994, p. 235). Likewise, Murch would experiment by recording in various spaces, such as bathrooms or the Museum of Natural History, to capture the unique reverb, which could then be processed, distorted, time stretched and layered afterwards (Lo Brutto, 1994, p. 86). He termed this technique as 'worldizing', a means of capturing the surrounding environment as much as the specific cause of sound:

Figure 4: Capturing sounds of making at Ambika P3 Gallery. © Huw Wahl

10.5920/soundings.04

> My general principle of recording sound is never to think of recording just the sound itself. To record a telephone ring I think of recording the space between myself and the telephone. What I'm really recording is the relationship between that telephone and the space around it (Lo Brutto, 1994, p. 88).

These are techniques that are still relevant in sound design today, even with the vast array of sound manipulation easily available via computer software and digital audio plug-ins, the ideas of physical play are still essential practice, as illustrated by sound designer Gary Rydstrom:

> The trick to a lot of sound effects recording is to experiment with different mike placements and different ways of recording. . . . It's just a matter of experimenting. So much of what happens in sound effects recording is unexpected. You just have to be open to finding something different than you originally intended. . . . It's a time of discovery (Lo Brutto, 1994, pp. 235 – 6).

So the techniques of sound design in Hollywood or low budget documentary film are not mutually exclusive. But being free of industrial, bureaucratic and financial implications can encourage an avant-garde, radical or explorative approach to sound in low budget film, just as it did with Murch and his contemporaries in the 1970s, the heyday of the American Zoetrope (Thom, 1999). In a similar period, on the other side of the Atlantic in London, the same could be said of Action Space and their approach to engaging and educating audiences. Unbound from the restrictive elitism of the gallery-based art world, their DIY approach required them to learn as they went, as described by Ken Turner:

> We could only see that parts were beginning to fit together in a new way: we had to feel intuitively that things were right; there's no grand master plan to work to. It often happens by accident or force of circumstance, which I think is sometimes exactly that, accidental (Turner, 1971, p. 14).

Exploring the Acoustic Space of an Inflatable Structure

Entering an inflatable structure for the first time is an otherworldly experience: it is a fabricated vessel that breathes and swells with air as its only structural support. The internal surfaces respond to touch, encouraging one to lean, lie, bounce or roll against them. It is a space that provokes a childish reaction to run, jump, roll and bounce. The bold slashes of red, yellow and blue transparent PVC that adorn the structure

10.5920/soundings.04

allow the internal space to flood with light and colour, reminiscent of a stained-glass window. At several points in the film, the finished structure is inflated and 'brought to life'. With the inflatable as almost a central character, it was important to sonically capture the expanding space and corresponding change in acoustics within. This was achieved through the use of several piezo contact microphones and condenser microphones placed within the folds of plastic, capturing the gradual metamorphosis from its chrysalis like state into its full bloom. This process of inflation and deflation was completed several times, for the purpose of the audio takes, and allowed every nuance, creak and flap to be captured. At semi-inflation there was enough room to allow me to explore inside and capture sound from within the folds of the structure. Armed with a mobile recorder and pseudo-binaural recording setup I could gravitate towards the areas of most interest. Such sounds were collected with the final mix in mind, and were later subjected to time stretching and filtering in order to reinforce the size and weight of the structure.

This sense of the 'otherworldly' is highlighted in the film's opening scene. Sensitivity to sound here is particularly heightened, in darkness the only sound heard is the initial powerful rush of air from the fans, then the gradual unfolding and crinkling of PVC. Close-up detailed shots come into focus: slowly shifting, creased plastic surfaces begin to take shape; and the occasional waft of air allows glimpses of exterior light to bleed into the space. The detailed material sounds were blended with the exhalation of the human voice to reinforce the idea of new life as the scene transitions into the film's first featured performance — 'Expanding Space' by vocalist Phil Minton. Minton has been an active vocal improvisational artist since the late 1960s with an illustrious solo career, as well as being a regular collaborator with other influential performers such as the band Henry Cow. As one of the artists invited to perform inside by director Wahl, he reacted and respond sonically to the unique space. Using several extended and unorthodox vocal techniques, Minton focussed primarily on breath, breathing life into the inflatable. This metaphor was heavily emphasized in the post production stage, as the heavy structure begins to heave and sigh in synchronisation with Minton's inhalation and exhalation, the plastic crinkles as the folds expand and stretch outward like lungs filling with air.

Capturing the Musical Responses of Play and Improvisation

Alongside Phil Minton, the other key performances featured an improvised musical set by AMM, 'The Space of Play'; a performance theatre art piece by founder member

10.5920/soundings.04

Ken Turner, 'The Folds of Time'; and a live sound collage by myself, 'Sounds of the Action Space Audio Archive'. In each of these performances, artists were encouraged to improvise and channel the idea of playful expression, responding to the unique space surrounding them.

Like Minton, AMM also emerged from the mid-1960s avant-garde and free improvisational scene in London. They initially started as an unnamed ensemble with founder members Lou Gare, Eddie Prévost and Keith Rowe playing sessions at the Royal College of Art. AMM's formative years were in the same era as Action Space's, and the group even performed during one of Action Space's summer residencies at Wapping Graveyard between 1969 and 1970. AMM have gone through several incarnations since their first album *AMMMusic* (1967) and past members have included the composers Cornelius Cardew and Christian Wolff. Since 2005, and at the time of filming, the main line up consists of percussionist Eddie Prévost and pianist John Tilbury. The duo were ideal for performing inside the inflatable, both in terms of their links to the past of Action Space and their emphasis on improvisational experimentation using extended and traditional techniques to explore the possibilities of their instruments and collectively create new sonic textures. As highly proficient improvisers, AMM

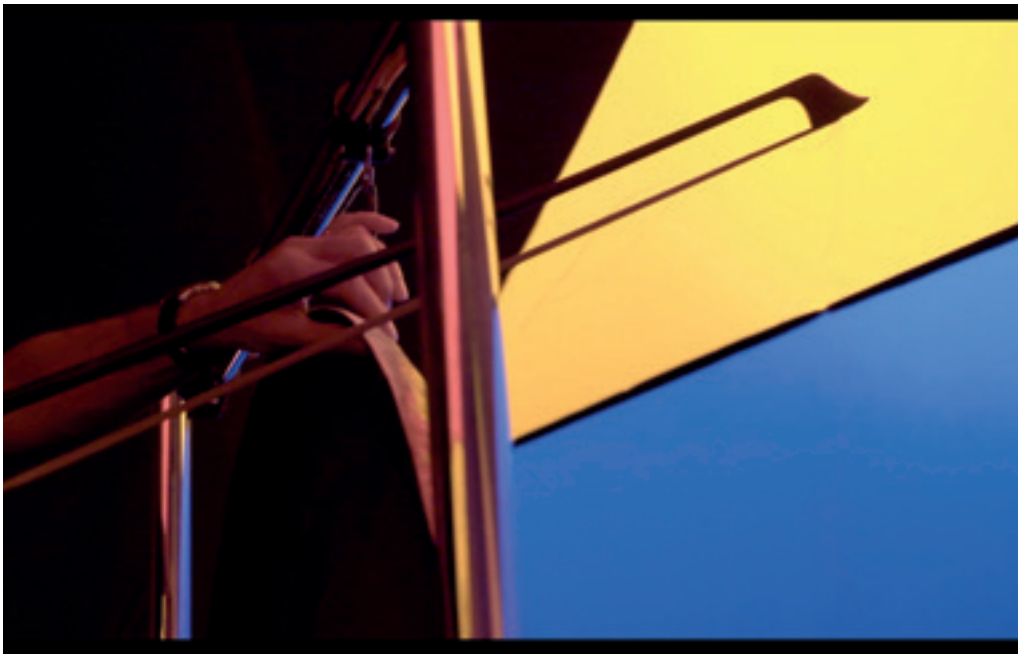

Figure 5: AMM: The Space of Play. © Huw Wahl

10.5920/soundings.04

were quickly at ease in playing and experimenting, testing out the acoustics, casting out harsh, percussive strikes into the space followed by softly subdued, low-register resonances that radiated through the inflatable, resounding around the curved surfaces. Low-register fluid piano figures blended into the low groans of the bass drum, whilst sporadic trills in the high notes alternated with eerie drones produced from bowed gong and cymbal. Their performance in the film is a heightened sensory one with its exploration of texture and timbre, the scratching and scraping of surfaces, the friction of bow hair against metal, and the heavy drag of wooden beaters across stretched drum skin. The resultant reverberation of these sounds was also important to capture, but the inflatable's unusual acoustics made for challenging recording. As much of the structure is perfectly curved or domed, sound reflects in highly unpredictable ways and is constantly reinforced or cancelled depending on one's pinpoint location inside the space. Suitable microphone placement was key to capturing these performances successfully, using distant ambient microphone techniques had the undesired effect of inadvertently capturing a high level of the attached fans required to keep the structure inflated. Conversely, closer microphone placements on the piano and percussion allowed a much more detailed sound, but lost some of the spatial character. In the end a compromise was made: both close and distant capture microphones were utilised and then mixed accordingly later, depending on the nature of the shot.

Sounds from the Action Space Archive

The Action Space audio archive totals approximately 80 hours of reel-to-reel analogue tape. These are recordings of documented meetings, radio interviews, and several musical contributions from members of the group including Richard Harper and Jon Trotter, featuring electric and acoustic guitar, flute, vocals and clarinet. Many of these pieces feature in the film and were digitised prior to the edit, with some recordings requiring additional audio restoration to reduce noise, or to enhance the clarity of dialogue and music. Most of the documented meetings were in poor condition, through years of neglect and inadequate storage, resulting in the raw content being almost inaudible. Through digitisation and restoration, several stories were uncovered that may have otherwise been lost, such as one key recording from 1976 featured in the film (01:07:49). The visual focal point here is the reel-to reel tape recorder, playing back the original tape as the inflatable begins to deflate around it. The crackly, distant but heated discussion between the members about the direction of the group, reveals the internal frictions of Action Space, hinting at the inevitability of its ultimate fracture.

10.5920/soundings.04

A substantial amount of the Action Space archive comprises the sound collages of Alan Nisbet, one of the group's founder members. Nisbet was an active musician and sound artist, his home tapes contain intricate compositions created from manipulated textures, nature recordings and everyday objects, in the vein of Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*. Many of these pieces are chaotic, percussive and abrasive; struck pots and pans, motor engines and industrialised sounds are all merged and mashed into complex and relentless rhythms. Some sounds are much more mesmeric, long-form drones that subtly evolve, modulate and morph over time. It is clear that Nisbet was skilled at manipulating tape to create these pieces, often through his use of looping. This would have required the physical cutting and splicing of several tape loops, which would then be re-recorded onto a second tape and multi-tracked over several layers. By all accounts Nisbet only had access to limited recording equipment and resources, rendering this all the more impressive. During Action Space's most active period these pieces were played over a public-address system inside and outside the inflatables to entice and engage the public as part of the group's happenings and interventions in the parks, streets and council estates; wherever the group happened to be. As Ken Turner reminisced:

> The sounds he built for the outdoor pieces, the inflatables, were truly amazing, they held the whole environment together, he put out speakers, about four or five speakers in surround and he'd operate these heavy reel-to-reel recorders, and those large tapes they'd last quite a long time. We couldn't have done it without them, they gave an added depth to the atmosphere (K. Turner, personal interview 16th Oct 2017).

As the vast majority of the Action Space archive was still on ¼ inch analogue tape, it needed to be digitised for use in the film. Spending time actively listening to and cataloguing this material helped me to gain a healthy appreciation and respect for the work of Nisbet, Trotter et al. and the wealth of creative music-making within Action Space. Notes were made on each tape, based on usability and quality (some had partly perished over years) and on the featured musical qualities ('slow drones', 'frantic percussion' etc.). Some of these digitised pieces would be incorporated 'as is' into the film's edit, whilst selections were also catalogued and curated to be used in 'Sounds from the Action Space Archive'; a live tape piece performed by myself as one of the film's featured performances. In the spirit of Nisbet's original approach I limited myself to a completely analogue setup, with two ¼ inch tape machines, a mixing desk, and an

10.5920/soundings.04

analogue delay unit. The limitations of such a setup, though at first restrictive, became extremely liberating. I had to think creatively to maximise the limited resource of sounds and with only variations in levels, pan, filtering, tape speed and delay to create variation. This was not an exact replica of Nesbit's setup, but an attempt to channel his tactile approach and add some authenticity that harked back to the sound worlds of Action Space's heyday. Engaging with the physical and malleable properties of sound was important to his creative process, as highlighted by fellow member Ken Turner:

> I don't think anybody actually saw him putting the tapes together, you know, collecting the sounds or how he did it, it's all a bit of a mystery. So he would turn up one day and say 'here I've made another tape', a reel-to-reel tape. He had these two very old tape recorders, well they were old because they were slung out by the BBC and he just got them for nothing practically. It was like handling a big digger or something, because you had to sort of yank the handle to make it move, or switch it on, or reverse it and so on. . . .
>
> What he would have done with a computer-generated sound system, I don't know. Maybe he wouldn't have liked it; it wouldn't be real enough for him. He loved the reality of material to make sounds and maybe the tape recorders being heavy and having to wrench them as though they were a mechanical tool, rather than an instrument, [was what] he really enjoyed (K. Turner, personal interview 16th Oct 2017).

As Donaldson highlights, these familiar physical approaches to sculpting, wrenching and playing with sound are an integral process to the world of sound design:

> . . . the processes of creating film sound requires physical activity and involvement, play and experimentation, which might be literally physical, or have a kind of tactile analogy (to weaving, sculpting and so on) (Donaldson, 2017, p. 31).

In this regard, Nisbet was indeed a sound designer. He took a tactile, avant-garde and experimental approach to sound, sculpting, layering and weaving strands together, using sound to evoke atmosphere, entrance and entertain, working together with performers to enrich the visual spectacle and ultimately enhance the overall experience. In the late 1960s to late 1970s Nisbet and Action Space were rallying against the art elite, incorporating a DIY approach to attracting and educating audiences in London and around the UK. At the same time Murch and contemporaries in California, US

10.5920/soundings.04

Figure 6: The Action Space audio archive. © Huw Wahl

were reacting against established Hollywood film protocols, seeking new creative and aesthetic applications of sound in film. Despite their different applications, sound was, and still is, essential to create atmosphere, mood, and to engage audiences. This was understood by Murch and the American Zoetrope as much as it was by Nisbet and Action Space. And although the tools may have changed, traditional roles may have been blurred or redefined, and film budgets and their available resources vary wildly; play, risk taking and experimentation are still integral skills to successful sound design.

Sound and Affect

Whilst this chapter highlights the vital importance of play and experimentation in the various contributions to the soundtrack, an immediate response from the viewer-listener could well be a visceral sense of the surreal or otherworldliness, created through the use of archive material, production sound and featured music when combined with the visual.

The audio archive excerpts and sound collages are often coupled with idealistic visual imagery from archive film footage — children playing, bouncing, laughing, enjoying the structures. Occasionally the footage becomes more surreal, huge looming inflatable shapes sway with the force of activity around and inside them, adult characters appear to lead the action dressed in theatrical costume, dancing, singing,

10.5920/soundings.04

chanting or writhing on the floor. The participants in these scenes are lost in the moment, absolutely absorbed, the music seeming to heighten the trance-like or instinctive behaviour. These scenes are accompanied sonically by evolving drones, distorted and ambiguous voices, sporadic percussion, steel drums or woodwind textures. At several moments, the camera catches everyday passing onlookers appearing bemused, curious and somewhat suspicious — 'What on earth is going on?' — a reaction that may in fact be similar for the film viewer at these points. Although history and context are given in the film, much of the archive material is unaccompanied by voice-over to allow the viewer to take in the full spectacle for their own interpretation. Sounds drift in and out, often asynchronous with image, the combination resulting in a bewildering audio-visual experience.

This dreamlike effect is partly evoked through the nature of the sounds themselves; abstracted and contorted beyond recognition. The source material of Nisbet's tape loops becomes unidentifiable through filtering, reversing and time warping processes. These are mixed and woven together to create further indistinguishable layers. The film's location sound is sometimes subtly shaped in a similar vein, as with the tubing effects described earlier, or emphasized through post-production layering and experimentation. This abstraction is also true of the featured musical performances through the use of extended instrumental techniques. Minton uses the most primordial instrument available, the human voice, yet he uses it in an unconventional way. His opening performance of yelps, cries, screams and two-tone throat singing, along with the emphasized inhalation and exhalation of breath, give a very impressive yet unsettling performance. AMM feature a fairly orthodox musical combination of piano and percussion, but applied with a completely experimental approach. The bass drum groans, resonances, scratches and scrapes, bowed cymbal shrieks, and fluid atonal piano figures create a mesmerising but mysterious performance.

This sense of the surreal, or even unease, for the audience is heightened further by the musical structures that contain these sounds. The film does not feature a 'composed' soundtrack and, although extracts of AMM's performance are woven throughout the film, the source material is improvised through musical and sonic responses to the uniqueness of the surroundings. There is no clearly identifiable melodic material, no reused musical cues nor recognisable themes, thereby shunning conventional approaches to the film score. The featured music, whether archive or featured performances, is mainly responsive and reactive, leading to a sense of uncertainty for the film audience. This embodied sense of risk, experimentation and

10.5920/soundings.04

play, an unwillingness to remain rigid or commit to conventional structures, is very much in the ethos of Action Space. Sound and music, like theatre and performance, were used to push and provoke audiences and to disrupt accepted opinions of culture. It is only in fleeting moments, such as the film's conclusion, that equilibrium is found through a more stable sense of sound. Here, the second main extract from AMM is featured non-diegetically; the piano now employs more major tonalities, bolder chords, clearer cadences and rhythmic progressions. The occasional minor chords lend an edge of melancholy, reinforced by bowed cymbals that ring out like whale song, echoing around the inflatable. Gradually the texture becomes sparser and the sounds more delicate, accompanying a more intimate moment, the final scene where Ken Turner plays amongst the folds of the semi-inflated structure as it eventually deflates around him. The metaphorical 'death' of the inflatable signifies the end of Action Space, the time lived and left for Ken in his advanced years, and his relationship with his son the filmmaker. This change to a more fragile and intimate sensitivity, in both sound and image, signals the end of the film.

This sense of the otherworldly emerges from within the inflatable structures. As Turner states, the created structures enabled 'an imaginative understanding of the world more sensually. A difference in sound, colour, space awareness and movement. One could say that a new dimension of life was being unfolded' (Turner, 2016, p. 78). The overall effect of the soundtrack is an attempt to bring alive that heightened sensory experience, to express, through whatever creative means necessary, the sensation of being inside these spaces. In the film, philosopher Johan Siebers describes the newly made inflatable structure as having 'a kind of enchanting appeal as if it leads you into a different world. A world that is somehow real, or more real even than the world in which we normally live but you can't capture it.' (Wahl, 2016). Nisbet, AMM, Phil Minton and myself are all striving to express this sonically; be that through instinctive play, experimentation, seeking new sounds via extended techniques, or via the abstraction and accentuated materiality of sound and its dynamic, timbral and spatial characteristics. These facets are coupled with the visual of perspective, colour, shape and movement in an attempt to recreate the heightened sensory and otherworldly experience for the viewer-listener.

The permission to play granted to the documentary sound designer opens up critical arguments around authenticity (Rogers, 2013, p. 1). As detailed here, such practices might seem more aligned to those of fiction film. One may need to strike a balance between using sound for aesthetic or embellishment purposes and providing

10.5920/soundings.04

a sense of actuality. *Action Space* treads the line of primarily telling the story and history of the group and the impact on the family unit found at its core. However this story is acknowledged to be 'a re-presentation' rather than a 'clear window onto reality' (Nichols, 2005, p. 18). As in all documentary, there is a subjective shaping of aesthetics throughout — decisions when to record, when to stop, and choices of length and combinations of shot during the editing stages. As Dai Vaughan states, attempting to try and achieve exact impartial truths would not only be 'practically impossible but absurd' (1999, p. 88). These influences are acknowledged in *Action Space*: it is also a personal story, the filmmaker is part of the extended family of Action Space, a potential 'fabricator of meaning' (Nichols, 2005, p. 18) and this interest is declared to the audience through the voice of the filmmaker in one of the film's first scenes. This central story however occasionally needs to transcend the 'real', to blur into the otherworld, to give important glimpses of a non-reality, of another time, other possibilities — new spaces in which to start anew. All of which were dreams of Action Space's alternative culture, to 'move out' and 'do something different' (Wahl, 2016). Representing both the 'real' and 'unreal' have equal authentic importance in the film which requires the audience to 'hold together two worlds at once' and simultaneously engage and suspend our disbelief (Rogers, 2013, p. 12).

Conclusion

Reflecting on the process of *Action Space* as sound designer, it is evident that I became completely absorbed by the whole process. The vibrant creative energy present during the production and inflatable build was indeed infectious and inspiring, it wasn't enough to stand on the side lines as an objective observer. As Turner stated in 1971: 'You can't get much from Action Space just by looking at it; it is meant to be joined in' (Turner, 1971, p. 24). As a passion project this wasn't simply a job, but an experience that I became truly immersed in, discovering the history and ethos of Action Space for myself, which in turn influenced my approach to the sound design. This is true whether exploring the archive material, playing with the production sound, recording the musical performances or shaping the final mix. Working as sole sound designer on a small budget documentary film does have many limitations including not having enough time, resources, or even hands to do the job. However, it also comes with an unencumbered freedom to explore, to seek out creative opportunities, and allows one to learn through play, enabling a more artistic and holistic application of the soundtrack.

10.5920/soundings.04

Endnotes

1 '*Mise-en-bande*' is Altman's analytical approach to understanding the interrelationships between dialogue, music and effects that contribute to the complete soundtrack. This is akin to the visual sense of *mise-en-scène*, where we consider the significance of what is 'put onto the stage', *mise-en-bande* requires we consider the importance of what is 'put onto the track' (2000)

2 Wright identifies at least three interpretations of the sound designer in modern day Hollywood:

i) those who undertake the administrative role of managing the various sound departments on a film production

ii) those who create special sound effects through recording, processing and layering audio

iii) a combination of these roles, both administrative and creative (2013).

Bibliography

Altman, R. (1992). The material heterogeneity of recorded sound. In R. Altman (Ed.), *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (pp. 2 – 31). New York: Routledge.

Altman, R., Jones, M., & Tratoe, S. (2000). Inventing the cinema soundtrack: Hollywood's multiplane sound system. In J. Buhler, C. Flinn, & D. Neumeyer (Eds.), *Music and cinema* (pp. 339 – 359). Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press.

AMM. (1967). *AMMMusic*. UK: Elektra EUK-256.

Buhler, J., Neumeyer, D., & Deemer, R. (2010). *Hearing the movies : music and sound in film history*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chau, C. (2012). *Now history repeats itself with Graham Stevens' pneumatic art.* un Magazine 6.1. Retrieved from http://unprojects.org.au/magazine/issues/issue-6-1/now-history-repeats-itself-with-graham-stevens-pneumatic-art/

Chion, M., Gorbman, C., & Murch, W. (1994). *Audio-vision : sound on screen*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Coppola, F. F. (1974). *The Godfather Part II*. USA: Paramount.

Coppola, F. F. (1979). *Apocalypse Now*. USA: Zoetrope Studios.

Donaldson, L. F. (2017). Feeling and filmmaking: the design and affect of film sound. *The New Soundtrack, 7*(1), 31 – 46. https://doi.org/10.3366/sound.2017.0095

Grierson, J., & Hardy, F. (1966). *Grierson on documentary*. London: Faber and Faber.

Higgins, H. (2002). *Fluxus experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jones, C., & Jolliffe, G. (2011). *The guerilla film makers handbook*. New York; London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Lo Brutto, V. (1994). *Sound-on-film : interviews with creators of film sound*. Westport, Conneticut: Praeger.

Lucas, G. (1977). *Star Wars*. USA: 20th Century Fox.

Nichols, B. (2005). The voice of documentary. In A. Rosenthal & J. Corner (Eds.), *New challenges for documentary* (Second Ed, pp. 17 – 33). Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press.

Rogers, H. (2013). Composing with reality: digital sound and music in documentary film. *In Zdok. 13* From: https://blog.zhdk.ch/zdok/talk-video/2016-talk-video/english/2017/composing-with-reality-digital-music-and-sound-in-documentary-film/

10.5920/soundings.04

Ruoff, J. (1992). Conventions of sound in documentary. In R. Altman (Ed.), *Sound theory/sound practice* (pp. 217 – 234). New York: Routledge.

Thom, R. (1999). Designing for sound by Randy Thom. Retrieved 3 November 2017, from http://filmsound.org/articles/designing_for_sound.htm

Turner, K. (1971). Discussion: Action Space. *Theoria to Theory, 5*(2), 10. From: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgipt?view=image;size=100;id=mdp.39015024593041;q1=turner;page=root;seq=120;num=10%0D

Turner, K. (2016). *Crashing culture: an artist notebook from 1954 to 2016*. UK: Imaginative Eye and Eye Projects.

Unfinished Histories (n.d.). *Inter-Action*. Retrieved from http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/inter-action

Vaughan, D. (1999). *For documentary : twelve essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wahl, H. (2014). *To hell with culture*. UK: Distrify.com.

Wahl, H. (2016). *Action Space*. UK: Distrify.com.

Walker, J. A. (2002). *Left shift : radical art in 1970s Britain*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris.

Wright, B. (2013). What do we hear? The pluralism of sound design in Hollywood sound production. *The New Soundtrack, 3*(2), 137 – 157. https://doi.org/10.3366/sound.2013.0043