

The Docu Doctor's Clinic

By Story Consultant Fernanda Rossi
The Documentary Doctor
www.documentarydoctor.com



photo by
Tania Retchisky

Sounding the Board

(Reading time: 5:22 minutes – 766 words)

January 2010

Can sound shape a film? Does it affect structure? Sound issues rarely come up in conversation in a consultation unless it's in the form of a disclaimer, such as “We haven't mixed the film yet,” or “There is that wind noise but the sound designer said he can tone it down.”

I was pleasantly surprised when one person opened my eyes, or more precisely my ears, to how sound can shape a story. A couple of years ago I was at the New York premiere of *Billy, The Kid*, by Jennifer Venditti, with whom I collaborated. Sitting right behind me was the sound designer, Damian Volpe. We were chatting away when he pointed out that because only the main character, Billy, was “miked” and everybody else was picked up with a boom, Billy was the “sound” protagonist, which was very much in tune with the point of view of the film: the convoluted and isolated world of an outcast teenager with an undefined behavioral condition—or was it just being a teenager?

Since then I have always pondered how much sound can shape or focus a story or storyline. And the more I thought about it during consultations, the more I was convinced that the answer is: much more than we actually take advantage of.

Sound design is a very subtle and flexible tool in filmmaking. According to Wikipedia, “Sound design and editing are the manipulation of audio elements to achieve a desired effect.” Not surprisingly, the entry is tagged as incomplete and unbalanced. I say not surprisingly, because sound design is a neglected art. Few budget for it in spite of its importance.

That desired effect that a filmmaker *should* achieve is the creation of a coherent and consistent sound world. In *My Perestroika*, sound designers Barbara Park and Peter Levin, from Splash Studios, enhanced and unified newsreels and archival footage with library sounds, location recordings, and foley. The most purist vérité filmmakers would cringe, but, eventually, even they would have to weigh whether the gaps in sound make the “real world” the filmmaker is trying to capture more unreal.

Just as the Director of Photography/Cameraperson creates a consistent color palette during color correction in post, in order to keep the film’s visuals from jumping all over the place, the Sound Designer should create a smooth audio track, allowing the audience sink into the story without being distracted by technical inconsistencies—unless that’s the desired effect, to remind the audience that this is a mediated experience.

These days the eye is much more forgiving to visual inconsistencies than the ear is to sonic ones. Audiences don’t notice or are not bothered by a shaky camera or a burn-out shot as long as the audio keeps them engaged. On the other hand, most people can’t tell that it was the permanent audio jumps and the discontinuities in background noise, to name two common audio oversights, that took them *out of the story*. Instead, they might attempt to attribute their disengagement to something else, to a scene or character that was not interesting.

The same goes for me in a session. Is the apparent structural problem just a sound imperfection that will be resolved? Or am I relying too much on what the sound will do? Here are some sound questions with an ear to shaping the story: Who in the cast are you going to mike, and how? Everybody with portables? Expensive but doable. Just main characters? Boom everybody? This can be disruptive: your characters might be self-conscious with a massive dragonfly hovering over their heads. Do you have room-tone? How about getting background sound in a separate channel so it doesn’t sound like the character is talking in a fish tank?

Once in post, the most common issues to consider are the following: is everybody audible? Are there sounds of cars or jackhammers or wind that need to be taken out? If it is impossible to remove them, can they be “completed,” continued till the end of the shot, so as to not disrupt the background? Can you add other sounds to complement the scene? Maybe not, because you’re a vérité purist; or maybe you can have a lot of foreign sounds, because you’re an experimental documentarian. And then there are the narration and music questions to consider, which are a whole other discussion on their own.

All stories get enriched by good sound design and sound designers can work magic, but you have to give them the rabbit and the hat first.

Conclusion: In a story noise becomes sound when we give it meaning.

Doctor’s Credentials: Internationally renowned speaker, author and story consultant **Fernanda Rossi** has doctored over 300 documentaries, scripts, and fundraising trailers including two films nominated for an Oscar. In addition to private consultations, lectures, and seminars worldwide, she has served as festival juror and grant panelist. Ms. Rossi shares her knowledge of story structure and the creative process in columns and articles in trade publications. She is also the author of **Trailer Mechanics: A Guide to Making your Documentary Fundraising Trailer**.

Sounding the Board Case Study: Musings about Sound

Article by Fernanda Rossi • edited by Marcia Scott • photo by Tania Retchisky
published by Documentary Educational Resources, www.der.org • January 2010