

THE SCHOOL OF SOUND

April 1999 and April 2000

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A figure in a bright yellow fleece top sits alone on the stage and talks. Enthralled, we listen as Mani Kaul extemporises, elaborates and weaves provocative spells. His talk illustrates and embodies a story he recounts of how he learned music as a child in India, how practice took place on the carpet and theory on the sofa, how a rag is in itself an elaboration on a figure. This could be taken as an appropriate metaphor for the whole four day event known as The School of Sound. In its second year the word of mouth excitement generated by the first drew a large audience eager to be inspired by the international panel of speakers, eager to travel between the interstices of listening and hearing.

The presentations were varied in style, approach and theme indicating an extraordinary breadth of scope in the creative thinking of the School's director, Larry Sider. With theoreticians, teachers and critics such as Michel Chion, Roberto Perpignani, Michael Chanan and Shoma A. Chatterji we travelled from silent to contemporary cinema, from Cuba to India and with practitioners Peter Kubelka, Mike Figgis, Jocelyn Pook and Andre Ktori from formal structuralist experimentation to improvisation, from backward singing to digital sound creation.

As guided frameworks for analysis of our understanding and thinking about sound in the cinema the presentations by Michel Chion and Roberto Perpignani were the most clearly thought through and illustrated. Michel Chion gave us superb examples of his thesis about the three domains of sound in film (music, voice and sound effects) and their interrelationship in a way which picked up on Larry Sider's introduction calling us to consider the totality of sound design. This resonated throughout the event as speaker after speaker called on us to use sound as music (Mike Figgis), compose sound tracks as music (Jake Milton and Owe Svensson) and resist the 'wrapping paper' approach to incidental music (Jocelyn Pook). Roberto Perpignani, editor and teacher, illustrated how sound events were so vividly created by editing in pre-sound films (particular examples being the breaking of a window in *Birth of a Nation* (DW Griffiths, US, 1915) and the snap of a dry branch in John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (US, 1924)). He also illustrated the play of junction/disjunction between image and sound creating scansion and rhythm in the graphic intertitles of *Battleship Potemkin* (USSR, 1925) and Eisenstein's rule of three to create a rhythmic editing, perhaps at last putting paid to the notion that sound is only an add on to image in the film and proving how integral an awareness of sound and rhythm has always been to a reading of moving images. This theme was taken up again by Michael Chanan in his presentation of the documentary work of Santiago Alvarez and his use of music in the place of direct sound or narration, constructing his work on the principles of musical montage, counterpointing aural and visual rhythms. The realisation and constant illustration of this relation reverberated

throughout the school culminating in the apposite intervention of Keith Griffiths on a panel of producers lamely apologising for the poor treatment of sound in their work due to financial and time considerations when he called for a new role of 'Director of Sound' to be created in line with 'Director of Photography'.

The cultural signification of sound is perhaps an under-researched or little considered aspect of theoretical enquiry and both Owe Svensson's video interview on the construction of a sound track for Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (Sweden/France, 1986) and Shoma Chatterji's exuberant talk about representation of women in Indian cinema opened up another realm of listening to the quality of sounds. Her discussion included reference to the different sound quality of women's bangles (if they are made of glass, gold or bone), how the breaking of bangles signified widowhood, the beating of pots and pans rebellion and how silence could also be read as protest.

But returning to the bright yellow figure on the stage our journey encompassed an assertion that the dominance of perspective should now be challenged, that eroticism is the source of all knowledge and a fierce reaction to the tyranny of realism. Elaborating on the figure that he had set himself, Mani Kaul raged against the notion that a director 'renders a script' and urged that we move to a plane of suggestion. He quoted the poet Basho on haiku and again gave us a metaphor for the event with the idea that the 'mind goes then returns'. We journeyed into the night of South Kensington provoked, invigorated and inspired, impatient to try out and discuss the ideas that had been presented to us.

In April 2000 we reconvened: familiar faces and new recruits, some under the important bursary scheme which enables students also to absorb some of the excitement generated by this now annual event.

This year's School of Sound focused more on the voice. In a darkened RIBA lecture theatre we were hypnotised by Piers Plowright's pantheon of voices as transmitters of history and his rich illustrations of the rhythm, pitch and cadence of the voice as music. We were then transported to ancient Greece by Thanos Vovolis who gave an account of the relationship of the mask to the voice in Greek tragedy. He demonstrated how the mask acted as a resonance chamber for the voice and how the use of vases, introduced by Vesuvius to increase amplification, tuned to the seven fixed notes of the Greek harmonic scale, enabled the theatre space itself to act as a musical instrument that harmonised with the human voice.

It was Michel Chion who then went on to analyse a sequence from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, GB, 1968) and demonstrate how the mise-en-scene of voice in sound design can both reflect and counter the visual mise-en-scene. But this was also a School of Sound where the absence of a visual referent freed much of the thinking about necessary connections and thus inspired an open-eared reflection on the nature of sound production. There were presentations by Gregory Whitehead and Heidi Grundmann which demonstrated some of the potential of Radio Art and an interview with Manfred Eicher who recounted the process of scoring soundtracks with Jean-Luc Godard and the production of CD recordings of *Nouvelle Vague* (Jean-Luc Godard, Fr, 1990) and *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (Jean-Luc Godard, Fr, 1999). These dislocated projects well illustrate the dictum that it is 'good to create irritation now and then to make people think'.

However, it was Siegfried Zielinski and Anthony Moore sitting side by side again in a darkened lecture theatre, working with a prepared sound track and writing on overhead transparencies, who in their eclectic illustration of the archaeology of thinking about sound did most to provoke reflection on the idea that 'the air itself is one vast library'. A library we look forward to entering again next year.

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