

# **CINESONIC 2 : CINEMA AND THE SOUND OF MUSIC**

**Second International Conference on  
film scores and sound design**

**RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia  
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'As the deep oceans of the planet remained unexplored, so does the world of sound in film exist as a deep, moist terrain, submerged by the weight of literary and visual discourse. And just as film theory shudders in crisis as to what to say about the acceleration of cinematic effects over the past twenty years, the soundtrack lies quivering - awaiting our critical exploration of its neglected depths.' (Philip Brophy)

For three heady days last year the Media Arts course area at RMIT hosted an international conference on film scores and sound design. This inaugural Cinesonic conference was such a creatively curated and invigorating experience, it was hard to imagine that it could get better. Conference attendees were able to listen to practitioners of the calibre of Howard Shore, Carter Burwell and Yasunori Honda and renowned international writers and theorists such as Rick Altman, Philip Brophy, Royal S. Brown, Caryl Flynn, Sarah Kozloff, Adrian Martin, Dave Sanjek, Will Straw, Elizabeth Weiss and Alan Williams. Kicking off with a live performance of the opening scenes of Cronenberg's *Crash* (Canada, 1996) conducted by Howard Shore, and concluding with a living Nickelodeon re-presented by Rick Altman, it was a place where theorists and practitioners could come together and their work, analyses and language could interact, cross over and become a dialogue .

This year, the second Cinesonic conference launched AFTRS's publication of last year's proceedings, seeking not only to continue this dialogue, but to actively expand it. Once again the evenings foregrounded spectacular audio-visual presentations from cutting-edge practitioners while the days featured writers offering their research on those far too-frequently-marginalised but dominant aspects of the cinematic experience - sound and music. In the kind of lateral move for which he is famous, conference convenor Philip Brophy invited a number of writers specialising in different aspects of music to turn their attention to film, even though some of them had not actively written about it before. This proved to be one of many inspired decisions.

**PRACTICE**

"Film is not a visual medium."

This was the polemical banner under which the mercurial and sonorous Randy Thom launched the opening night of Cinesonic 2. Thom's credits include *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, USA, 1979), *The Right Stuff* (Kaufman, USA, 1985 - for which he won an Oscar), *The Empire Strikes Back* (Lucas, USA, 1983), *Wild at Heart* (Lynch, USA, 1990), *Mars Attacks* (Burton, USA, 1996), *Starship Troopers* (Verhoeven, USA, 1997) and *Contact* (Zemeckis, USA, 1997), to name just a few. A polemicist for sound designers being involved from the very beginning of the creative process, Thom's many experiences have formed his provocative topic - 'Designing a movie for sound'. Some of the ways to do this, he explained, were to focus on listening and listeners, point of view, camera movement and dark and ambiguous image spaces. He suggested that dialogue-driven films tended to limit the sound designer, although he did say that human vocalisation was a vast unexplored palette of sound. Reflecting on current production practices, he declared that it was a miracle that film music is as good as it is, given that composers were often expected to create ninety minutes of music in the last four weeks of the filmmaking process.

If Thom gave a detailed and anecdotal sense of what it was like to be working both in the centre and on the fringes of New Hollywood, the deferential Francois Musy spoke of his experiences of collaborating with the inimitable Godard. Musy has designed, edited and mixed most of Godard's films since his pioneering work on Godard's *Passion* in 1983. His many credits include *Hail Mary* (Godard, France, 1985), *Detective* (Godard, France, 1985), *Helas pour moi* (Godard, France, 1993) and *Nouvelle Vague* (Godard, France, 1990). Musy not only offered a number of voyeuristic insights into Godard's preferred method of recording sound on location, something he also described as a particularly French practice. He also revealed that he was more than just a technical assistant. His creative work with Godard can be heard in its sonic purity on the *Nouvelle Vague* soundtrack ? the entire 100 minutes released as a double CD complete with dialogue, music and ambient sounds.

The final evening session closed with a revelatory musical performance of 'reinvented film scores' by the remarkable David Shea. Shea is a composer from the East Village, Knitting Factory music scene, whose work draws upon sounds created by a large body of new-music and jazz musicians, as well as a collage of sampled snippets from film soundtracks and lounge LPs. It has been described by some as 'soundtracks for surreal daydreaming'. He is also committed to bringing sampling and collage into live performance which he did with his astonishing presentations of 'Satyricon' - a nod to Fellini - and 'Screwy Squirrel' - a tribute to surrealist cartoon master Tex Avery. But it was 'The Red Chamber', a solo sampler based on the 16th century Chinese Buddhist novel *Journey to the West* and the later novel the *Tower of Myriad Mirrors*, that was the most energising piece offering an illuminating homage to the Hong Kong cinema, accompanied by a frenetic compilation of film fragments. In the Q & A session after, Shea's analysis of his approach to collage, sampling and reinvention was so articulate it traversed the entire spectrum of contemporary arts practice.

## **THEORY - FILM SOUND**

The writers who presented their research in the day sessions were creative in their own ways, offering diverse analytical approaches to the practice of sound and music. Directors once celebrated for their visual stylisation were now examined for their 'sound style'. In his paper, Adrian Martin engagingly disrespected Fritz Lang's claim that he had 'no ear for sound' and, through detailed close analysis of *Scarlet Street* (Lang, USA, 1945) and *M* (Lang, Germany, 1931), demonstrated what was distinctive about the Lang sound event. Welles scholar Francois Thomas traced the shift in the Welles oeuvre from live recording to obsessive post-synchronization, illustrating his talk with many subtle and not-so-subtle variants of Welles' vocal lexicon. For other writers it was music and its shifting place in different genres and national cinemas that motivated their presentations. For John Conomos, jazz in film noir resonated as deeply as the chiaroscuro lighting and the visual iconography in films as mysterious and compelling as *Force of Evil* (Polonsky, USA, 1948) and *Laura* (Preminger,

USA, 1944). For Roger Hillman it was classical music, impregnated and over-coded with history, that created a simultaneously ponderous and ethereal diegetic space in German and post-war Italian cinema. For Philip Brophy it was folk and indigenous music which is appropriated in unsettling ways, sometimes intentionally and at other times with screamingly aberrant effects. For Claudia Gorbman it was the very familiar sound of Hollywood's tom-toms so frequently stereotyped the pre-war Indian as an obstacle to overcome. Her paper traced the way this musical coding had changed in a number of recent 'liberal Westerns' as efforts to humanize the Indians had taken prominence.

## **THEORY - MUSIC**

But music is larger than the screen, larger than the cinema, macrocosmic, and it was because of their unusual attention to music that another group of writers were invited to the conference. Evan Eisenberg's early book *The Recording Angel* (McGraw Hill, 1987) had paid groundbreaking attention to the phenomenology of listening to recorded music, and he extended his inquiry into those moments in cinema when music, dancing and nature come into coincidence, citing films as diverse as *The Magic Flute* (Bergman, Sweden, 1975), *Flying Down to Rio* (Freeland, USA, 1933) and *Dante's Peak* (Donaldson, USA, 1997). Joseph Lanza's book *Elevator Music* (St.Martin's Press, 1994) focused on the muzak that spills over into so many aspects of our life - in elevators, supermarkets, dentist's waiting rooms, on factory floors and in airplanes. Lanza's provocation was to bring what is always in the background into the foreground as he argued for a re-elevated status of this frequently maligned form of music, reflecting on the affective status of the themes to *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, USA, 1961) and *Titanic* (Cameron, USA, 1997). Kodwo Eshun's book *More Brilliant than the Sun* (Quartet Books, 1998) has been described as a hybridic interface between science-fiction and black music ? sonic fiction. This liminal status was also evident in a talk that was more like a performance piece than a conference paper. Eshun's monologue on the music videos of Hype Williams, in particular his work with hip-hop stars Missy Elliott and Busta Rhymes, surged around a maelstrom of perceptual, sonic, tactile and optical ideas from the microrhythmic to the animatographic, suggestively demonstrating that music videos are the avant-garde of our age.

## **THEORY/PRACTICE**

We have come to know a lot about the visions and intentions of directors, actors, writers, and cinematographers, but the sound artists who work on the same films are far less frequently profiled. By bringing together theorists, practitioners, performers, academics, buffs and enthusiasts, Cinesonic continues to transcend conventional conference boundaries - not only celebrating a marginalised area of the film-making process, but also foregrounding a number of key questions such as: What is the relation between a director and the composer/sound designer? Are a practitioner's intentions and aesthetic choices relevant to the theoretical reading of the work? What can the language of practitioners offer to theoretical analysis? And additionally, what can ideas, theoretical constructs and language derived from the study of music and musicians contribute to the study of cinema. Further to this are questions about the ways contemporary theoretical ideas and analyses might inform the creation of a film soundtrack.

When Kodwo Eshun got up to speak he said that it had been a revelation to listen to the way others had listened, to realise that there was such difference. The privilege and potency of Cinesonic is in what and how it enabled us to hear.

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*For more information see [this website](#).*

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