creative workshops

S O U N D   A N D   V I S I O N

Tom Barrance

ABSTRACT

This session looked at practical ways of using image and sound together in children's filmmaking: starting with the image, starting with the sound, and developing image and sound together.

THE TROUBLE WITH SOUND

Getting the sound right can make a huge difference to the quality of students' filmmaking. I've seen films that have been transformed when the students making them have added the right kind of music in exactly the right place to enhance and explain the story. But as a judge on a schools video competition I've also sat through dozens of student films where the sound has been badly recorded, poorly mixed or just added as an afterthought.

There are several reasons for the poor sound in many of these films. Often, students have no understanding of the importance of sound in film and the different ways in which it can engage the audience, and explain the story. But they also lack the practical skills and equipment to do sound well. Recording good live sound on location is difficult, particularly as most low-end digital video cameras don't have microphone sockets so you are limited to using the built-in microphone.

I think it's important to address both the conceptual and practical problems. So, even though my session was a creative one, I started by looking at ways of developing students' understanding of the part sound plays in films.

HOW SOUND SUPPORTS MEANING

I set the scene by showing a couple of film extracts I used in my critical session at CP3 2006.

If you're trying to explain what the 'rules' of filmmaking are, it's often useful to show somebody breaking them. Jean-Luc Godard seemed to be a recurring theme at this year's conference, and I started by showing a sequence from his film Bande à Part. In this case, Godard breaks the rules by turning off all the sound – including the atmospheric or wild track – when the characters decided to have a minute of silence. The second example I showed, from the same film, also broke the rules of movie sound but in a different way. The three characters are in a cafe dancing to the jukebox and clicking their fingers. The music they are supposed to be dancing to drops out and we just hear their fingers clicking, then a voiceover describes each character's feelings. As in the first clip, our expectation that sound will be depicted 'realistically' is disrupted. The next example I showed is from a classic adaptation: David Lean's 1948 version of Great Expectations. I often use the opening scene from this film to help children understand the importance of sound. First, we listened to the sound without the picture and without my telling the group what the film was: I asked them to list the sounds they could hear, and then to work out what those sounds told us about the picture and the story.

The sounds in the early part of the scene include running feet, wind and seabirds; the second part includes louder wind, creaking and crackling branches, a heavy footstep, a clinking chain, and an owl hooting. All of these sounds are 'diegetic' – in other words, they are part of the film story space and we assume that the characters in the film would be able to hear them.

These sounds enabled the participants to work out that the first half of the scene is bleak, near the sea, and includes a single character; while in the second half it's dark, the character is scared, there is another character, and something unpleasant is about to happen.

Once we'd watched the scene I played the first shot – of Pip running along the shoreline past a row of gibbets – but with a different, music soundtrack that completely changed the original meaning. From being sinister and bleak the mood was transformed to happy and nostalgic: even though the gibbets are still there, the music persuades us to ignore them.

Finally, we watched Tracy Spottiswoode's short film Ding Dong, without and then with the soundtrack, and looked at how the unconventional sound design enhanced its meaning. This film is unusual in that it makes effective use of 'cartooning' or 'Mickey Mousing', where musical 'hits' match the action exactly: something which is normally

avoided in serious films. It also uses sound effects to emphasise the jokey editing, which includes whip pans, reverse motion, freeze frame and repeated actions. Unsurprisingly, Tracy Spottiswoode is an animator and this was her first live action film.

My sessions on sound and image looked at ways in which sound and picture work together in film. The emphasis was on making sound manageable.

If, like me, you've had to shortlist films for a student video competition, you'll be painfully aware that bad sound is one of the major shortcomings of student filmmaking. There are several reasons for this, both practical and conceptual. Students often don't understand or appreciate the role of sound in film, and they also don't have the practical skills and the equipment needed for sound recording.

Recording live sound on location is difficult to do well. My answer to this, for a lot of student filmmaking (we work with children from ages 7 upwards) is to forget about using live sound and to make the soundtracks in the classroom on the computer. This is actually how a lot of what you see on TV is actually made: many advertisements don't use any live sound at all, and what appears to be live sound is added by a 'Foley artist'.

BUILDING A SOUNDTRACK STARTING WITH FILM & ADDING SOUND

The purpose of this session was to explore different ways of relating image to sound. The practical part of my session started by looking at how you can plan a film soundtrack. For this, I used a short suspense sequence from an S4C historical drama series (Dihirod Dyfed/Villains of Dyfed). A woman is walking along a country lane. She starts off smiling and relaxed; gradually she gets the feeling that she is being watched, and at the end she turns and is shocked to see the man who was following her.

We played the film without the sound, using a 'cue sheet' to plan the soundtrack. Normally a director would sit down with the film composer to do this, working out what mood and information the soundtrack should be trying to convey at each point in the film, and where characters' moods or feelings change. It's important to work out the moods and information first rather than going straight to planning the music, which is the next step.

The first group did this in pairs, while for the second group we did it as a whole-class activity, and then we watched the scene with its original soundtrack to see how closely it conformed to what we had planned. We planned to try to use this activity with a scene from a film adaptation to see if it could encourage a closer reading and a greater understanding of the original text.

Apple's GarageBand music-making software – part of the iLife suite – allows you to compose movie scores: you can add your movie as a video track and preview it in a window, while building up a soundtrack using music loops, sound effects and even real instruments. Final Cut Express and Pro come with a more sophisticated soundtrack editor (Soundtrack or Soundtrack Pro – the PC equivalent is Adobe Audition).

EDITING TO MUSIC, BUILDING A SOUNDTRACK, THEN ADDING IMAGES

You can also use the soundtrack as the starting point and fit your images to it. This is the way of working we have adopted for a lot of our school filmmaking projects.

One recent project – filmschool – has involved a lot of short filmmaking activities in primary schools. We worked with classes of up to thirty children in groups of four to six pupils. Each group had a few days to make a film using a Mac, a camcorder and a tripod. As the project went on we rapidly learnt that trying to emulate TV or film drama – with sound recorded live, and children acting out dialogue – wasn't an appropriate way of working. It requires a high standard of acting with a lot of rehearsal, multiple takes, the use of a separate boom mic (which sometimes appears in shot), following conventions such as the 180-degree rule, and precise editing. The results were often static and stilted, and even with very short scenes the children needed a lot of adult support and guidance to achieve an acceptable technical standard.

So we looked for a way of working that would provide more scope for children's creativity and imagination, and would allow them to produce work of a good technical standard without constant adult intervention. The solution: forget about using live sound and build the soundtrack on the computer. Some feature films are made like this: the original version of El Mariachi was shot completely silent and the sound added afterwards. (Lip sync, however, is also beyond young children: if you need a model to show them, a television advertisement with a voiceover and music is a better example.)

You can use an entry-level editing programme like iMovie HD to build a soundtrack – including voiceover, music and effects – or you can import a soundtrack that you have created in a standalone audio application like GarageBand. For the voiceover, it's best to use an external microphone such as the Samson C01U USB microphone.

You can then place iMovie HD markers on the timeline to indicate where the shots should change. Once you've inserted the markers, you can trim the beginning of each clip, drag it to the timeline, and then drag the end of the clip to line up with the appropriate marker. This approach can work equally well with fictional genres, poetry and factual films such as documentaries.

You can also edit to the rhythm of music, using a keyboard combination to tap in markers to the rhythm of the music. If the music's rhythmic, the best place to insert the markers is the first beat of each bar: easy with funk, harder with some other musical genres. (This is much easier if the group contains a musician or dancer!)

POEM FILMS

A couple of years ago we ran a series of short iMovie editing workshops for Years 5 and 6 where we gave each group a soundtrack (a recording of the poem Traeth y Pigyn, a poem about an imaginary beach) together with a bank of clips of beach scenes, taken from Marc Evans' film Dal:Yma/Nawr (Still:Here/Now). We gave the children a printout of the poem and they worked very successfully in groups to fit the video clips to the relevant lines using iMovie HD.

This is rather a literal way of working, though, and the best film poems get away from simply illustrating the poem and move into metaphor, allusion and personification. Several of our recent filmschool projects have been based on riddle poems. We asked children to take a thing or place in the local area and to describe it in terms of metaphor. They then write the poem in the first person, record it as a soundtrack, and then film images that explain the metaphors. We've also had children writing narrative soundtracks that describe events from the point of view of different inanimate objects (such as the pen that wrote graffiti on the wall, the wall itself, the broken window, and so on).

The final practical activity in the session was based on these ideas. Participants worked in pairs. They were provided with a bank of high-resolution still photographs of beaches, rocks and water. Their task was to select a number of still images and compose a 60-second personification riddle poem based on metaphors (so a crack in a rock becomes a wrinkle, for example). Once each group had written their poem they then recorded it as a voiceover. The next step was to add markers, fit the still images to it, and then use the 'Ken Burns effect' to apply pan and zoom effects. Finally, we screened the finished film poems to the whole group.

Tom Barrance is Director of Media Education Wales, www.mediaedwales.org.uk, a Cardiff-based non-profit organisation which supports media and moving image education around Wales, the UK and beyond. His particular interest is in teaching children about film language and ensuring that they use it to inform their own filmmaking. He wrote the CD-ROM Making movies make sense: understanding and using film language (highly commended in the BETT Awards 2006) and is an Apple Distinguished Educator. He has been involved in a number of practical projects on moving image and digital video in the classroom and beyond including Dal:Yma/Nawr, a series of Primary workshops on editing film to illustrate poems. He has also been involved in research including BECTA's DV Pilot project.