

Darkness

a short movie by Yann Seznec

The initial idea for “Darkness” came to me when I started thinking about how different creatures (and people) perceive frequencies. As everyone knows, there is a vast range of frequencies that dogs can hear or bees can see, for example, that humans are not able discern. In a sense, it seems perfectly arbitrary that we hear certain wavelengths and see others, and use still others to transmit radio broadcasts.

What would it be like to visit a place where the inhabitants have a different set of perceptions? Or, on the other hand, what if someone came to visit us, only to discover that the frequencies he is used to hearing are being used as radio transmissions? It would be a disturbing and aggressive world, nearly impossible to live on.

“Darkness”, then, was born out of an imagined scenario where the narrator is some sort of visitor from Earth, stuck on a planet where the noises that he hears are perceived as light by the native population. I felt that this story had lots of potential for metaphor, particularly in regards to art and creativity. I wanted to explore the ideas of perception, of how different people can see or hear the same things in completely different ways, and how an artist deals with that. Essentially, an artist has very little control over how their work is seen. This is particularly problematic with a modern digital media art form like short video, which can be distributed to millions of people online, each one of whom will watch on different computers with different monitors and speaker systems.

Another important theme is the concept of illusion, the marrying of sounds and visuals to create what Chion calls “synchresis” - when a sound occurs at the same time as an event on screen, and our minds link the two together. People in the early 20th century were often amazed at the effect created when a sound was made by a hidden Foley artist in a movie cinema - an effect that would probably strike us today as comically inept. Perhaps in a hundred years our blundering attempts at sonic realism will seem just as quaint.

My use of the Dickson Experimental Sound Film illustrated this idea. Filmed in 1895 at the Edison studios, it was the first attempt at a sound film, featuring a violinist and two dancers (and a technician who steps in at the end to check the equipment). It is a surreal piece of film that was restored in 2000 by Walter Murch:

It was very moving, when the sound finally fell into synch: the scratchiness of the image and the sound dissolved away and you felt the immediate presence of these young men playing around with a fast-emerging technology.

After writing the script and recording the narration I shot most of the footage with a small digital camera at night, getting footage of darkness mixed with jittery shots of streetlamps (and the moon). This was edited in Final Cut Express with some footage shot by my brother Cory late at night in a car (and the aforementioned Dickson film, which is available for free download at archive.org).

The editing of the film was somewhat arbitrary, the primary concerns being length and a few key moments like the light at the very end.

Once I had a final edited version of the visuals and narration I was able to concentrate on the sound design, which is of course the most important part of this movie. I wanted to create an alien atmosphere that reflected the jittery video and flickering lights, while preserving just a hint of familiarity.

I attacked this problem by recording twenty minutes of piano playing - mostly long held notes, as well as a small snippet of Bach's Prelude in Eb minor from the Well Tempered Clavier book 1. I also recorded some audio of guns firing at the Edinburgh castle with my digital camera. I recorded all of this audio into a reel-to-reel tape machine, and played it back at variable speeds into a computer. I applied various digital plugins (delays, reverbs, EQ, flanging, etc) in real time, improvising with the effects while recording it back into the tape machine. Once re-entered into the tape machine I played it back into the computer at variable speeds once again, giving me mangled and processed, yet still occasionally recognizable, versions of my original sounds.

This process gave me the perfect sonic aesthetic for my movie. Slowing and reversing the sound with the tape machine was a wonderfully effective way of smoothly manipulating the audio, and combining that with digital effects created gorgeous and disjointed textures, with occasional glimmers of the original recordings. This was particularly powerful with the Bach prelude, which became quite poignant when slightly manipulated and layered. I ended up using it as a recurring theme, to tie the sound design together as a whole.

The tape machine did introduce plenty of hiss and noise at each iteration, but I found it added a nice texture to the overall atmosphere.

After experimenting and recording 120 minutes worth of sound (from my original 20 minutes or so of recordings) I listened through and matched sounds to the movie. This proved remarkably easy, as the quality of the sound fit perfectly with the visuals. The biggest challenges were preserving the narrative and choosing when to sonify the visuals (and when to leave them alone). I had to strike a balance between ambient textures and momentary flashes of sound.

In a way, this movie is quite ironic. While the narrator speaks about a dark planet full of sound, we see flashes of disorienting light, often sonified quite dissonantly. Conceptually I wanted to hit the middle ground between the perceptions of the narrator and the perceptions of the "creatures that live here", to give the viewer a taste of both ways of interpreting the same frequencies.

Below is the script for the narration.

Darkness.

Yeah, this planet is dark.

And noisy, too. I've never really gotten over that. The dark takes a little getting used to, but the noise is something that's really hard to block out. It makes me wish I had earlids that I could close whenever I wanted and pretend I was back home. I guess that's what headphones are for, but they don't even help - there are so many frequencies that I feel more than hear. Low bass rumbles that make you queasy and high pitched tones that feel like they're burning a point of light into the roof of your mouth, through your brain and out the other side.

It makes you wish you weren't human. It makes me wish I was one of the creatures that live here that perceive those frequencies as light...for them, the constant low rumbles are varying shades of chartreuse (so I've been told), and migraine inducing squeals are a scintillating violet, and the cacophony of sound that envelopes us without end represents every shade in between.

I like to imagine that one day I'll be like bats on Earth, using the loopholes in the physics of sound to carve out a little place the world.

Back on earth, we have a strange way of naming sounds. That's a bird, that's an engine, that's a sine wave, that's a synthesizer. We use the same word to describe the object we see and the sound it makes...

It's good that it's like that. It avoids a lot of confusion. I can tell you what I think my voice sounds like, but not how you hear my voice. Or could I? Geeez that's confusing.

I read a quote once in an old magazine dedicated to silent films:

"At a London show wonderfully realistic effects are introduced. In fact, two men are behind the screen doing nothing else but produce noises corresponding with events happening on the curtain. These effects absolutely synchronise with the movements, so that it is difficult to believe that actual events are not occurring."

At first I laughed when I thought about how rough that synchronization must have been, how low grade to our modern eyes and ears. But when I got here I realized that there's always going to be someone behind the screen banging a drum or closing a door or lighting a fire. Even right now, in this little movie, all I'm doing is sitting behind the curtain desperately trying to make sense of the images flickering backwards in front of me in order to translate that into sound. It's all an illusion, isn't it? What does my voice sound like?

What I need to learn how to do, now that I'm here, is the opposite. I need to listen and create visuals from the sound...make the noises into something recognizable, like in those old movies, where the noise coming from behind the curtain made the images indiscernible from real life.

But there's no guarantee, is there...I don't know what my voice sounds like to them, what colors it generates, and I sure as hell don't know what it sounds like to you back on earth. I don't know what this little movie will look like to you, I don't know how the colors will have changed on your monitor or what the little laptop speakers you listen on will do to the sound. I guess the only solution is to work within my own little world, so that the sound and the visuals are effective within this movie, within these characters, and within this setting. I can hope that my audience will respond to that, I suppose, even if I can't guarantee that they will have the response I'm hoping for. Hearing me speak my own voice has a certain effect on me, and a certain effect on the creation of this movie, but that effect can be bastardized and convoluted and twisted in ways I can only imagine dimly, like the colors that I am told exist in this dark world.

Yeah, and it is dark, isn't it? I told you so. That sound is their projector machine turning on... The show's about to start. I'll be quiet now, let's see how it turned out.

Works Cited

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