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Sound Design and Science Fiction

By William Whittington

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A Review by Douglas King, Gannon University, USA

Starting from the axiom that "sound is half the picture," William Whittington's *Sound Design and Science Fiction* argues forcefully not only for sound's equality with the visual in contemporary cinema, but perhaps for its preeminence. Whittington's book resonates best in his case studies of several seminal science fiction films, beginning with *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and carrying through the *Matrix* series (Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 1999, 2003). He also contextualizes film sound historically, charting its evolution from the classical Hollywood mimetic conception of capturing sound, through the monumental advances in technology and in the artistry of sound design.

Whittington marks *2001: A Space Odyssey* as *the* film that elevated science fiction from its 1950's roots as a "B" genre to an "A" genre. While this observation is hardly new, Whittington unfolds very nicely how this film's groundbreaking achievement came largely through its use of sound -- particularly music. He recounts director Stanley Kubrick's struggles with MGM over his desire to use classical music rather than an original score for the film, noting that "Kubrick's innovative approach challenged not only the traditional music-image model but also the traditional mode of music production . . ." (44-45). Whittington keenly analyzes the effects of each piece of classical music in the film and delineates how Kubrick stripped away their traditional associations -- as the director stated, [Johann Strauss's "The Blue Danube"] "gets about as far away as you can from the clichŽ of space music" (46) -- to substantially supplant dialogue and to usher in a new era of sound consciousness among filmmakers and filmgoers.

In a different but equally groundbreaking way, *THX-1138* (George Lucas, 1971), though a box office failure, changed the history of sound in cinema. Whittington charts first the influence of French New Wave science fiction on up-and-coming film school auteurs such as Lucas, Coppola, Spielberg, and Friedkin, analyzing in depth *La JetŽe* (Chris Marker, 1961), *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard,1965), and *Fahrenheit-451* (Fran•ois Truffaut, 1966) for their deconstructive and revolutionary uses of sound. Drawing from these influences, Lucas's film pioneered the use of "suggestive fragments," as the director and his "Sound Montage" person, Walter Murch, asserted independence by working outside the Hollywood sound systems, gathering and creating new sounds to create the sterile, dystopian universe of *THX-1138*.

THX-1138's pioneering of the concept/title "Sound Montage" paved the way for that of "Sound Design," as exemplified by that other Lucas film, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) -- and its sequels. As Lucas (and the other new Hollywood filmmakers) began to embrace the notion of the blockbuster, he abandoned the more avant-garde, formalist sound aesthetic of *THX-1138* in favour of "a more commercial style that emphasized a new kind of image-sound unification, anthropomorphism, and spectacle" (94). However, Whittington notes, this concern with commercial appeal did not come at the expence of sonic advance. On the contrary, sound designers such as Ben Burtt created new aural landscapes that matched the visual dimensions of films such as *Star Wars* and both drove and benefitted from new multichannel technologies such as Dolby Stereo. *Sound Design and Science Fiction* excels when it elucidates specific techniques such as the elaborate ones Burtt used to attain the familiar and usually unexamined sounds such as light sabers, laser blasters, and Wookie language.

Also outstanding is Whittington's chapter on 'Surround Sound and Science Fiction,' in which he charts the advent of various new systems, including Dolby Digital, Digital Theater Systems (DTS), and Sony Dynamic Digital Sound (SDDS). He effectively argues that these surround sound technologies "offer access into areas the image is not willing or is unable to go. In these instances, the sound design has not just achieved an equal status with the image. It has in fact surpassed it" (126). Less compelling is another argument Whittington develops in this chapter and beyond: that surround sound technology "demands participation by filmgoers" and encourages audiences to "get into it" (123). Although the author attempts to bolster this case by discussing audience involvement through home theatre technology, video games, and other film offshoots, it would seem at least equally valid (and perhaps equally subjective) to assert that ever greater spectacle in sight and sound can desensitize and lull audience members into an orientation of -- to quote Kurt Cobain -- "Here we are now; entertain us."

Whittington's book structure -- pairing a technical/theoretical concept with a case study -- works well. For example, Part IV, titled 'Sound Effects,' includes a chapter on 'Genre Splicing: Horror and Science Fiction' and then a chapter/case study of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), with both chapters elucidating the recent history and development of sound effects. In the genre splicing chapter, Whittington effectively weaves in discussion of the history of Foley effects with more theoretical concerns such as invisible referents, placing these discussions in the context of films including *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), and *Predator* (John McTiernan,1987). The author notes that scholarship regarding sound technique has long been hampered by Hollywood conventions and codes of realism:

> One of the key obstacles is the compositive nature of a sound track that hides much of the material work of the mode of production. Isolation of specific sound cuts, fades, and even effects is extremely difficult . . . . Cue sheets, sound logs, and mixers [sic] notes would be useful in scholarly research, yet these documents are rarely preserved. (149)

This dearth of primary documents of sound design makes a study such as Whittington's all the more valuable.

Whittington uses *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) as the case study for his discussion of voice design. He notes that while the human voice has long been accorded privileged status in film, voice-

overs are unstable and often highly subjective. Harrison Ford's voice-over as Blade Runner Rick Deckard is further complicated by the production history, in which neither the director nor the star wanted the addition. The voice-over thus falls flat (a fact almost universally agreed upon), and also befuddles the bridging of science fiction and film noir that the film otherwise achieves. Whittington engages in an extended comparison of the original with the 'Director's Cut'of *Blade Runner* (1992), which eliminated the voice-over. As have others, Whittington argues that the newly edited and remixed version succeeds brilliantly where the original release failed:

> Without the voice-over, new image-sound relations appeared that significantly altered the narrative and plot structure . . . the . . . *Director's Cut* encouraged filmgoers to swim in the dense sonic and visual world of *Blade Runner* as it foregrounds the music composed by Vangelis and the film's ambient backgrounds and sound effects. (173)

Covering ground less well- trodden , Whittington also discusses automatic dialogue replacement (ADR), using a scene from *Blade Runner* to point out the delicate nature of voice flow in a film and demonstrates how botched ADR can disrupt that flow.

The book's penultimate section explores sound mixing and the blending of human and mechanical sound in *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991). Convincingly making the case that film sound has become at least equally powerful as image, Whittington points out that when the film was broadcast on television, numerous potentially disturbing sound effects were removed, while the majority of images were left intact (219). The author demonstrates how many previously discussed elements of film sound -- ambient sound, music, voice, Foley, and sound effects -- are blended to create the filmmakers' coherent sonic visions for *Terminator II* and other films.

The concluding chapter of *Sound Design and Science Fiction* deals with *The Matrix* series (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999, 2003), but focuses beyond the films to discuss extended phenomena such as bonus dvd release features (commentaries, behind the scenes looks, and so forth); home theatre systems; and computer games. Here the analysis devolves into areas Whittington argues are essential and the wave of the future, but which actually seem tangential and trivial (is it really significant that lots of people bought *Matrix* posters and action figures and placed them in their home theatre settings?).

Sound Design and Science Fiction is a stimulating and well researched work that can expand our appreciation for film sound. It includes thorough notes and helpful appendices, including an overview of the sound production process and a sound term glossary.