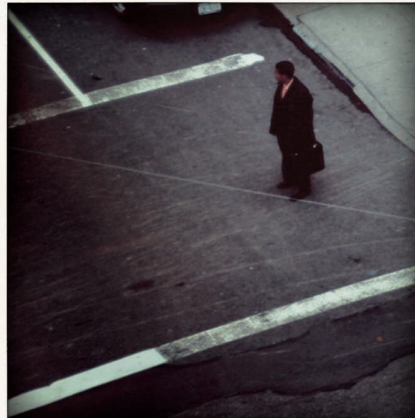# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN MEDIASPHERE

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Foley Artists – Wiring acoustic spaces in cinema, TV and radio plays

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1. Introduction to Foley Artists

Explaining Foley Art is both easy and complicated. In the landscape of the Hollywood studios in the mid-1920s, Jack Donovan Foley, an engineer working at Universal, successfully manipulated existing recording technology. Competing in this emerging market were the German Try-Ergon (TOBIS)[1], a European contender, and the main US players, Vitaphone (a sound-on-disc technology) and RCA Photophone (a sound-on-film standard).[2] Universal, having purchased a primary licence from Western Electric Export Corporation (Westrex),[3] was using the Vitaphone and Movietone systems.

Foley manipulated all sorts of requisites in order to record effects and sounds on a layer and audio track. This was an exercise that later became the recording technique of *dubbing*, in which one layer is substituted by another.[4]

Most probably, Foley's trick was based on an inappropriate use of sound technology, getting the 'right' sound back on the celluloid band, making post-production less costly. In contrast to this assumption, Ray Brunelle (1996) argued that it is not entirely clear whether Foley did actually invent

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1   "Tobis-Klangfilm." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Downloaded on 20.112011. on http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/597789/Tobis-Klangfilm.

2   See Gomery (1976) and Lastra (2000). Besides Vitaphone and Phonotope (RCA), there were two more standards in use: Phonofilm (Lee De Forest), and Movietone (Fox-Case). Downloaded on 20.09.2011 from http://frank.mtsu.edu/~smpte/twenties.html

3   Downloaded on 20.09.2011 from http://www.westernelectric.com/, downloaded on 20.09.2011 from http://www.porticus.org/bell/westernelectric_history.html, downloaded on 20.09.2011 from http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/157

4   Downloaded on 20.09.2011 from http://filmsound.org/foley/

it or just acted so impressively in the eyes of the production and art direc-tors of the studios that they wanted post-production to go the Foley way. Brunelle (1996) drew an intriguing line from vaudeville cabaret through fairground entertainment to the sound film industry.

Before continuing, some clarification is needed: when talking about the acoustic, I mean the physical dimension of listening. The term auditory refers to the perceptional dimension, while audible is bound to the psy-chological dimension of hearing. A Foley Artist is a person creating sound effects manually using all kinds of materials, fitting into films,[5] TV pro-ductions, digital games and previously into radio plays. Winfried Hauer, a sound engineer at the public service broadcasting station in Munich, said: "*It is not filed, which sounds are used in a radio play, and there will be no different procedure applied and implemented in the near future.*"[6] When pro-ducing radio plays, it is far too time-consuming to list and archive every sound that is used. Hauer explains that several layers of sound shape a sequence, even the shortest one. Therefore "*given that, in a broadcast lasting one hour, you find, let's say, around 200 different sounds, if the assistant were to allocate an archival number to each sound, she or he would have a lot of additional work to do.*"[7]

In respect of radio plays and broadcasting from the early days until the mid-1950s, adding sound was the job of 'Foley Artists'. By examining those artists and media professionals, I am aiming to test two theoreti-cal approaches. One is the concept of acoustic space highlighted by Mar-shall McLuhan (interview by Norden, 1969), while the second is Raymond Murray Schafer's (1973) idea of a soundscape. My purpose is to set out a suitable approach to reintroducing the manual and physical production and creation of sounds– still minority positions – into academic discus-sion at the interface of communication studies, media and film Studies, literature studies and the newer and dazzling strand of sound studies. And those theoretical concepts are no longer fit for instant use, and have to be readjusted, "pimped up".

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5   URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSrmqyV7pYI (last accessed 20.09.2011) Albert Brooks (1981) Modern Romance, 13 March 1981, Columbia Pictures Corporation. Watching from 1.15" to 4. 28" is recommended.
6   Interview with Wilfried Hauer, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Department Production Radio Plays/ Drama 25.02.2011, 11.00 to 11.50 am.
7   Interview Hauer, 25.02.2011.

In terms of Foley Artists as a research problem, four different constellations and competing understandings are central.

- analogue versus digital practices and technologies
- sound and its location in a media product
- resonating bodies and performativity
- studio environments and production processes

Foley Artists are delivering authenticity to a product of media, while adding its illusion at the same time. And, as agents and actors, they connect the settings of production, recording and insertion of sounds, and mediate and bridge the transitions. Certainly a network-centred approach appears to be suitable to explaining how knowledge is produced and practical tradition is taught in the context of such a performative profession. And, being part of a knowledge-based network of individuals, Foley Artists compete in the same market of freelancing and contracting.

Sounds are gone as quickly as they appear, on the surface of what we may want to examine. The ambiguous and indefinite character of sound is no longer of any relevance in a visual world. Well, yes, this is sort of right. Watching a movie, we are focused on the actors, plots, special effects and maybe – at least – on the main character themes in the soundtracks. But no, this is also sort of wrong, because sounds are leaving marks in every form and condition of content. It is about us tracing them.

Considering their acoustic impact on media products, and Foley Artists' approach to sound, our toolkit of media and cultural theory is insufficient in this respect. Or, to put it differently, the notorious theories hardly match the object I want to explore. I postulate that Foley Artists serve as a reminder of the analogue and an oddity in a media environment shaped by digital coding and converging content.

2. MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S CLAIM FOR ACOUSTIC SPACE

Marshall McLuhan delineates "acoustic space" as having "*no centre and no margin, unlike strictly visual space, which is an extension and intensification of the eye*". (Norden, 1969: 6) However, "*acoustic space is organic and integral, perceived through the simultaneous interplay of all the senses*". (Norden, 1969: 6) The quote points to the more general layers of McLuhan's concept of cultural progression and development. Taking a historical and anthropological perspective, this concept consists of multiple stages. A functional

reading is predominant, meaning that the function of a (cultural) technique in a given setting is the key to understanding (human) progress. Back then, in this assumed natural state of pre-civilized tribes, McLuhan claimed that the primary medium was speech. And talking to each other was the main mode of getting to terms with the present, the past and the future of the tribe's existence. And *"before the invention of the phonetic alphabet, man lived in a world where all the senses were balanced and simultaneous, a closed world of tribal depth and resonance, an oral culture structured by a dominant auditory sense of life"* (Norden, 1969: 6). Understanding any culture as "*an order of sensory preferences, and in the tribal world, the senses of touch, taste, hearing and smell were developed, for very practical reasons, to a much higher level than the strictly visual*" (Norden, 1969: 6).

Listening to somebody talking generates cohesion in tribal communities. In 1972 Edmund Carpenter described "acoustic space" as being non-pictorial, not boxed in and framed, "*its resonating, in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It's a world in which the eye hears, the ear sees, & all the five & country senses join in a concert of interweaving rhythms*" (Carpenter, 1972: 31).

I understand Carpenter's and McLuhan's proposition of 'acoustic space' as a structural feature of interactions and social relations in a given environment. An example is the communication tactics and rituals of an illiterate tribe, dominated by verbal face-to-face interaction.

Ritual and interpersonal communication are storage spaces for knowledge, the data carrier of the pre-Gutenberg galaxy. Rituals are a memory stick. And the rituals and memories of sound are providing access to past modes of hearing, listening, and virtualising communities.

3. RAYMOND MURRAY SCHAFER'S IDEA OF A 'SOUNDSCAPE'

A 'soundscape', a term originally coined by the urban anthropologist Michael Southworth (1969), and transferred by the Canadian composer Raymond Murray Schafer in 1973, assumes a specific state of nature of the acoustic and auditory interrelatedness of objects, materials, communities and natural phenomena like wind, thunder, rain, snow etc. resonating, additionally defining a specific geographical entity.

Recording the sounds of the world and storing them on tape helps to describe what is characteristic of the auditory experience in a town or in the

countryside. But this old approach lacks a straightness in interpretation. When sounds - of a bird, of men, of church bells, of hammers - are heard in their own volume and power, they determine a hi-fi-soundscape. Hi-Fi is a code and chiffre for the uniqueness of tonal qualities, acoustic information and auditory presences, and stands for the different capacities to get through to the channel called ear, the threshold.

A Lo-Fi soundscape, in a city, with an increasing amount of traffic, on a construction site or at an industrial facility, consists of specific data packages of acoustic information interfering and mixing up. To manipulate sounds manually, electrically or electronically by technical devices - pitching volume and loudness higher, or modulating frequencies, to get a siren switching to alarm mode for example – is a tactic to generate public awareness.

In 1973, Schafer was much more interested in orchestrating the sounds of landscapes and areas of a city, searching for opportunities to improve and to filter out, assessing noise and mapping cities by recording the acoustic situation, and marking zones of auditory disintegration. That was more intriguing than pointing out the potentials of post-production of audio tracks.

Collating what we have obtained so far on the Schaferian side of sound, and linking our object of examination - Foley Artists - to the concept of 'soundscape', in terms of the clear hearing – clairaudience – of visual information, we find a strong interrelationship in terms of making the movements, places and sequences of pictures as acoustically coherent as possible.

Tools and materials are re-used, re-coded by application and combined in different ways. Sound "atmospheres" made by Foley Artists are manually created, handmade in order to speak and fit into the Schaferian sense of 'Hi-Fi'. But being performed in a setting that is defined by microphones, sequencers, compressors, equalisers and other mixing applications, Schafer's key terms do not really match. Performed on a theatre stage or in a vaudeville cabaret, or in early sound film, this might be different, and fit once again.

Foley Artists infuse analogue craftsmanship into a virtual setting of the camera, the eye of an instrument and its visual effects. Serving as the analogue extensions of a digital production process, they act in a shape that could be labelled post-literate.

Foley Artists roam freely, passing the 'tribal echo-lands', reproducing the pre-digital conditions of sound, sound colour and sound memory. From the angle of literature studies inspired media theory, we might go so far as to label Foley Art as a specific form of distortion (Holl 2011: 214) at the interface of technological and aesthetical settings designed to generate and create a product, namely a blockbuster, TV film or a computer game.

As speech and face-to-face communication within communities are key to those bits and pieces McLuhan dropped into that Playboy interview, we have to state fairly that Foley Artists as agents in the recording and post-production process do not in any way fit into that concept. But when we extract alert listening and multisensivity out of McLuhan's explanations, we are kind of back in the game.

Certainly we need another concept to consolidate our approach, and look for continuity, starting-points and break-ups. In the construction kit of theories and frameworks, there is the idea of a 'soundscape'. In this land-scape of sound, we can determine positions, locating Foley Artists with the main feature of their manual capacity – creating sound with different means, resources, purposes and responsibilities derived from social and contractual relations.

And McLuhan's perspective on film is different to his one on television: "Unlike film or photograph, television is primarily an extension of the sense of touch rather than of sight, and it is the tactile sense that demands the greatest interplay of all the senses." (McLuhan, 1969: 11) Foley Artists are scanning moving images in order to add the best and most suitable acoustic layer. It is a tactile mode applied. A Foley Artists is an active viewer as well, but he is also part of the production process, although she or he keeps a position in between. Foley Artists are distorting the existing theoretical frameworks.

Understanding a studio as a space, as an 'acoustic space', re-applying McLuhan to this setting, helps to reconfigure acoustic events and auditory dispositions, raising the issue of the extent to which the cultural technique of listening reshaped by atmospheres, rattles, noises and sound markers makes the visual impression of a pictorial sequence even stronger.

We can write the story of Foley Artists from a technical and technological perspective, pointing out new procedures, tools and shifts in the record-ing process. Or we can outline the institutional perspective of broadcast-

ing stations dropping Foley work, or film production companies standing by. Or we can opt for a micro media history of recording studios in relation to individual sound artists and the film projects or games projects to which they contributed.

4. Conclusion

Radio plays developed out of theatre performances, with microphones upfront. The genre of the radio feature was given a major boost in the early 1970s by the collaging and bricolaging of recorded sound and noise from the real world outside the studio. A broadcasting studio is a laboratory with specific constraints. And at least in terms of broadcasting, we can state that, in the late 1950s, the functions and tasks of Foley Artists volatilised and diffused step by step, as they were replaced by sound effect libraries and sound databases.

Neither McLuhan nor Schafer offers a consistent theoretical approach to understanding the subject of Foley Artists. Are they some sort of gatekeeper of acoustic memory, carrying with them practical knowledge about sounds in packages of analogue data, being reproduced manually.

They are inscribing this memory and knowledge into the media product itself, at least by their contribution to the post-production. And with this capacity they are wiring acoustic spaces. But they are artists, and this knowledge concerning sounds is the cultural and professional capital they have to offer and sell. From that angle and perspective, the soundscape, as well as the acoustic space, appears to be a hybrid constellation of a competitive market.

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