EXPERIMENTING WITH AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVE FORMS IN STILL-IMAGE FILM

DURAĞAN GÖRÜNTÜ FİLMDE İŞİTSEL GÖRSEL ANLATIM FORMLARIYLA DENEYLER

Nick POULAKIS*

Zoi TZAMTZI**

This paper focuses on an educational project for high school students that took place during the 2022 in Greece. This workshop sought to approach the pivotal role of sound in still-image films – an innovative style of visual storytelling that merges static (instead of moving) pictures with audio elements. By unveiling the transformative power of soundscapes together with photographic narratives, this experimental procedure highlighted the close relationship between cinematic sounds and images. At the beginning, the students were initiated into the theoretical principles of cinema as an audiovisual medium and were shown examples from earlier still-image films, namely Agnes Varda's Salut les Cubains! (1962) and Chris Marker's La Jetée (1962). Thereupon, they were asked to observe and record a number of sounds and images inside and outside their school using only their mobile phones. During an interactive and collective editing process, following their audio recordings as the main pathway, they improvised on image composition and created their own audiovisual narrative.

In particular, this study investigates the synergy between critically curated visuals and meticulously crafted soundtracks in order to demonstrate how sound can deepen realistic comprehension, sensorial perception, and emotional engagement in diverse cinematic forms. Generally, sound has been treated as a subordinate filmic aspect (Beck, 2010). Driven by contemporary audiovisual literacy this project emphasizes the dialogue between sound and image in an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the pedagogical potential of this interconnection, enabling educators to harness the powerful medium of still-image film.
.

Still-image films generally refer to slideshows or sequences of motionless images presented in cinematic or storytelling format. These types of films are formed from photographs or illustrations to convey a narrative and are often accompanied by music, voiceovers, other sounds or text to provide contextualized feature elements.

*Laboratory Staff, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), nick.poulakis@music.uoa.gr.
**PhD Candidate, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), zoitzamtzi@gmail.com.

They can be used for various purposes, such as for documentation, educational presentations, or artistic expression. Creating a still-image film involves arranging and sequencing the images effectively to engage the audience and convey a specific message or story (Taylor, 2014). Producing a still-image film as an educational class-work can be a powerful means for students to engage with audiovisual narrative structures. In our case, the project was implemented at a public high school in Amaliada, a small town in the Greek province of the Peloponnese. The group of participants consisted of eleven students and two teachers who helped us organize and carry out this workshop. The title of the project was "From sound… to cinema" and was included in the 2022 Olympia International Film Festival for Children and Young People, a long-standing festival that aims at the promotion and development of cinema for children and young people as well as the evolution of cinema as a learning tool and media literacy[***].

These pedagogical aspects could be stressed by making a still-image film – a process which offers numerous benefits for students, both in terms of their personal and their educational development. Producing a still-image film is quite advantageous as it could provide an outlet for creative expression, allowing students to convey their opinions, emotions, and perspectives through an audiovisual scenario, thus promoting their innovative ideas and expressions. It also encourages critical thinking as students need to plan the storyline, sequence the images, and consider how to effectively transfer their message to the audience. Since digital media have become increasingly crucial in contemporary milieu across various platforms and industries, learning how to make a still-image film could enhance students' audiovisual literacy, helping them understand how images and sounds – as well as their interaction – can convey complex ideas and emotions, and how their arrangement impacts fantasy and storytelling. Through this interactive process, students acquire technical skills related to photography, image compilation, and audio editing, as they learn how to use various software tools and how to structure a narrative, create compelling visuals and soundscapes, and evoke audience reactions through their work. These theoretical and practical skills enhance media literacy by helping students understand by what means still images – when sequenced effectively – can formulate a powerful and meaningful content for the audience and in what way can sounds (human speech, music or effects) affect the audiovisual result (Soto-Sanfiel, Villegas-Simón and Angulo-Brunet, 2018).

Just as in common films, producing a still-image film could foster collaboration and communication among students. They often need to work in teams to plan, capture, and edit the still images and sounds. It also boosts self-confidence and demonstration skills, as students may need to present their films to peers, teachers, or a larger audience, thereby improving their public exposition abilities. Furthermore, it encourages collective awareness and empathy as students often choose to explore significant social, cultural, or political issues through their audiovisual narratives, while promoting responsible digital citizenship through learning to respect copyright, using appropriate content, and sharing their artwork in a conscientious and ethical way (Cannon and Potter, 2019).

***For more information, please refer to the festival's web portal (https://olympiafestival.gr).

The workshop was organized based on dynamic interaction with the students, following a rather demanding yet functional timetable. On the first day, we conducted an interactive session in school to establish the theoretical framework of still-image film production by using various examples for basic concepts. Initially, we delved into discussions about sound, music, cinema, and documentary films. We tasked the students with providing their ultimate understanding of these terms based on the given case studies. Moreover, the meaning of the word "audiovisual" was discussed together with whether sound tends to be disregarded in conversations about media that encompass both aural and optical stimuli. We briefly touched upon the history of sound in cinema, placing specific emphasis on documentaries and – where time allowed – showcasing characteristic paradigms.

Special emphasis was given to the concept of "soundscape" as used within anthropological discourse. In sound anthropology and ethnomusicology, the term refers to the sonic environment or auditory landscape of a particular place, including both natural and human-made sounds. It encompasses the mixture of sounds that contribute to the overall auditory sensorial experience within a specific cultural or geographical context. Scientists study soundscapes to understand how sound reflects specific place and time, how it is produced, perceived, and understood within a specific cultural setting, and how it influences human behavior, communication, as well as the overall perception of the environment (Feld and Brenneis, 2004).

In this context, incorporating soundscapes in still-image films can significantly enhance the overall viewing experience and add insights to the storytelling. Ambient sounds, voiceover narration, effects, music, dialogues, and moments of silence, when strategically employed in these films, could create a multisensory experience that enriches the visual narrative and engages the audience on a deeper level. In addition, a competent editing that pays attention to sound quality, balance, and transitional sounds or musical cues, ensures that the audio elements of still-image film are evenly mixed together and synchronized with the photos, offering smooth shifts between different segments or themes and establishing a cohesive and fluid viewing experience.

Moving on to the next section of the workshop, we introduced the concept of still-image film to the students, explaining its creation process and focusing on two fundamental films of this genre, one being a fiction and the other a documentary production. The first one was La Jetée, a 1962 film directed by Chris Marker, which was associated with the French New Wave artistic film movement. The 28-minutes duration black-and-white film is constructed primarily from still photographs, playing out as a photomontage of varying rhythm. The film has minimal dialogue, it includes just one short film shot, and its story is conveyed through a voice-over narrator. Given that the film unfolds as an assemblage of images, the sole consistent component remains its aural milieu, which takes the form of vocal commentary, orchestral score, and sound effects. The rhythmic patterns of the soundtrack serve as a structural element that contributes to the illusion of motion during the passage of filmic time (Bellour, 1990).

The second one was Agnès Varda's 1963 film Salut les Cubains. During her visit to the island, Varda decided to explore the post-revolution Cuban culture and society. As the film institute of Cuba did not grant her permission to shoot a film, Varda returned home with thousands of pictures she took while on vacation and, then, she decided to make a still-image film with these photos. Salut les Cubains surpasses a conventional slideshow documentary as it transforms the visual excursion into a dynamic and playful experience, an experimental exploration and innovative combination of film, music, photography, and documentation. It is a delightful black-and-white composition where the editing resembles a choreography, intermingling photos with Cuban music rhythms (Murray, 2022). Both Marker and Varda utilize film-photo essays to audiovisually explore and inquire into the realms of film, photography, and sound, contemplating aspects of stillness and motion. They view film and photography not as opposing mediums but as complementary ones, while regarding stillness and motion as nuanced forms of expression rather than diametrically opposed concepts. After screening the respective films, we engaged in debates about their captivating integration of moving and still images with sounds to convey poetic visual and sonic narratives.

During the third section of the workshop, we outlined our plan of activities and clarified the technical aspects of the project. We suggested a subject for the children to investigate – this was their school environment at different times of a day. Students were divided into subgroups of two individuals, with each team undertaking the recording of two audio and visual tasks. After a collective discussion, students suggested a series of sound and photo recordings that capture aural and optical instances of calmness and motion throughout the school's general environment. They proposed possible sounds for recording, such as dialogues from outside classrooms, dripping water from taps, distant sounds from a music lesson, specific sounds from the school (e.g., a bird, a particular noise, a door opening or closing), children doing exercises or playing sports (e.g., basketball bouncing, voices in the backyard), sounds from the streets outside the school, rain (if raining), sounds and voices from the teachers' or the Principal's office, sounds of students exiting classrooms, bell ringing, footsteps, breathing from running, sounds of schoolbag wheels, whistles, moving chairs making noise, children clapping and yielding, etc. They also suggested the corresponding visual analogues, such as an empty or full school playground, half-closed or open doors, corridors and stairs, taps, bells, children taking part in physical activities, classrooms (with or without children and teachers), rain in the yard (if raining), school offices, children's faces or backs, students ascending or descending the stairs, balls, bags, fences, children holding hands or playing games in the yard, someone whistling, schoolyard from inside a classroom, etc. We subsequently distributed roles between the participants and assigned the corresponding responsibilities. Students used their mobile phones, a tripod, and a digital recorder to facilitate the documentation of their assigned tasks. Subsequently, we established a message group to promptly share the material collected during that day. Later in the afternoon, everything was set to proceed with image and sound editing.

Following the distribution and collection of all the material from the students, we started discussing the editing process of the film. We introduced them to a free software for editing video and audio and began a kind of "collective editing" for our film through a movie projector[****]. After providing an explanation of the fundamental tools and the required software, students started to understand how to structure both efficiently and artistically the "audiovisual body" of their film. While there was often a struggle to prioritize images for the subsequent editing steps, the audio-based storyline reminded them that the audio recordings were crucial elements for progressing the process.

Image 1. The Bell

The film's sonic narration was not solely centered on a series of acoustic events during school-time but also focused on the rhythm and harmony of the overall audiovisual outcome. Students agreed that a gradual increase in the volume of the audio channel would correspond with the daily soundscape at school, with the ringing of the bell to commence lessons and break time serving as reference points (see Image 1). The sonic intensity of this cyclical event was linked with the corresponding images, which appeared to accelerate towards the end of the film. Students believed that this playful manipulation of rhythm and volume would impart a sense of moving images or, better yet, a feeling of "being there" for the viewers/listeners. Moreover, in order to mitigate the technical discrepancies in image quality due to the use of different mobile phones, we made the collective decision to convert all the pictures to black and white.

[****]For the concept of "collective editing", see Mohn, Hare, Vogelpohl and Wiesemann, 2019.

The absence of color in our film was also a deliberate choice to eliminate redundant details and information, thus emphasizing specific features such as movement and light contrast. The students titled the film Αν... ησυχία (If... Silence).*****

Image 2. Screening The Film

The final segment of the workshop involved the screening of the film in a cinema hall in Pyrgos at the 2022 Olympia International Film Festival for Children and Young People. This was a unique experience for students who were able to attend the screening, as they witnessed the transformation of an idea into an audiovisual product and its eventual presentation in the cinema hall (see Image 2). Since a film could serve not only as an audiovisual language for self-expression but also as a significant experiential and multisensorial means, a film festival provides a tremendous opportunity for a sense of "collective watching", which initiates discussions on how we perceive and express our world.******

*****The film is available online on the YouTube platform (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JINeK8u9vOQ).
******For a presentation of the project in Greek, see https://olympiafestival.gr/workshops/sound-narration.

Bibliography

Beck, J. (2011). "The Evolution of Sound in Cinema". In W. H. Guynn (ed.). The Routledge Companion to Film History (pp. 64-76). Routledge.

Bellour, R. (1990). "The Film Stilled". Camera Obscura, 8 (3): 98-124.

Cannon, M. and Potter, J. (2019). "Pedagogies of Production: Reimagining Literacies for the Digital Age". In C. Hermansson and J. Zepernick (eds.). The Palgrave Handbook of Children's Film and Television (pp. 435-450). Palgrave Macmillan.

Feld, S. and Brenneis, D. (2004). "Doing Anthropology in Sound". American Ethnologist, 31 (4): 461-474.

Mohn, B. E., Hare, P., Vogelpohl, A. and Wiesemann, J. (2019). "Cooperation and Difference: Camera Ethnography in the Research Project Early Childhood and Smartphone". Media in Action: Interdisciplinary Journal on Cooperative Media, 1: 81-104.

Murray, B. (2022). "Historicity and Photography in Salut Les Cubains". Short Film Studies, 12 (1): 47-54.

Soto-Sanfiel, M. T., Villegas-Simón, I. and Angulo-Brunet, A. (2018). "Film Literacy in Secondary Schools across Europe: A Comparison of Five Countries' Responses to an Educational Project on Cinema". International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics, 14 (2): 187-213.

Taylor, A. (2014). "Writing with Images: The Film-Photo-Essay, the Left Bank Group and the Pensive Moment". Journal of Screenwriting, 5 (1): 59-84.