Ambiguity: Walter Murch and the Metaphoric use of sound in *The Godfather*, *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now*

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Walter Murch, film editor and sound designer, has created lasting soundtracks that have enriched cinematic experience over the past thirty years. Murch's book on film editing, *In The Blink of An Eye*, and Michael Ondaatje's book, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*, are opening up new film audiences to his insightful writings, musings, and theories on film. But one may expect that the winner of three Oscars, one for Sound on *Apocalypse Now*, and an unprecedented double Oscar in Editing and Sound for *The English Patient,* would be more broadly known. In 1994 he received the Life Achievement Award from the Cinema Audio Society and in October 2000 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences honoured Murch's work in editing and sound design. He has recently received another Academy Award nomination, this time for editing Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain.*

I have chosen to discuss *The Godfather*, *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now* in order to analyse in some detail the sound design contribution of Murch. These films were all made in the 1970s and encompass very different themes and genres: a gangster film, a thriller/art-house film, and an anti-war film. This variety impacts on the shape of the soundtrack, and this diversity demands differing attention from a sound designer. Murch skilfully utilises sound, so at times it acts in an ambiguous manner with the visuals, he does this differently with all three films. For Murch, ambiguity and metaphor are key elements in creating multi-dimensional films, he outlined this significance as such:

> The danger of present day cinema is that it can suffocate its subjects by its very ability to represent them: it doesn't possess the built-in escape valves of ambiguity that painting, music, literature, radio drama and black-and-white silent film automatically have simply by virtue of their sensory incompleteness – an incompleteness that engages the imagination of the viewer as compensation for what is only evoked by the artist. By comparison, film

seems to be "all there" (it isn't, but it seems to be), and thus the responsibility of filmmakers is to find ways within that completeness to refrain from achieving it. To that end, the metaphoric use of sound is one of the most fruitful, flexible and inexpensive means: by choosing carefully what to eliminate, and then adding sounds that at first hearing seem to be somewhat at odds with the accompanying image, the filmmaker can open up a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush. As a result, the film becomes more "dimensional". The more dimensional it is, the more impact it has on the viewer, the more it seems to speak to each viewer individually, and the more sound can become a representation of the states of mind of the central character, approaching the pre-verbal "song" that Stephen Spender called the base ground of poetry: "a rhythm, a dance, a fury, a passion which is not yet filled with words".[1]

Murch offers an interesting and fresh perspective on filmmaking, requiring a concept of ambiguity and metaphor through the use of sound design. The 'completeness' in many films that Murch writes of, can be alienating, as it leaves no space for the audience to interpret the film for themselves. Murch has outlined the creative input sound can have on a film, and his films demonstrate this theory in practice. To illustrate how Murch utilises sound metaphorically, through the use of ambiguity between sound and image, I have selected a scene from *The Godfather*, two examples from The Conversation, and the opening sequence from *Apocalypse Now*.

A key scene in *The Godfather*, lasting approximately five minutes, centres on Michael, as he prepares to murder Sollozzo and McCluskey in the restaurant. Ambiguity through sound is used to deepen the dramatic tension. Sollozzo speaks to Michael in Italian. Coppola chose not to use subtitles at this point, and Murch described the effect of this brave move: "As a result you're paying much more attention to how things are said and the body language being used, and you're perceiving things in a very different way. You're listening

to the sound of the language, not the meaning."[2] To non-Italian speakers not understanding the language has a further implication: it has a distancing effect between the world of the audience and the Mafia characters. It becomes an unfamiliar world, the characters less predictable, and the outcome seems all the more uncertain. The rules are not known or are not the same as one is used to. This effect breaks all the conventions of film, to distance an audience is meant to destroy a film, whereas Coppola creates a curiosity within the audience through this absence, drawing the audience deeper into the film. This is highly effective, and can only work if there is a consistency in approach throughout the film. Coppola placed Murch in charge of post-production (his credit was Post-production Consultant on *The Godfather*), such was his faith in Murch, having worked together on *The Rain People*. Murch said of the mix for *The Godfather*, "I was the person representing the intentions of the director, which, because Francis trusted me, were frequently my own intentions."[3] The collaboration between director and the Post-production Consultant, or Sound Designer is essential if a coherent result is to be achieved. An understanding of the overall scheme is required, so that the film maintains an organic balance, refrains from over emphasis, or leaves the audience bewildered due to a lack of explanation. Murch brought this over-seeing and over-hearing element to the post-production team; however he was also responsible for the specifics. From a sound recorded during the production shoot, Murch emphasised the sound of the cork being extracted from the wine bottle in the restaurant scene. I asked Murch about this sound:

> In fact, the only thing recorded at the time of that particular cork pull was the 'pop' itself so we added that squeaky sound that goes into it. In that case it it's a good example, although small that the 'pop' itself elicited say the added thing of the screw going in. Which was to both make you pay attention to very small sounds at that point in the story, and also something just to add the idea of tension being ratcheted up, that you get that sense of something being increased and then released with the pop. If you boiled it down to a tiny metaphor that's

what that whole scene is: it's increasing tension and then 'pop' which is when he shoots.[4]

We hear the squeak of the cork in the wine bottle as we first see Michael in close-up in the restaurant. Neither Sollozzo nor Michael speak about business matters while the waiter is present. The tension at the table is palpable due to the relative quietness, and the sound from the wine bottle becomes significant due to the lack of other sounds at this point. More importantly, however, because of the wonderful sound recorded, the squeak has an annoying presence that is finally alleviated with the pop of the cork. The importance of having such a small sound with the cork also aids the later part of the scene. The train and gunshot seem all the louder because we have come from virtual silence.

When the car pulls up outside Louis's Restaurant we can hear the train. This sound carries over to the first shot inside the restaurant, and then naturally fades away as a passing train would. The train is heard again during a heated exchange between Michael and Sollozzo. It is heard initially towards the end of a mid-shot of Sollozzo, and continues over a shot of Michael fading away at the beginning of another shot of Sollozzo. The effect of this is that we begin to associate the sound with tension and, more particularly, with Michael, even if at a sub conscious level. Michael goes to the toilet to pick up the gun, the sound of a train can be heard in the background. The cistern from the toilet becomes the most dominant sound in the mix, but when Michael finds the gun, he stops briefly to compose himself. He places his hand to his head and the train sound returns. The sound builds with the emotional intensity of the scene, until we hear its screeching brakes when Michael shoots Sollozzo and McCluskey. Murch described the use of this ambiguous sound:

> It's an authentic sound because it's a real subway train and because it seems authentic to that neighbourhood of the Bronx, where the restaurant is located. We don't wonder what that sound is, because we've seen so many films set in the Bronx where that sound is pervasive. But it's metaphorical, in that we've never established the train tracks and the sound

is played so abnormally loud that it doesn't match what we're looking at, objectively. For a sound that loud, the camera should be lying on the tracks.5

Michael is seeking revenge for the attack on his father. What Walter Murch achieves here with the sound of the train is an insight into Michael's emotional state, as he is about to commit his first murder. The pressure that builds within Michael, is expressed to the audience through sound effect, rather than the usual, all too familiar, murder music. This train sound heightens the tension within the scene through ambiguity and volume. The scene plays as if there could be a train outside the toilet window, and the filmmakers have simply continued this sound through to the restaurant. The volume is louder than realism would allow for, but the scene does not seem like a manipulation of the audiences' feelings, although it undoubtedly is. The sound of the train characterises aurally Michael's internal anxieties. There is a great degree of subtlety in this type of filmmaking, which makes a film like *The Godfather* such a believable world. The realism of this film has been confirmed by an interview that appeared in *The New York Times*. Salvatore Gravano, a Mafia hitman, claimed that Mario Puzo the writer of *The Godfather* was either in the Mafia or had connections with them, because of how the train sound drowned out all other sounds in the restaurant. Gravano reckoned that was exactly how he felt when he killed someone for the first time. Here Gravano mistakes the book for the film, and it is the artistry of Murch, and not Puzo, that he refers to. What stronger endorsement could one have for the realism of one's work? Even if it is rather chilling.6

The murder scene in *The Conversation* illustrates the effective use of ambiguity in film. It is neither seen nor heard. Standing outside room 773, Harry Caul listens, but all is quiet in the corridor. He moves onto his hotel room next door, lays a plastic bag on the bed and walks over to the adjoining wall. Distant traffic sounds can be heard, along with the rustling of Harry's raincoat. He taps on the wall to determine the material it is made from. Harry goes out onto the balcony and listens, but only the hum of traffic is audible. He listens at the air-vent but this too proves futile, so he takes out some instruments from his plastic case. Choosing a small hand-drill, he flushes the toilet and drills into the wall, he flushes again in order to finish the drilling. He places a microphone on a cable into the hole he has created, and attaches this to a box, which enables him to listen. The box rattles ominously against the tiled floor, he places a hand on it to stop the noise. Harry's breathing becomes more audible as he concentrates on the sounds coming from next door. A man's and then a woman's voice become audible, and then the taped conversation is played. Harry jumps up angrily, his breathing gets heavier as he realises what he has recorded is going to cause somebody to be killed. An argument ensues next door. Harry sits on the bed looking at the wallpaper. He goes out onto the balcony and sees through the reinforced glass two bodies struggling, a woman screams and he sees blood. Music accompanies the scream and then the sound of a synthesised scream continues as Harry goes back into his room. He shuts the door and curtains, turns on the television, and gets into bed. The television blasts out a current affairs programme as Harry tries to block out the murder scene from his head. The screen fades to black. Murch described the editing of this scene:

> What Francis Coppola shot was Gene Hackman in the hotel room looking at the wallpaper. On the wallpaper is this turquoise, fifties view of Coit Tower and the Bay Bridge. It's very bland, and yet the horror is what's on the other side of the wall. So what is the sound to go with the wallpaper? I did some scuffling and some ambiguous sounds, and you hear a snatch of the conversation. It's as if Robert Duvall is playing a tape for Cindy Williams so she can hear it. There's a scuffle and then it goes quiet – there's nothing. So not only is what you are looking at, which is hotel wallpaper, totally bland, you aren't even hearing anything – it's just distant traffic. But when I see that film with people, that's the point where whatever was in their imagination has reached its climax. Yet it was achieved by double indirection – don't show it and at the right moment take the sound away. Let them see it in their head and also hear it in their head.7

Through the use of ambiguity in picture and sound, Murch has created one of the most

chilling murder scenes in cinematic history. So much of the scene is very quiet, the corridor, the bedroom, the balcony, not until Harry goes to the balcony after hearing the tape playing does the film get loud, and it feels so loud in vast contrast to the rest of the scene. The murder scene does not rely on suspenseful music to create the tension, but on skilful editing and sound design. Through not seeing and not hearing the murder, the worst becomes anticipated in the mind of the audience. The music comes in as we see the murder but it does not build the tension within the scene. The music accompanies the emotion that has already been created with picture, sound effects, atmospheric sound, and silence.

Another example of ambiguity in *The Conversation* occurs with the line of dialogue, "He'd kill us if he got the chance." During the shoot, the conversation was recorded using radio microphones, but there was a lot of interference on the soundtrack, so Murch recorded the conversation with the actors, Cindy Williams and Fred Forrest in a quiet park, while they repeated the conversation three times. Murch noted that Forrest gave a different reading on the third take, he said, 'He'd kill *us* if he got the chance.' It was not until much later in the post-production process, when the film began to have plot problems, that Murch remembered this reading of the line and was able to find a solution. Murch re-edited the film with this reading of the line, and it now appeared that Harry had made a mistake all along.8 The ambiguous reading of the line by Forrest, created a meaningful solution for Murch.

The opening scene of *Apocalypse Now* is a masterpiece. Both image and sound are used to gain greater insight into the character of Captain Willard. Through the use of visual dissolves and metaphoric sound, the audience becomes privy to Willard's thoughts. *Apocalypse Now* opens to a black screen, the synthesised sound of helicopter blades fades up, followed by a wide shot of the jungle. In contrast, in *Apocalypse Now Redux*, the image fades up first and then the sound. Smoke rises from below the frame, a helicopter crosses the screen from left to right, which cues the beginning of *The Doors*' song,

'The End'. The smoke turns a distinct yellow colour and fills the screen, to the guitar music. Helicopters cross the screen and silent explosions occur as Jim Morrison sings the opening line 'This is the End ...', the camera pans from left to right across the jungle which is now on fire. Deep black smoke fills the screen, as two helicopters pass from right to left, followed by a helicopter crossing from left to right. Captain Willard's head is seen upside down, on the left-hand side of the screen, superimposed with the images of the jungle. Helicopters pass across Willard's head from left and right. A third image is superimposed, that of a ceiling fan. The camera continues to pan across the jungle. A helicopter passing from left to right cues the next verse of the song. The jungle becomes more dominant visually than Willard's face, until he completely fades out leaving the single image of the jungle. Two helicopters cross the screen from left and right, the ceiling fan is dissolved with this image, and then the camera begins to rotate 90° around on Willard's face, until we see him in side profile. The jungle and ceiling fan are superimposed and more helicopters cross the screen as we see personal possessions belonging to Willard. We see him lying in the room with his eyes shut, jungle images are superimposed, and Morrison sings 'All the children are insane', as the camera pans from an alcoholic bottle to a gun. The ceiling fan is superimposed on this image, and the synthesised sounds of the helicopter are raised in volume. Willard's head is yet again seen from upside down, but this time with a black background on the right-hand side of frame. This cuts to the only singular shot of the ceiling fan and the synthesised sounds become dominant, the music becomes more distant and fades out. As the camera tilts down from the fan, the synthesised helicopter sound fades down, and a real helicopter sound fades up as we see a window in the room. Willard, still lying in bed, looks to the left of screen, off-screen at the window. The camera tracks in to denote Willard's movement towards the window, the helicopter volume rising as the camera / Willard nears the window. Unexpectedly, as Willard peers through the blinds, the helicopter sound fades away, and the sound of the city fades up.

Traffic sounds are audible with the sound of a marching band in the distance. Willard's voice-over begins. He takes his hand away from the blind and takes a drink from his glass. Cut to Willard in bed, then another cut to a different angle of Willard attempting to swat a mosquito, of which is briefly heard. The sounds of the jungle: crickets and birds begin to fill the room. Willard looks at a photograph of a woman (presumably his wife as the voice-over at this point is about his divorce), he brings the image of her close to his lips which hold a cigarette, and the photograph is so close to the cigarette that he looks as if he may wish to burn it. A close-up of Willard drinking is accompanied by a growing intensity in the jungle sounds. There is an eerie quality to the soundtrack. A wide shot of Willard squatting on the floor of the room mirrors the voice-over, 'Charlie squats in the bush.' The intense music of *The Doors* fades up, as Willard practises some martial arts. A cut to a low-angle shot depicts Willlard as a menacing figure. Willard continues his drunken martial arts, his actions become more frenzied, in time with the music. He smashes the mirror, which is the only sound audible from the room, the music is relentless at this point, delineating a man at breaking point. He smears his face in blood, drinks from the bottle, and then jumps over the bed onto the floor, where he screams or sobs but with no sound other than that of the music. The music fades out and the screen fades to black.

Visually the film brings together the world of war and the jungle with the domestic or interior. Images superimposed upon each other from these diverse worlds expose a man on the edge. What the sound does is aid this journey inside Willard's head. The sound of the ceiling fan connects the helicopter seen in the jungle, Willard's memories, and the helicopter in Saigon. Through using a mixture of synthetic and real sounds, the subjectivity of what is heard is exposed. Willard is 'the ear' of this opening sequence, hearing the world and then filtering those sounds in a highly subjective manner. The Sound Designer Randy Thom explained this factor:

> Films need to be given an ear. In the opening sequence of Apocalypse, Captain Willard is the

ear. The first sound you hear is that electronically synthesised helicopter. Why not use an actual recording of a real helicopter there?…It's Captain Willard's brain that we're listening to.9

The greatest insight into Willard's mental state is gained, with the skewed hearing of Willard. Sound is freed from the realms of reality, when there is a subjective excuse to do so. Hearing the world through Willard, the sounds are filtered through his mind, creating a world at odds with reality. The sounds of Saigon mix seamlessly with the sounds of the jungle, because it is Willard recalling those sounds. Psychologically there is a motive to mix those divergent sounds, otherwise it could not have worked. There has to be a narrative reason to create such a soundtrack. Murch described the function of this scene:

> Effectively, there is no reason why what you are looking at should be producing the sound that you are hearing…In terms of both the picture and the sound, we were trying to get into this person's head. Look at the second section of this piece. You are looking at Saigon, you are in a hotel room, but you begin to hear the sounds of the jungle. One by one the elements of the street turn into jungle sounds: a policeman's whistle turns into a bird, the two-stroke motorcycles going back and forth turn into insects, and item by item each thread of one reality is pulled out of the tapestry and replaced by another one. You are looking at something very improbable which is a man sitting in a hotel room – and you are listening to the sound track that you would hear if he were in the jungle – which is the point. Although his body is in Saigon, his mind is somewhere else.10

Willard's mind is the key to hearing these sounds, and his voice-over is also interesting to listen to in relation to the overall soundtrack. The voice-over has an intimate quality, which draws the audience further into Willard's story. Murch used a close miking technique for recording the voice-over:

> If you position the microphone perfectly, you can get that intimacy without too many unwanted side effects: distorted b's, p's, and s's. I asked Marty to imagine that microphone was somebody's head on the pillow next to him, and that he was just talking to her with that kind of intimacy.11

The effect created is quite disturbing, Willard is shown to be a man on the edge, and therefore is an unreliable narrator, yet he feels intimately close due to the miking of the narration. He has sole knowledge of the journey to be embarked on, his voice-over is all knowing. Visually, flash-forwards can be seen, illustrating what is to come in the film, and the voice-over gives an indication that this is to be an epic journey, at the beginning of the next scene, Willard says, 'Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins they gave me one. Brought it up to me like room service.'[12]

Willard's 'mission' is partially what is seen in flash-forward. His voice-over indicates he is to go on a journey. In this opening sequence Willard breaks down. It is his end, which has distinct parallels with the song, 'The End' by *The Doors*. Yet, this end is occurring right at the beginning of the film. This is a highly ambiguous opening. What Gustavo Constantini, the Sound Designer refers to as, 'The war of the circle versus the line', is a linear narrative in *Apocalypse Now*, that is constantly encircled by an awareness of what is to come.[13] Ambiguity serves to let us enter Willard's head, images and sounds at odds with each other, in order to bring us into another dimension, one that is deeper and more subjective than an audience is generally granted.

The use of metaphoric sound in *The Godfather*, *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now*, enables the audience to see and hear the world through the protagonist's eyes and ears. In turn, the audience becomes intimately aware of the emotional states of the characters. This skilful use of filmmaking allows the audience to identify, often with unlikely and even unlike-able characters. To be with Michael Corleone, Harry Caul, or Captain Willard, is to take a journey into the unknown, and to be able to empathise with these deeply flawed characters. The ambiguous sounds used in these three scenes: the sound of the train and the wine bottle in *The Godfather*; the removal of sounds and the different inflections of voice in *The Conversation*; or the peculiar juxtapositions of city and jungle in *Apocalypse Now*, are examples of how metaphoric sounds can be used to create great drama. Sound design is critical to these

scenes, the films are shaped around the most interesting interaction between image and sound, and it was Murch's insight that created these masterpieces for the cinema.

Notes
[1] Walter Murch "Sound Design: The Dancing Shadow." Eds. Boorman, Luddy, Thomson and Donohue *Projections 4: Film-makers on film-making* (London, Faber & Faber, 1995), 247.
[2] Michael Ondaatje *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 2002), 121. Hereafter referred to as Murch *Conversations*.
[3] ibid, 99.
[4] Liz Greene, telephone interview with Walter Murch, July 28th 2003.
[5] Murch *Conversations*, 120.
[6] ibid, 123-124.
[7] Vincent LoBrutto *Sound – On – Film: Interviews with Creators of Film Sound* (Westport, Conneticut & London: Praeger, 1994), 90.
[8] Murch *Conversations*, 250.
[9] Sound Designer, Randy Thom describing the ambiguity of the opening scene of *Apocalypse Now* - he had worked as an assistant on the film. In Larry Sider, Diane Freeman and Jerry Sider. Eds. *Soundscape: The School of Sound Lectures 1998 – 2001* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 124.
[10] Murch in Mark Cousins. "Designing sound for Apocalypse Now: an Interview with Walter Murch." Eds. Boorman and Donohue *Projections 6: Film-makers on Film-making* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 160 -161.
[11] Murch *Conversations*, 64-65. For further reading on voice-over theory, see Michel Chion *The Voice in Cinema* Trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
[12] Captain Willard's voice-over in *Apocalypse Now* Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Editor & Sound Designer Walter Murch. Zoetrope Studios. 1979. 153 minutes. Sound Mix - 70mm 6-track, & Dolby 35mm.
[13] Gustavo Constantini 'No con un estallido sino con un gemido: fuentes literarias del diseño de sonido en *Apocalypse Now'* in <http://filmsound.org/gustavo/apocalypsenow.htm> 01 May 2003. Trans. Niamh Thornton "Not with a bang but with a whimper: the literary origins of sound design in *Apocalypse Now*."

Filmography

Apocalypse Now (U.S., 1979)
Zoetrope Studios.
Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.
Editor & Sound Designer Walter Murch.
153 minutes.
Sound Mix - 70mm 6-track, & Dolby 35mm.

Apocalypse Now Redux (U.S., 2001)
Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.
Zoetrope Studios.
Editor & Sound Designer Walter Murch.
202 minutes.
Sound Mix - DTS & Dolby Digital.

The Conversation (U.S. 1974)
American Zoetrope, Paramount Pictures, The Coppola
Company, The Directors Company.
Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.
Editor, Sound Montage & Sound Re-recordist Walter Murch.
113 minutes.
Sound Mix - Mono, re-release DVD, Dolby Digital, 2000.

The Godfather (U.S., 1972)
Paramount Pictures.
Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.
Post-Production Consultant Walter Murch.
175 minutes.
Sound Mix - Mono, re-release DVD, DTS. 2001.