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Authenticity and Realism in Documentary Sound
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Abstract
While we expect a dramatic feature film to use creative licence in bringing the soundtrack to life does the same carte blanche approach apply for documentary? Does it, and should it, matter?

This article highlights some of the problems and questions relating to the notions of realism and authenticity in the production of the documentary soundtrack. The production of the documentary film Gallipoli Submarine is used as a case study to examine the implications for practice.

Introduction
Gallipoli Submarine (Westh, 2008) is the story of an Australian World War One AE2 submarine and its crew and the efforts to carry out an underwater survey on its sunken wreck off the coast of Turkey. For the drama/documentary huge effort has been made to create CGI submarine details from photographs and blueprints as well as an authentic replica of the submarine’s control room for the dramatic re-enactments. Yet there are few recordings of what a world war one era submarine actually sounded like and few living people would have heard them in any case. How important is accuracy in the soundtrack in telling the story in such a case? Does dramatic need override historical accuracy?

The reality of illusion
Sound has the ability to convey metaphorical as well as literal meaning, assuming that the sound is both synchronous and broadly within the realm of what would be expected – Michel Chion’s idea of synchresis (1994). Once these two criteria are met the sound chosen to accompany a
particular audiovisual event can be used on the basis of its value to add meaning through the
associations the audience may have with particular sounds, or groups of sounds.

When we talk about realism in drama and documentary or realism in the soundtrack, we need to
make a distinction between realism and reality. Realism often means ‘the illusion of reality’ -
realism as a representation, without limiting the representation to truthfulness or authenticity. It is
merely a representation of real life, which can stand in for real life. Reality on the other hand is
real life - actuality - as we experience it. However even the term reality has been somewhat
modified by the emergence of ‘reality TV’ in recent years, which few would view as being close
to what is recognizable as ‘reality’.

Realism then is the product of creative choice, like any other in filmmaking or documentary
making. To represent things as they are found in real life often means using techniques to hide
the artifice of the process of filmmaking. In William Stott’s definition documentary is ‘the
presentation of actual facts in a way that makes them credible and telling to people at the time’
(Minh-Ha, 1990). This definition frees the filmmaker from rigid adherence to one particular way
of showing a sequence or single event.

**Sound in Documentary**

Sound in documentary occupies a curious position. As an audience we would hope that what we
are seeing is somehow a truthful representation of real events, and if what we are seeing is a re-
creation, we would expect some explicit reference to the fact that it is not. What about the
soundtrack? How many times do we consciously notice an element in a soundtrack and
recognize that what we are hearing is not authentic?

Audience expectation plays a role in determining the elements chosen for use in a soundtrack -
we do not usually notice artifice in the soundtrack when we are presented with what appears to
be a reasonable representation which matches what we are seeing. Further, we can become
aware of, and even distrustful of the soundtrack when it presents a real and authentic
synchronous if it does not meet with our preconceptions of what things should sound like. The
ethical question this raises is whether truthful representation might be stretched sufficiently to
enable some small misrepresentation better to tell a larger truth. How much artistic license is too
much in the production of a non-fiction soundtrack?
In the BBC natural history series *The Trials of Life* (Attenborough, 2002) and *Life of Birds* (Attenborough, 2001) there are two clips which highlight sound’s ability, on one hand to give the impression of truth via an artificial representation, and on the other to present truth in a way that appears implausible to the viewer. The episode ‘Hunting and Escaping’ from the Trials of Life contains a sequence showing killer whales deliberately beaching themselves in the hunt for sea lions at the water’s edge. Much of the sequence is shown in slow motion and has underwater footage which acts as a point of view of the whale’s perspective. The sound which accompanies these images is what we expect – the sound of waves and underwater-type sounds – but the recordings were not made at the time of filming. At one stage a whale catches a sea lion and thrashes it into the sand – which makes a noticeable thud on the soundtrack. The sounds for the sequence are added to the images because they seem to fit them image and are in keeping with audience expectation.

A sequence from *Life of Birds* involves the Australian lyrebird, in which the bird mimics the call of other birds in its environment as well as other sounds, including that of a camera shutter and motor drive, and most astoundingly that of a chainsaw. The typical reaction to seeing these clips is that it is part of a hoax since it seems incongruous that a bird could reproduce so convincingly these most mechanical of sounds. The sound recordings for this sequence are an authentic recording of the bird in question.

These two natural history documentary clips neatly illustrate some of the issues which arise in documentaries such as *Gallipoli Submarine* (Westh, 2008).

**Sound in Documentary / Drama**

Filmmakers in drama are not routinely bound by the need to present an absolutely truthful soundtrack and image track, though they may well strive for a realistic portrayal. For both filmmaker and audience, the authenticity of the soundtrack is not a prime concern. Instead ‘disguised artifice’ is the norm, where the soundtrack is manipulated to suit to needs of the story whilst remaining concealed for the most part. Yet the artifice which is acceptable in fiction is not as widely recognized in non-fiction, though it has been acknowledged (for example Sklar, 2008).

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1 The sound recordist for much of the series confirmed that there was no sound recordist for the sequence in question ROSS, G. & MURRAY, L. (2010) Interview with Graham Ross.

2 Also confirmed through interview with Graham Ross.
1975, Nichols, 1983). Indeed as Nichols shows ‘The comfortably accepted realism of one
generation seems like artifice to the next’ (1983).

When discussing the notion of realism - places, historical events or situations which are far
outside our experience - it may be more fruitful to look away from documentary theory to
literature and specifically the concept of ‘literary realism’:

> A novel is considered realistic if it does not violate our ideas about the world in its supposedly
shared and 'objective' existence. The realism of a text can be established on the basis of actual
familiarity with the matter and the action described.... But the appreciation of realism in a novel
does not necessarily depend of course on the recognition of first-hand experience. We are quite
willing to accept as realistic prose narrative texts in which the action, setting, and characters are
far removed from our own area of immediate experience. (Sauerberg, 1991)

The notion of documentary realism, which as we can see in natural history films such as The
Trials of Life, does not apply equally to picture and sound elements. Filmmakers and audiences
are more sensitive to the truthfulness or veracity of the images presented as ‘factual’ than they
are with the soundtrack. The picture elements dominate and sound is used to uphold the
legitimacy of the image (Batcho, 2005). Sound can be added, manipulated or replaced entirely if
the images demand it. Sequences that are shot without sound are routinely shown with added
music and voiceover, which would be obvious additions to a literate audience. Less obvious
would be where sound effects elements have been added deliberately to give either a more
realistic or dramatic feel to something that was never actually recorded.

The balance of the sometimes conflicting needs of authenticity and story are illustrated by
filmmaker Steve Westh, director of Gallipoli Submarine:

> There is a kind of obligation of the filmmaker to make it as authentic as possible – for a whole
number of reasons... [but] there's other things where you take extraordinary license because
ultimately you’re a storyteller and we’re making films for popular markets and you want people
to watch them and so there's a certain amount of dramatic license that I take and I'm unashamed
of that. Nevertheless, there’s always an exquisite dilemma. (Westh and Murray, 2009)

In documentary there is an amalgam of actual location sound recordings made in sync with the
camera and other sounds which are added later. Yet there are also instances in which the actual
recorded sound is disregarded in favour of one which will help better to tell the story. Whether
fiction or non-fiction, the filmmaker’s priority is in the telling of the story.
Sound Authenticity and Ethics

Where the scientist must provide evidence of assertions the journalist or filmmaker need only provide the ‘finished article’. The filmmaker is ‘[t]he privileged author who conceals the evidence for his analysis’ (Young, 1995). The production and reception of supposed non-fiction material provide ample opportunity for individual interpretation of what is appropriate, ethical, and intellectually honest. There are still few governing principles on the use of sound for documentary purposes other than those which came initially from the fields of Anthropology and Ethnography, in which the representation of the human subject is the focus. There is no distinction between authentic sound and realistic sound.

One notable example of the manipulation of the soundtrack came through the reporting of what has come to be known as ‘The Scream’ (CNN, 2004). In the run up to the 2004 US presidential nomination Howard Dean spoke to a noisy and enthusiastic crowd of Democratic supporters, whose noise made it difficult for Dean to be heard and as he got louder and more energetic so did the audience. What, from the audience perspective, was an energizing and positive Howard Dean became something different entirely when reported on news broadcasts. The soundtrack of the news event contained only the recording from Dean’s hand-held microphone, which largely eliminated the noise of the crowd. Thus deprived of its context Dean’s voice, rising both in pitch and intensity, and finally ending with a whoop became the subject of a campaign focusing on his anger, instability, and unsuitability for office. The perspective of the recording, and in this case its combination with the perspective of the camera, provide a misleading representation that did not correspond with the experience of those individuals present at the event.

Theo Van Leeuwen gives a useful alternative definition of authenticity, wherein the authentic is ‘the true essence of something’ (2001), which frees us from the need to be tied to a specific time or instance that matches the visual, or even perhaps the thing being recorded. The onus then falls on the creator of the sound or sound/image to do so in an ethical manner. The example of ‘The Scream’ illustrates that there is no single definitive authentic representation of an event, since strictly speaking, the recording of ‘Dean’s scream’ was not manipulated. Instead perhaps it would need to be manipulated – mixed with recordings from other the microphones - for it to present a fuller and more faithful representation of the actuality of the event.

Undoubtedly, there are occasions where sound is not recorded at the time of filming and is later added to footage without destroying the verisimilitude of the representation. At other times an
actual recording might deliberately or otherwise give a misleading representation. Between these two extremes lies the range of practical applications of sound in documentary. Decisions about realism and the requirements for authentic sound in individual films come down to the views of individual sound editors and directors. The ‘audiovisual literacy’ of the audience has changed since the days of newsreels but it would be a mistake to imagine that an audience would be able to determine the origin and authenticity of material in the soundtrack, especially when compared with the visual - ‘A lot of people just accept sound and they don’t even hear it. They hear it but there’s no analysis of it. It’s total acceptance.’ (Westh and Murray, 2009)

**Sound in *Gallipoli Submarine***

For the AE2 the sounds of actual elements in the reconstruction, such as the submarine engines, the propellers and the scraping of mines along the submarine’s hull were often either augmented with, or replaced by, sounds which had enough similarity to be taken as genuine but which carried a more dramatic, or emotive quality. For example, the submarine’s engines were initially the sounds of a real submarine’s diesel engines, but when mixed with the sounds of the voices appeared to be masking the voices (Martin and Murray, 2008). As a result the engine sounds were retained - because they had a certain personality which made them recognizably different to a modern engine – but were lowered in pitch so that they did not obscure the dialogue. Conversely, the propeller sounds which accompany the CGI images of the submarine are a combination of a real propeller recording augmented with the sound of an overhead fan which provides a rhythmical and recognizably rotating element to the sound – synchresis at work.

For story elements where there were no recordings to act as a guide, the use of sound metaphors was the primary method for selection. The submarine studio set which was built for the dramatic components had a mock-up of the periscope but the actual sound of the real periscope could not be ascertained. Instead the sound of a lift/elevator was used as it contains a metaphorical link as the sound of something mechanical being raised or lowered (Martin and Murray, 2008).

The film also contains a sequence in which Morse code is seen being typed. In real life what one would hear would be the simple tapping of the key by the operator, but what we hear in the film is a representation of what we as an audience recognize as Morse Code, namely the ‘beeps’ which are the electrical representation of the tapping and which are heard at the receiving end.
Interestingly perhaps, neither the code seen being sent by the actor, nor the beeps sound accompanying it, is actually real Morse code (Martin and Murray, 2008).

Conclusions

Documentaries occupy a strange place in that they are thought of as non-fiction yet contain many of the conventions and practices apparent in the world of fiction films: firstly, that sound effects are used to portray the emotional or augmented reality more than the actuality, or are inserted where no recording was actually made; secondly that music is used to manipulate an emotional response in the audience; and thirdly, that voices and dialogue are enhanced with respect to other sounds to favour intelligibility over authenticity.

This though is not a new direction. Rather it has been the case since the earliest days of documentary, and certainly since sound was introduced, with voiceover narration and music being used to steer the audience’s understanding. As Nichols (1995) points out the adoption of fiction techniques and narrative structure has been a part of documentary since Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922).

There is obviously a difficulty in drawing attention to elements which are not real, especially where the real and the faked/recreated coexist. The BBC Producers Guidelines (2005) for example, state that (visual) reconstructions ‘... be labelled as reconstructions. If unlabelled they should be differentiated in some way from the visual style of the rest of the programme such as using slow motion or black and white images in a consistent and repeated way.’ Yet there is no advice on sonic reconstructions, and if or how they should be signposted. Greater diligence is required in declaring manipulations of the image than manipulations to sound.

With this in mind it is still necessary to point out that there are nevertheless expectations of ethical treatment that go hand in hand with the production of non-fiction films. Nash (2009) asserts the traditional view that documentary ethics questions focus on the impact on the subjects/participants, but there are also areas of non-fiction practice which may not involve direct participants and, while having no adverse consequences on individuals, nevertheless have the power to mislead or misrepresent. It is the soundtrack’s concealed influence which goes to the heart of a filmmaker’s reputation and credibility in the production of factual material.

Inevitably there are instances where minor manipulations are necessary whether due to pragmatism, exhaustion of other possibilities, budgetary constraints or bad luck; just as there are
cases where real or authentic sounds are used which mislead or misrepresent. Within these poles documentary sound exists. The only people who really know whether a recording is actually authentic are the filmmakers responsible for the work, who have a responsibility to act in an ethical manner, and to judge whether any manipulation or omission would be likely to mislead or misrepresent. It may be, as William Routt (1991) suggests, that the true aim of cinema vérité ‘was not to replicate the human senses but, once again, to utilise the technology of the cinema in order to tell a truth which the human senses alone could not attain.’ Georges Franju argues that the idea of cinema vérité does not really exist at all: ‘It's necessarily a lie, from the moment the director intervenes - or it isn't cinema at all’ (cited in Minh-Ha, 1990). Sound in non-fiction films can perhaps best be understood as a merger between authentic reproduction and artful depiction – the truth, augmented by artifice, made credible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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