

‘SOUND AS
EXPRESSIONISTIC
DEVICE IN
CITIZEN KANE’

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Orson Welles' background in radio drama is well documented. Working with the Mercury theatre group. Perhaps his most infamous moment was the 1938 adaptation and broadcast of H.G. Wells' 'War of the Worlds'. On the strength of this broadcast, George J Schaeffer and Nelson Rockefeller, in an attempt to avoid bankruptcy at their film production company RKO Radio pictures, gave Welles complete artistic freedom over his film, Citizen Kane. Welles rose to the challenge with freedom from the routine methods of experienced film directors. To this end, he incorporated many people from the Mercury theatre group into the creative production team. The music for the production was composed by Bernard Hermann, also from the Mercury theatre. He was employed to work on the film right from its inception, an unprecedented way of working, as the composer would normally be employed to score the completed film in the final four or five weeks of production.

In terms of sound, James C Stewart was placed in charge of post-production sound. As was common for movie soundmen, he had gained his background working for radio. Stewart would be aware of the timidity with which cinema then treated sound, usually in a purely functional way, foregrounding audibility. This is very much evident in the sound of films of the period such as Top Hat (1935 Mark Sandrich) and was done so that dialogue would be audible even in the poorest projection facilities. In the 40's the sound facilities in the majority of cinemas would have been of a very low standard, having been hastily equipped for optical sync sound during the 1930's. Throughout Citizen Kane, there is a detailed and dense use of sound. The contrast and dynamics of voices and sounds are rich and varied. Sounds are chosen for their timbral qualities, and most importantly the 'acoustic' in which the sounds are heard becomes a highly expressive element, both in terms of spatialisation and as a narrative vehicle.

This attention to detail within the soundtrack in Kane is heavily indebted to radio sound aesthetics. At that time, radio sound was pushing forward the dramatic use of sound, it being a medium without images, ascribed as 'Acousmatic' in Michel Chion's terminology (1)

In order to communicate space within radio drama of the period in question, there existed four basic acoustics.

"Reverberation - signifying outdoor space
Little reverberation, long reverberation time - Large, well furnished room
Much reverberation, short reverberation time - Telephone booth or bathroom
Much reverberation, long reverberation time - Cave, palace or concert hall"
(2)

A great deal of narrative and dramatic information was inherent through the placement of the drama within these certain acoustic environments.

The soundtrack's treatment of space in Citizen Kane takes these 'basic acoustic units' as a starting point and, because we also see the space, is able to distinguish between cabin, car, great hall and auditorium. Ceilings, famously in Kane, were made from a textured muslin gauze but the sound is dense enough to give the impression that the ceilings are real (3) This sophisticated use of sound allows the audio-visual language of Kane to become very rich and detailed. Sound is used as a key expressionistic device throughout the film.

Throughout the film acoustic space is described through an extended 'superfield' (4) Sound comes from 'acousmatic' off screen sources, such as rain, suggesting atmosphere of a wider diegesis 'outside' the room's acoustic. These are also defined by Chion as 'elements of auditory setting' or as 'passive off screen sound' (5). This also cut very much against the grain for sound films of the period.

"A movie then was a show where the audience was meant to feel they could get everything the first time round, Kane was the first American movie so dense that it needed to be seen more than once" - (6) The intricate audio-visual relationships established in Kane are most wonderfully expressed, I feel, in two or three sequences of the film.

In the scene at (00:39:20) where Kane and members of his staff have been brought outside the window of rival newspaper 'The Chronicle'. They are looking at a photograph of their editorial team.

Bernstein: "You know how long it took the chronicle to get that staff together. twenty years."

Kane: "Twenty years? Well, ,"

Here, the vocal acoustic changes, although the image remains that of the photograph filling the screen. Kane's voice continues along the same lines of thought but this time talking in a past tense...

Kane: "Six years ago I looked at a picture of the world's greatest newspapermen..."

Here, Kane walks into frame, in front of the men seated posing for the photograph. As the camera pulls away, it reveals a different space and a different time. We are made aware of this primarily by Kane's voice. The visual element remains static, yet the dialogue and its changing acoustic and context has moved us through space and time.

This technique is extended and used to greater effect in the later scene at (01:00:25) Kane's mistress is seated playing piano for Kane in her room. The *mise en scene* consists of a small room busily decorated and somewhat cramped. The acoustic sound of the piano and her singing are matched to the size and furnishing of the room. Here, visual information is being built upon by information given through sound. The piano playing and singing continues as a dissolve is experienced. We now find ourselves in a more opulent flat setting, heavily decorated with dark material. The characters remain in place, the only thing to have changed is the 'quality' of the location. The voice of the piano has changed from that of a sharp, cheap upright piano to that of a richly toned, grand piano (although her singing voice is still unimproved!)

Upon finishing the song we hear the clock on the wall ticking. Kane then applauds her playing, clapping at exactly double the speed of the clock. His clapping and the ticking clock are the pivot upon which the next spatio-temporal ellipsis is made as a dissolve brings us into an exterior street scene, the clapping continues but a crowd is now applauding. The quantity of the clapping hands and the outdoor acoustic is carried through by the rhythm. We cut to a large, full screen picture of Kane and slowly pan down to reveal the source of this new vocal. This time the sentence is continued in Kane's voice, a confident and booming voice with large amounts of reverb suggesting a vast auditorium. The scene continues to be cut into various point of view and corresponding Point of Audition shots, giving more reverb from the back of the hall and of shots of the audience.

This entire ellipsis has at its core the manipulation of the acoustic properties of sound. The visuals operate around this 'core'. We are left with a sense of narrative propulsion in terms of the 'qualities' and narrative positions which the characters now enjoy. The transition of time and of the quality of the surroundings of Kane's mistress' flat, coincided with the increased dominance of Kane's presence on the political scene, indicated by both the tone of his address and the size of the crowds to whom he is speaking. (this is also greatly achieved through visual expressionistic devices, however, the audio track enriches our experience of the narrative space)

In terms of how meaning is articulated in cinema, Andre Bazin argued of the artistic arrangement of the visual elements of cinema both pre and post sound) that they created 'a meaning not objectively present in the images, but derived purely from their juxtaposition' (7)

This echoes sentiments expressed in the writings of Russian constructivists such as Eisenstein and Vertov, meaning is acquired through editing, a rich montage of various filmic elements. (8)

These visual elements, such as *mise en scene*, editing, deep focus cinematography (of which Kane is also a fine example) lighting, camera angle all encourage the viewer to 'read' the images in a particular way. A character seen from a low camera angle assumes a more powerful image, whereas an angle looking down to a character gives a weaker reading to the image. This gives a great deal of narrative information about how the audience 'reads' the relationships of characters.

Kane's use of sound, in combination with these visual elements, promotes 'acoustic information' as one of these essential expressionistic devices. Describing the quality of the sonic environment is as important to Kane as the visual environment. In Extract 3, the vast interior spaces of Xanadu are seen as Kane and his now wife sit and talk. The characters are seen to be worlds apart and disillusioned. This 'emptiness' is explored through the vast space of Xanadu's hall. Deep focus cinematography functions to exaggerate the sizes of the characters and the vast distance between them. The acoustic quality of the voices in this vast space is heavily reverberated, this emphasizes, as does the deep focus cinematography, the size and emptiness of the hall, the sound reflecting off cold marble surfaces. The audience knows what size of room is being explored. The primary distance cue the brain uses is the relative amount of direct sound to reverberant sound, and in *Katie* this is very carefully designed and exploited giving a sense of environmental audio'.(9)

We can therefore extend Bazin's notion of meaning to include juxtaposition of sound with image. This is what Michel Chion later theorized in his notions of 'added value'. Indeed it is here where Chion's terminology seems to take over. He recognizes (taking note here of Pierre Schaeffer's work) that sound, being abstract and ambiguous cannot be truly

pinned down or defined in terms of a concrete objective reality. Meaning is in flux, until sounds are ascribed a 'context' of audition, in this case, with a particular montage of images.

By 'added value' Chion posits:

"the expressive value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression 'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself"
(10)

Kane's use of reverberant sound and acoustic quality of the recorded sounds adds a great deal of narrative information to the image. In much the same way that expressionistic visual devices encourage us to read the image in a particular way, we are encouraged to experience the sonic environment of Kane. This use of sound as an expressionistic device in Kane was unprecedented in cinema up to that point, possibly due to limitations in technology but more than likely due to the fact that cinema was still being thought of as a purely visual medium and it took someone from a radio background to fully exploit what the cinema and sound were truly capable of.

notes

- (1) Chion, Michel. 'Audio Vision: sound on screen' p.71. Trans Claudia Gorbman. Columbia 1994.
- (2) Altman, Rick. 'Deep focus sound: Citizen Kane and the radio aesthetic'
- (3) This was more than likely the hidden source microphones, and as they would be pointing downwards, would only register the acoustic space below them, and not the space above the gauze.
- (4) Chion, Michel. 'Audio Vision: sound on screen' p. 150. Trans Claudia Gorbman. Columbia 1994.
- (5) Chion, Michel. 'Audio Vision: sound on screen' p.85. Trans Claudia Gorbman. Columbia 1994.
- (6) Thomas, David. Rosebud'
- (7) Bazin, Andre 'Quest-ce que le cinema' vol.1. 1958 p.132 from 'The Cinema Book' Ed. Pam Cook. BFI 1994
- (8) Soviet montage, a technique of juxtaposing various shots in order to create a specific meaning. Eisenstein wrote extensively on this, a useful study of this is Petric, Vlada 'Constructivism in Film'.
- (9) Rossum, Dave 'Environmental Audio' e-mu systems Inc I Creative Technology Ltd. The term environmental audio is used here to describe the direct to reverberant sound ratio of a particular audio-environment such as a cave or a padded cell. The essay was taken from the internet, web-address no longer known.
- (10) Chion, Michel. 'Audio Vision: sound on screen' p.5. Trans Claudia Gorbman. Columbia 1994.