

Mystic Soundman

This is the first in an ongoing and perhaps sporadic series of essays addressing the world of production sound. Sounds like a tall order, doesn't it? Well, it's a broad subject and as many of you know if I'm good at anything, it's rambling, so eventually there'll be a topic of interest for everyone. I thank Damon Tutunjian, Rachel Clift Margie Bergel and Kelly Doran, for the genesis of this writing project. Without good questions there are no good answers.

The mystics of filmmaking are found in the sound department. What all the other departments do on the set is obvious. We are the occultists. It's obvious what the art or prop or camera department does, I mean, it's the movie, it's right there on the screen. ANYONE CAN SEE IT! And that is, by way of rambling, my point. Sound is something intangible, and to such an extent that the better the sound is, the less it is noticed. And now I know why. Armed with some of this knowledge I have been able to do a better job and survive with my integrity as a skilled craftsman in a land of egos and "it's all about the picture" mentality. Sound, as it is received by the audience and perceived by the production crew, just happens. I am continually surprised by crew members who, upon first donning a set of headphones at my cart, say "WOW, you can HEAR EVERYTHING!!!" No kidding. That's why we complain when we hear "everything."

Laypeople often have no concept of how the sound becomes part of the movie. Some think there's a microphone on the camera. I am not making this up! So what's the story behind all this ignorance? Everyone has two ears, just like two eyes, and the picture isn't a mystery. The plain fact is that since movies with sound have been around, the seamless integration of two information streams is what makes a film interesting, and makes it work. The way our brains decode these information streams is what makes us magicians, and at the same time invisible and incomprehensible to most people.

Many film schools concentrate on theory, and give less regard to practice. I have taught sound recording seminars at large eastern universities with graduate students who had never touched a Nagra. Why? Theory. Theory lives in the domain of the intellect.

Its true that a picture is worth a thousand words. The picture part of a film tells you things that you learn by watching and thinking about. Colors tell you something, the way something is lit, the size of the actors in the frame, length of shots. The geography of the location is presented for you to digest. The style of clothing and sets tells you the era, and so on. Visual elements are processed by the cerebral cortex, are acted on by the intellect, narrating the story to the viewer.

Sound, however, is another story. In the typical thriller, for instance, how much time is devoted to pictures that scare the audience? For that matter, are those pictures really scary?? Jaws was in deep trouble during production; the subject of the film was not cooperating. Many of the mechanical effects were not working properly and the director had to shoot around his deadly beast. Soon he realized that the less we saw of the demon shark the scarier the film would be. How can that be? What made Jaws so scary? Those double-basses! Who doesn't know the "shark theme" from Jaws?

When we see a picture we tend to process stuff in an intellectual way, by way of the cerebral cortex, the most developed part of our brains, where consciousness is said to live. Sound is processed much closer to the midbrain and the limbic system. The limbic system is the part of the brain where our emotional response comes from. Except for language, practically no "intellectual" processing of sound occurs. So sound tends to act directly on parts of the brain that deal with our emotional states, and the subconscious.

One thing I've come to learn is that the subconscious is the place where our "self" resides, the core of who we are. The interesting part is that we don't have direct access to the self! Our outer personas mediate our experience and our personality acts as a filter to send or block information going to the subconscious. The limbic system is part of our ancient brain, and sound does an end run around our consciousness, to be processed in an inaccessible

environment. Animals with very rudimentary brains have limbic systems to tell them to be afraid and run away or stay and fight, to hunt and kill, give them their sex drive and give rise to profound feelings that help ensure survival. When you're talking to the limbic system, you're talking to fundamental drives, and sound talks most directly to the ancient brain. Is it any wonder then, that the cries and whispers we record have a profound affect on the audience yet seem to go somehow unnoticed? It really says a lot about why so many of our picture-centered colleagues don't "get" what it is we're doing on the set, and explains why sound people seem to be a special breed: We're the mystics.

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