Sound and Fixed Media project brief

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1 Introductory note

We believe that the term *Fixed Media* is sufficiently vague to enable us to investigate a range of art forms on this course. We want to concentrate on audiovisual work especially[1] and much of the course will concern itself with this area. However, it is conceivable that you could end up developing work around other art-forms that are of interest and importance to you[2].

While we will often talk about sound, as if 'it' is a modality on its own, isolated and separate from other modalities (light or scent for example) we should remain mindful that sound does not occur in isolation but as part of something else. While sound may be our 'material', and we may call ourselves sound designers, sonic artists, composers, or theorists, we're actually collaborators in a larger idea. In *Sound and Fixed Media*, sound isn't (just) the end in itself, we will be using sound as a lever, a pointer, a signifier, a clue, a metaphor, a sensation and therefore much of our work will be on understanding how sound operates in-situ, not just by itself.

[1] you might understand that to be Film, TV, animation - generally speaking, linear art forms

[2] Poetry, plays, academic papers, have a linear flow too and sonic interpretation of these sorts of forms is also a possibility.

2 Aims of the project

- This project will help those involved to develop skills in the analysis, interpretation and understanding of the role of sound in 'fixed media' contexts.
- Participant's analysis of existing, published moving image projects is expected to inform and aid the development of their own practical and creative work in this area.
- There are relatively few standardised methods used in the analysis of film sound. Rather, the work itself often suggests a way to approach the analysis. Participants will develop their own approaches to fixed-media sound analysis and will explore the analytical work of others.
- The project aims to push sonic artists to develop their creative and expressive voice and to challenge them to apply imaginative concepts introduced in lecture and tutorial sessions in order to develop works of sound design that may end up in their professional portfolio.
- This project expects its participants to push themselves technically in order to realise imaginative and complex sound design ideas. We expect participants to develop and exhibit an advanced approach to location recording, the gathering and layering of sounds consistent with the multiple layers of narrative often found in film and story-telling genres.
- Participants should be able to demonstrate competence in mixing and mastering for screen. Surround sound, binaural and 360 mixing can be explored but this is a significantly complex task if you are inexperienced in this area. Therefore, surround sound, while desirable, is not a core expectation of this project. Input will however be given regarding methods of recording and mixing in surround as the course progresses.
- Participants may have the opportunity to work in reasonably complex collaborative situations similar to those experienced in professional circumstances, we encourage this, but the success of the actual collaborative elements will not by default form a significant part of the assessment proce-

dure, though it may be referred to in comments.

- The project will expect its participants to work systematically and to plan the sound elements of their practical work carefully. They will keep a record of their sound design methods and how they've used these to interpret the image. They will submit their own report that explains how and why the sound design was developed in the way it was.
- Finally, the project aims to provide a well-defined project brief that participants will explore and respond to in imaginative, diverse and creative ways.

3 Context

In a fixed-media context such as film, animation, TV-short, radio play or documentary, what does sound actually do? How is it used to tell stories, interpret the image, connect with characters, traverse international boundaries, and what is sound's role in conjuring simultaneity between aspects of narrative, character, image, voice, place and space? Does the sound aid viewer immersion within these elements as if they are part of the action or offer alternative readings of the image by superimposing two worlds against one another, perhaps by making the viewer aware that they are observers and not participants? How does sound help viewers reconcile the illusion of reality with [painfully] obvious artifice?

Do sonic elements form a musical layer or serve some sort of a musical purpose? Is the sound intended to be heard by the characters or by the audience alone? Is diegesis a valid concept in the film you're watching? Is it a valid idea in any film at all? How does the sound integrate with abstract visual elements such as the construction of photography, colour balance, speed of cuts and scene changes? How are relationships between sound and the other elements sustained and developed? Is film a 'Sound Art' as (Chion, 2009) suggests?

These questions[3] come up frequently as a soundtrack is designed for a film, TV or documentary project, though they are probably not articulated in quite the same way. Such questions are often answered intuitively as solutions to other more technical or practical challenges that are met as the film develops. However, analytical questions like those above form a very important part of the whole film making process and its reception. Sound designers must think analytically about the role their sound is to play in the wider collaboration with fixed-media. Finding a methodology to analyse the way sound is used in existing films should help you when you make sound tracks of your own. Finding words to describe the things you're trying to conjure with image is helpful in collaborative contexts; each project may well develop its own language, unique

[3] and many others

to the collaborators involved, however, it is essential that the intended role of sound is clearly articulated and communicated to the other people on the project early on. Writing analyses of existing films is a very good way to help you develop this language[4].

This project asks you to analyse sound tracks and to create sound design work. First you'll develop an analytical framework for understanding and interpreting a film sound track and then you'll develop your own sound design and provide a short written commentary explaining your design decision-making process.

[4] and to make sure that you sound like you know what you're doing

4 Submission 1 - re-interpretive analysis 30%

This section of the project brief is designed to challenge both your analytical skills and your abilities to interpret information/ideas/concepts and express these in sound. It's a very challenging task and therefore we're asking for short, concentrated sound pieces up to a maximum duration of 3 minutes.

Because it's a tricky thing to express specific ideas in sound (without recourse to narration), we're also asking for 500 word programme note that carefully explains your approach and the conclusions of your analysis. We also ask that you devise a visual 'score' of your analysis and use this as the basis for your sonification. This can be information-rich in terms of text, signs and images. As this will be a digital image, it can also be very large in format.

4.1 what should you analyse?

A film will be provided that the whole class will watch. Each of use will choose different sections of the film to analyse and understand[5].

Bearing in mind the work of writers like (Wyatt and Amyes, 2004), (Chion, 1994), (Chion, 2009), (Beck and Grajeda, 2008), (Yewdall, 2003), (Sonnenschein, 2001), (LoBrutto, 1994), (Sider et al., 2003), (Owsinski and O'Brien, 1999), (Thompson, 2004), (Young, 2002) listen, look and assess how sound is used in the segment of film you've decided to work on. All of the above writers have found ways to discuss and explain the complex experience of watching, listening to and making films. The various approaches used should be liberating in some ways as you'll see that there is no one way to analyse the sound in film. However, it's also a challenge, deciding what to point out and why.

A way of doing this is to look/listen out for things and how they interrelate with one another. How does background sound for example serve to change the meaning of foreground events?

[5] this approach to be debated in class

Here's a workflow that should help you crack this challenge quite quickly.

- watch the film you're interested in through, making notes of your first impressions (you'll never have these again)
- watch the film a second time, this time, making precise notes and stopping any time anything interesting crops up (an interruptus).
- hone in on a key section/segment of the film where the sound strikes you as being interesting, powerful, discreet…
- evaluate what's happening in the soundtrack
    1. how many layers are there?
    2. how do they interact?
    3. what paths do various sound layers take?
    4. what's the formal layout of the segment
    5. how to different parts of the film relate to this specific section?
    6. are there any analytical terms that you've heard during the course that fit well or that don't fit at all?
    7. how is time managed?
    8. what emerges, what disappears over the duration of the segment?
    9. where do we start, where do we end up?
    10. what's the emotional space of this segment like?
    11. keep asking questions…
- draw a graph of what's going on, this will be the score for your interpretive analysis
- start making your interpretive analysis
- sing it through first, record it, play it back while you talk over it, make a list of sounds you'd like to record, think about ho the work will be presented…

and so on.

4.2 The diagrammatic analysis/score of your interpretation

Diagrams are particularly useful as they allow you to show multiple pieces of information at once and you can easily illustrate the relationship between different factors you're trying to explain.

It is much easier to write an analysis if you've got **something to say** and the more specific your point, the easier it is to get into some depth and avoid unnecessary description. A bad title for your analysis might be /The Sound in David Lynch's "Lost Highway"/. This is dull, general, unspecific and doesn't really provoke the reader's interest, the title does not entice a reader because no question or idea has been put forwards. This would be a very difficult analysis to write in 2000 words and extremely difficult to make into a piece of radiophonic sound interpretation.

An arguably more interesting and precise title that would offer you plenty of scope for analytical depth, wide reading and explanation of your terms might be /There may be trouble ahead, how David Lynch's "Lost Highway" uses low frequency sound to evoke a sense of dread, with particular reference to scene 3, 0:23:10 - 0:26:36/[6].

[6] please note this is a made-up title with invented timings

4.3 Submission 1 - details

This submission will consist of

- A 500 programme note, plus a diagram of your analysis which will also form the score of your piece. Both documents should be submitted as PDF files.
- Full credits for the particular DVD edition you're working from should be given along with precise location in hours, minutes and seconds of the scene on that disc and any particular moments you draw the reader's attention to.
- Any explicit examples, clips, sounds etc. should be properly credited and included in the same directory as the pdf file that you submit.
- A complete and correctly formatted bibliography / filmography should also be included.
- The piece itself should be submitted in two forms:
    1. A full resolution .wav file 48kHz 24 bit named with your initials, the title of the analysis and the file extension. eg: `mp_losingPaths.wav`
    2. A high resolution mp3 file with full metadata embedded and names as described for the .wav file but with a .mp3 extension.

5 Submission 2 - Designing Sound 70%

Develop the sound track to a piece of film that is given to you or a film that is currently being made by one of the collaborators you're already working with, or a piece of film you've found that you'd like to work on and have rights to use and post online. The film choice is important. It needs to offer you enough range to flex your muscles as a sound designer and to give you something original that you can use in your portfolio and host online - therefore, it should not be an extract from an already published piece of work[7]. The film should (ideally) be somewhere between 3 and 8 minutes in length. Much longer than this, and you may struggle to produce the work in sufficient quality and detail, shorter than 3 minutes and you may miss an opportunity to do sophisticated things with the larger structure of the sound design.

Whatever film you work on, it should be completed in good time for you to deliver an effective sound submission, if the film is coming together at the last minute, then you'll have to embrace a working method where the sound design evolves as the film project does[8]. Your role in this process will need to be explained in your project report.

This is not a music creation project. You are expected to design the soundtrack to the film and this may behave in some of the ways film-music behaves but "music" per se is to be avoided. You can concentrate on specific areas like Foley, ADR, location sound, spot effects but also on alternative interpretation of the film via abstract means if this seems appropriate to your design. Your finished design then may have musical properties but this is not a film music composition exercise.

You can work in surround sound if you wish but bear in mind that this has significant extra complications in terms of the recording, mixing and mastering of the project. It is very well worth your while exploring surround sound and

[7] Unless it comes from a public, open resource such as www.archive.org

[8] i.e., you are working with the film maker on location, recording and editing the sounds from these location visits, developing Foley and ADR etc. as the film grows and taking an active role in the way the film and sound develop.

there will be two lectures dedicated to this over the course but you will not lose marks if you work in stereo.

5.1 Submission 2 - details

This submission will consist of

- The film itself in its native resolution, encoded with the .h264 codec and in a .mov container with a two channel track of the sound design at 48kHz, PCM 24 bit.
- If you're working in surround please submit the film with a surround track in the ITU 5.1 format (L, R, Ctr, Sub, Ls, Rs). This should also be 48kHz, PCM, 24bit.
- A project report explaining your working methods (see below)

5.1.1 Project report

Please include an 800-word(max) project report of your sound design as a PDF file. The description will explain the following;

- a rationale explaining how you worked up and developed your sound design
- any specific or interesting descriptions of how you interpreted/understood the film
- any diagrams that might help explain your working process
- explain key research you did whilst designing and implementing your work, this might be research on sound analysis or other in other areas to do with the film's content
- provide any relevant sound credits for work that is not your own
- the report may refer to films or other work that influenced your design

- an explanation of any collaborative elements, especially if you've been working with a film maker on this project
- where possible you will avoid using stock libraries for your sound design, try to pick a film and work in way that means you can record, edit and design your own solutions. If you need a lot of gunfire, got to a rifle range and make some recordings, if you need car sounds, go and get some at the racetrack. However, you may be better off taking an approach that doesn't need these kinds of difficult-to-source sounds.

6 Submission deadlines and instructions

Both submissions should be compressed as a zip file. Place all resources inside a folder, right click on the folder and select zip/compress

- **Submission 1** Please upload your PDF file and any related resources to the submissions system by the date specified in the course calendar
- **Submission 2** Please upload your PDF file, and completed film to the submission system by the date specified in the course calendar

6.1 Upload instructions

https://subsys.eca.ed.ac.uk

This website is EASE protected, so you may have to log in to EASE before you can proceed.

Once logged in you will see a link titled:

Submit work for: Sound and Fixed Media > Submission 1 (or similar) Following the link you should upload a *single ZIP file ONLY* that contains the whole submission. Once a file is uploaded, you may delete it to upload a more recent version. N.B. the files are timestamped on upload, and the date/time of the latest file will be treated as the date of submission. Feedback will also be available through this system once the work has been marked.

7 Criteria for Assessment

Work will be assessed in line with the University's common marking scheme[9] and on the basis of;

- The soundtrack work itself
- Skills in creatively deploying allocated resources, whatever their quality
- Precision and competence in presentation, including well formatted documentation of the work
- Ability to meet the requirements of the project brief and deal creatively with its open-ended aspects
- Design quality of the work in terms of meeting functional requirements, legibility, usability, and appropriate use of media
- High quality sound design in the face of other creative challenges
- Account will be taken of the risks taken and degree to which the design deviates from standard solutions
- In text-based elements including the analysis, comments may be made on your accuracy, clarity and methodology.

Please note that assessment will take account of tradeoffs between the above criteria, particularly in light of the diverse backgrounds of students in the class. You are encouraged to seek feedback during the development of your work, but please note that adhering to feedback does not guarantee a high assessment of the completed work. Note also that the assessment of the work is not necessarily commensurate with the amount of time spent on the project work.

We will offer constructive feedback on the submissions but cannot give detailed FB on every detail of the work submitted. As soon as is possible after submission you will have received feedback on your work and a provisional mark, to be confirmed after the exam board in May/June of the year of study.

[9] https://digital.eca.ed.ac.uk/sdhandbook/marking-scheme/

Feedback may refer to the risks taken in response to the brief, the sound quality, the approach you've taken with your system-based sound design, the clarity of the written components, the style and clarity of the sound design and the rigour/integration between conceptual approach taken in analysis and practice.

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