Sound Before Picture: Towards a sound led Videographic Criticism

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Abstract

Videographic criticism has gained a significant foothold within the academic film studies community as a form of research and publication. The number of journals that now accept video essays as scholarly publications has grown over the last decade, and videographic works are now finding exhibition opportunities at film festivals and conferences, often bridging or balancing on the point between artistic and academic practice. Video essay courses and modules are also now part of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching at universities in the UK, Europe, and the United States. A growing body of critical writing and discussion has developed around the scholarly video essay, though there is a noticeable absence of discussion focused on the technical craft and skills involved in the making of videographic work, especially in relation to technical sound skills.

This thesis seeks to understand the role of aesthetic and technical sound skills in videographic criticism. Through analysis of published works, critical discussion, and practical engagement in the making of video essays, it will consider the contribution technical sound skills might make to this developing form of academic engagement. It will also seek to identify a means by which critical discussions and critical engagement with the technical aspects of videographic making, and specifically technical sound literacy, might be developed within the wider community of videographic critics.

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Author’s declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Introduction

This research is focused on the place of technical sound skills in videographic criticism. This research engages directly with the adoption of the video essay as a form of scholarly practice, both in terms of its research potential and as a form of peer-reviewed academic publishing. The aim of this thesis is to examine the development of this field of academic and creative practice in terms of its relationship with technical, craft-based skills in sound production for visual media.

Videographic Criticism

The term ‘videographic criticism’ as I am referring to it here has come to be widely used as a catch-all for video essays and other audiovisual investigations created within an academic context (see, for example, Garwood, 2016; Morton, 2017; Lee, 2017a; Keathley, Mittell, and Grant, 2019; Grizzaffi, 2020; O’Leary, 2021). More specifically, videographic criticism can be seen as a scholarly output, which might well take the form of a video essay but which adopts “a specific mode of communication,” which is considered scholarly (Kiss and van den Berg, 2016, introduction). Defining the 'scholarly’ in this regard has been a point of debate across the brief history of videographic criticism, which might trace its origins to Christian Keathley’s *Pass the Salt* (2006), which he notes in his own audio commentary on the work as “a pretty early example of an academic video essay” (2024). Keathley suggests that videographic work made within the academy might be considered to exist on a continuum between a poetic mode and an explanatory one (2011, p. 181). This has been widely adopted as a central tenet of the videographic form and as a means for scholars to calibrate the nature of their videographic outputs. Eric Faden raised the possibility of the “poetics” of this kind of practice in an early piece to consider the form published in *Mediascapes* (2008). In this article, he coined the term “media stylo” in relation to his own work and defined this as “using moving images to engage and critique themselves” (2008, p. 2). He suggested that his adoption of this form of videographic academic practice heralded this particular *Mediascapes* piece as the last essay he would ever write. Despite the distinctly playful nature of this declaration, he has in the intervening period continued to engage in his media stylo practice, with the most recent entry in his series of videographic works, entitled *Amuse-œil*, being published in the journal *[in]Transition* in 2020. The poetics at play here is one of possibilities and new beginnings that “explores and experiments” in the face of a more traditional

essayistic scholarship that “aspires to exhaustion, to be the definitive” (Faden, 2008, p. 3). Keathley’s later writing is sympathetic to this approach, though he cautions the practitioner who, in seeking to expose and engage with the poetic in their videographic work, “risks an opacity that means potentially going unrecognised as criticism” (2011, p. 183). The challenge, as Keathley sees it, is to find a happy medium, somewhere along the continuum between the two poles he defines, “borrowing the explanatory authority of one and the poetical power of the other” (2011, p. 190).

Most recently, Jason Mittell has suggested that ‘exploratory’ might be added to Keathley’s poetic-explanatory continuum, creating a triangular mapping for video essay practice (2024, p. 20). This can be seen as a reflection of Mittell’s own experimental videographic work (2021), as well as in explicit interventions by Payne (2020) and O’Leary (2021) and experimental videographic works by practitioners such as Binotto (2021) and Oyallon-Koloski (2022), with the latter working largely with musical films. This turn to an exploratory development of the form is cast very much in the spirit of the question posed by Catherine Grant, “should we embrace from the outset the idea that we are creating ontologically new scholarly forms?” (2014, p. 50). And this development is also visible in the growing number of peer-reviewed journals publishing videographic criticism (fourteen as of July 2024) and the scope of the works that they are choosing to publish.

An example of this expanding scope can be seen in *[in]Transition*, “the first peer-reviewed academic journal of videographic film and moving image studies” (2024), which features in its most recent issue (Volume 11, Issue 2) MacDowell and Hemingway’s *Autofictional Authenticity: Bo Burnham’s Inside, Netflix Comedy, and YouTube Aesthetics* (2024). In terms of style, form, and content, this video essay reflects a continued broadening of the definition of what might be considered scholarly in videographic terms. At over fifty-six-minutes, this video essay is the longest to be published in the journal and is one of only twenty-nine to last longer than twenty-minutes (out of two hundred and sixty-one published video essays to July 2024). Its engagement with and exploration of the YouTube video essay aesthetic marks an acknowledgement of the diverse forms which the video essay might adopt, even if they might not all be generated by or within the academy. It is also worth noting that this video essay is published on YouTube, whereas the majority of avowedly academic videographic works tend to be found on Vimeo (a distinction noted by Lee, 2021). Other recent publications, such as

Binotto and Kreutzer's *A Manifesto for Videographic Vulnerability* (2023) and Sekar's *Video essay, videographic criticism, polymedial essayism, and polymodal essayism* (2024) point to a burgeoning field of inquiry where the flexibility, adaptability, and potentials of the videographic form for research and publication are being explored in critical forums outside of the videographic work itself.

I suggest there is a clear through line in the scholarship, which has developed around videographic criticism seeking to clarify and expand on the potentials of the form whilst also certifying its validity as a form of academic research and output within the context of the academy. From the aforementioned Faden (2008) and Keathley (2011), through Lavik, who suggests "We can all agree that the video essay would benefit both from more documentary and from more avant-garde practices" (2012, para. 12), and on to Grant (2014) and Garwood (2016), who interrogates the place of voiceover in videographic criticism, the focus is very much on the form as a developing method of research and publication and the shape which this development might take. More recent interventions by Mittell (2021) and O'Leary (2021) have taken videographic criticism in a more exploratory direction, much in sympathy with Lavik's suggestion about avant-garde practices. And with the inevitable broadening of the base of what might be considered 'videographic', given the resistance in all of this scholarship to limit or categorise, there are newer works like Binotto and Kreutzer's manifesto (2023) and Sekar's conception of "polymedial essayism" (2024), which seek to encourage a broader adoption of the video essay as scholarly practice, just as they also embrace the idea that the conception of the videographic continues to expand.

Though cognisant of the value of these discussions (and indeed, having taken part in them myself), they very rarely, if ever, engage with the technical aspects and technical skills required to make videographic work. By technical skills, I mean those required to work with digitised sounds and images within the variety of software applications that might be used to create videographic works. I believe this gap, or oversight perhaps, in the literature is reflective of the point where videographic criticism finds itself. In 2017, the practice as research journal *Screenworks* published the first piece it categorised as a video essay (Nevill), and in 2024, *[in]Transition* celebrated ten years since its inception as the first peer-reviewed journal for videographic criticism. These and other peer-reviewed journals have now been established long enough to have broadly defined the formal expectations for a published

piece of videographic criticism. As broad as these expectations might be, accepting an ever-expanding variety of formal styles, lengths, and methodological approaches, they have also, perhaps unconsciously, set (or failed to set) technical standards or expectations for the videographic works being submitted, which I suggest has led to a mitigation of the value that technical skills might contribute to the making of videographic work. There is no significant space within the existing scholarship on the videographic form for questions or discussion about the technical qualities of the work, or indeed the development of technical skills as a fundamental part of the making process.

I suggest then that there is a gap evident in the development of videographic practice where no real emphasis has been placed on the value of these technical skills, and in particular, on the technical manipulation of sound in making videographic work. In seeking to understand why this might be the case, this research will consider the potential value that might be derived from a more technically literate, and specifically sound literate, videographic practice. The sound literacy I suggest here encompasses an understanding of fundamental principles of sound theory and a subsequent awareness of how this knowledge can be used to make positive, practical interventions in the creative use of sound in videographic practice. These interventions rely on a complementary technical familiarity with the software applications being used, in this case most likely the video editing software. For the most part, this literacy, both in terms of sound theory and technical application, is transferable across the variety of video editing software that might be used in videographic work, and so it can be broadly applied regardless of the individual practitioners working preferences. The suggestion is that, as with any artistic endeavour, the more adept a practitioner is at the technical aspects of their work, the less these technical elements get in the way, and the more likely the practitioner is to be able to use them to their advantage.

For my own part, I have a professional background in sound engineering, where I worked for almost ten years in commercial music and film sound production before turning to a career in academia. My masters is in sound design, and the majority of my academic research and practice, including the initial plans for my PhD research, were focused on film sound. When the opportunity arose to explore videographic criticism, I saw this as a chance to avoid some of the distinct frustrations encountered by researchers in sound practice, who must find ways to transcribe the complex, temporal nature of sound into words before they can then engage

in any sort of critical or analytical discussion about it. As such, the majority of my videographic practice to date has focused on film sound. In the context of this research and my thesis, my professional background also put me in a position where I felt equipped to not only create sonically sophisticated videographic works but also to subsequently investigate the implementation of technical sound skills and their contribution to the nature of the videographic work in the video essays of other videographic critics.

With these points in mind, I have defined the following research questions for this thesis:

What factors have contributed to the development of a videographic community of practice where technical sound skills are mitigated in the critical discourse?

What interventions might be made to move towards a more technically sound literate videographic criticism?

This thesis is split into three chapters that contextualise and reflect on the three phases of practice I have undertaken towards answering these questions. In terms of the videographic elements of this thesis, I am keenly aware that it is not sufficient for my practice to just engage with the video essay form as it currently exists, but rather, in the true spirit of the practice-based PhD, my research output should seek to explore and expand the form of practice, just as it strives for the dissemination of new knowledge. As noted by Anderson and Tobin in relation to a student undertaking a practice-based PhD in screenwriting “At the end of her PhD, my student should have created not only a screenplay that is a contribution to the art of screenwriting, but have contributed to the understanding of what the practice of screenwriting actually is” (2012, p. 957). As such, there is an onus on me to ensure that my practice contributes “to the understanding of what the practice actually is or is becoming” (Anderson and Tobin, 2012, p. 957), in this case, the scholarly video essay, and more specifically, how technical sound skills might be employed in the making of these works to the benefit of the videographic community as a whole. As such, certain of my practical investigations are informed by an experimental engagement with the video essay form. I use the term ‘experimental’ here in the context of Jason Mittell’s suggestion that “it is in such processes where methodologies are used and developed” (2019, p. 228). Part of the function of this written component of the PhD will be to offer a reflection on the success, or

otherwise, of these investigations in working towards a sound led videographic criticism and also noting any impact they might have on the broader community of videographic critics.

This written thesis follows the chronological structure of my practical investigations and is split into three chapters. Chapter One reflects on my first engagement with videographic criticism and comprises three published video essays: *Pan Scan Venkman* published in *[in]Transition* (2019c), *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* published in *NECSUS* (2020), and *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* published in *Screenworks* (2021). At the behest of the publishing journals, each of these video essays is accompanied by a written creator's statement, and these statements are included here as appendices for reference (see Appendix I for links to the published versions of these works, and the written statements can be found at Appendices II, III, and IV, respectively). The written chapter accompanying this phase of the research situates these works within the larger corpus of scholarly videographic criticism, specifically that which is concerned with sound, where I first question the use of technical sound skills in the making of video essays. With sound-specific skills in mind, I reflect on several other works of videographic criticism made by scholars interested in sound and music, where I see some synergy between an interest in the sonic aspects of moving image studies and the use of, or indeed the pursuit of, more developed technical sound skills. This phase of my investigation provides me with a platform both in terms of my theoretical and practical understanding of videographic criticism to develop a specific line of investigation to be picked up in phase two of my research.

Chapter Two reflects on phase two of the investigations and takes on the questions raised by the research and practice undertaken in phase one, seeking to explore the parameters of sound literacy within videographic criticism, or, as Liz Greene's writing in *NECSUS* noted, the "sonic potential of the audiovisual essay" (2020a, p. 436). The practical investigations that comprise this phase of the research go in search of this potential through an engagement with the exploratory elements of videographic practice, which Mittell has alluded to recently (2024, p. 20). This exploratory work is crucial to a better understanding of some of the very real benefits that a sound-literate videographic scholar might take advantage of in their making, and not just in terms of works that focus on sound or music, but I argue in this chapter that these skills might be deemed crucial to the future focused videographic scholar. This phase of the project is informed by a sustained engagement with deformative

videographic criticism (an area of practice that embraces experimentation and play whilst being somewhat less concerned with knowledge creation) via a series of experimental outputs captured in a research blog (*Deformative Sound Lab*) and an active engagement with practitioners in the videographic community who have championed the potential of deformative practice (see Ferguson, (2015); Mittell, (2019 & 2021); O'Leary, (2021). A direct line is drawn between this experimental engagement and the research portfolio *Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth*, accepted for publication in Screenworks in 2024. This portfolio of work revisits the research question I explored in my previous work *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), employing a different formal method and finding a new angle on that question in the soundscape research of Michael Southworth (1967). The chapter that accompanies phase two of my practice in this thesis reflects on the process of arriving at these sound-led video essay forms, focusing on the experimental aspects of the research, namely the blog, which birthed the specific processes employed, and how this experimental work demonstrates the value of sound literacy in the making of videographic work. This chapter also speculates on a means by which this literacy might be explored in a collaborative sense within the wider community of videographic critics.

Chapter Three of this thesis discusses the project *Super Volume*, a multi-modal videographic exploration of the specific relationship between the on-screen action of volume manipulation and the reciprocal manipulation that this might precipitate during the post-production sound mixing process, namely the turning up (or turning down) of volume. The *Super Volume* project was designed as a participatory experiment to engage directly with other videographic scholars and to open a dialogue with them about sound and specifically about the manipulation of volume, which forms a fundamental part of almost all videographic works that feature more than one audio track. This chapter of the thesis details the design and running of the *Super Volume* experiment and reflects on the outputs that it has generated to date, including the videographic work *A Tactile Art* (2023). The reflection on this project suggests a collaborative way forward in the pursuit of greater sound literacy within the videographic community.

This thesis is informed by seven longer-form videographic works and three short videographic experiments, which I am submitting here as my practical research investigations. These works are a selection from a larger corpus of videographic essays and experiments that I have

undertaken as part of this research, and while I have not chosen to reflect on all these works here, they have all contributed in one way or another to the shaping of this research. At specific points in this written thesis, I will suggest when each of these works should be viewed. In the case of *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), *A Tactile Art* (2023), and *Sound Stack* (2024a), I suggest that these are viewed in full at the point specified during the reading of the thesis. In respect of the *Sound Stack Tutorial* (2024b), which is a significantly longer piece (at nearly thirty-five-minutes) I note as part of the discussion of the work (in Chapter Two) a portion of the tutorial video that is reflective of the engagement I hoped to achieve with my participants and suggest that the reader might watch this part of the tutorial to get a sense of the intent behind the work. The soundwalk *Taking Delight* (2024c) is eighty-eight-minutes in length, and again I have chosen a section of it to discuss in some more detail in Chapter Two, and I will direct the reader to the relevant timestamp for the section during that discussion. In Chapter Two, I also discuss three of the shorter videographic experiments I undertook and published on my experimental blog, *Deformative Sound Lab*. Though these works are not fully fledged video essays, I have selected them for inclusion here as they speak to the nature of the experimental practice that informed this phase of my research, as well as engaging specifically with certain aspects of technical sound practice. In the case of these three experiments, I suggest that each is viewed at the point of their discussion, and links to the original blog post offering additional contextualisation of the experiments can be found in the reference list at the end of this thesis. Lastly, where I include discussion or analysis of works by other videographic critics, I will indicate specific timestamps or sections of those video essays that should be viewed for clarification as part of my discussion.

It is worth noting at this point that there is no single film, director, or sound professional whose work is necessarily the focus of the practical experimentation and investigations that inform this research and thesis. The selection of the films has been mediated by various factors; initially, my own familiarity with a film inclined me towards certain selections (such as *Ghostbusters*), but also my inclination towards films whose soundtracks are widely regarded as being of a high quality, such as the collaborations between David Fincher and sound designer Ren Klyce. And then, as I moved into a more experimental phase of my practice, I took inspiration from the approach adopted by Keathley and Mittell for the *Scholarship in Sound and Image Workshops* that they have run for several years at Middlebury College, with the first taking place in 2015. These workshops were established to provide

scholars interested in videographic criticism with some of the technical and conceptual tools required to make a video essay. Participants in the workshop are asked to select one film (or other media object), which will form the basis for the five videographic exercises that make up the workshop. For my experimental works, I have chosen to follow a similar iterative practice, working with the same film over a number of exercises to more fully explore and expose the various technical sound processes that might be brought to bear on a single film or media object. My background and interest in film sound has directed my videographic practice towards sound-related videographic studies, but it is important to note that the technical sound skills under discussion in this thesis should not be considered the exclusive domain of the scholar making sound-specific works. Rather I would suggest that many of these skills are essential to the making of any videographic work. At the very least, an understanding of volume manipulation and automation over time, as discussed and explored in *Super Volume* (and indeed, a skill which I believe is included in the Middlebury workshop), is necessary for the manipulation of two or more audio tracks playing simultaneously. But beyond that, I nurse an ambition for videographic criticism, where an enhanced sound literacy elevates the form through a sophisticated refinement of the scholar's engagement with and purposeful use of sound in the making of any videographic work.

Chapter One

The layout of the chapters in this thesis is perhaps best viewed as the record of an iterative process of learning and experimentation over the period of my PhD research since 2019. They are not a strict chronological record, but rather they offer a useful way of signposting significant waypoints in my research and practice in videographic criticism. This chapter reflects on my first experiences making video essays within the scholarly field, which began at the outset of my PhD research in late 2019 and includes the first three video essays I published, namely *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), and *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021). These three video essays represent my first experiments in co-opting the video essay as a form of scholarly practice and attempting to bring it to bear on my research into film, and specifically film sound. This chapter discusses some of the key formal elements that influenced the making of these three video essays in terms of the approach I adopted and the specific treatment of their audio and visual components. It also seeks to place these works within the wider context of videographic criticism and video essays, which also take film sound and music as their research subjects. I explore some of the formal aspects of these other works, some of which informed my own practice, and also point towards pertinent questions about sound and technical sound skills within videographic criticism. This chapter establishes a baseline in terms of my understanding and engagement with videographic criticism, both in theory and practice, and sets the platform for further investigations.

Not a pivot, but a slight course correction - my introduction to videographic criticism

I did not set out to undertake a practice as a research PhD; rather, my PhD proposal was formulated with a written thesis in mind. To reflect on this first phase of my making is to also reflect on the context in which I was primed to adopt videographic criticism as my method of practice. In the eighteen-month period during which I was researching my PhD proposal, I presented papers at three academic conferences in the UK. Over the course of presenting at these conferences, I came to the conclusion that my interest in film sound presented me with a significant challenge in terms of the method by which I might address a conference audience and, subsequently, how I might present my written research in a PhD thesis. At the first of these conferences, in June 2018, I presented a paper entitled *The Sonic Suggestion of Dinosaurs in the Jurassic Park franchise* at 25 Years of *Jurassic Park* held at the University of

Cardiff. My presentation was supported by a short PowerPoint featuring some video content and stills but no sound, somewhat in defiance of the title of the presentation. Though this was my first conference presentation, I was aware of the potential pitfalls associated with an over-reliance on presentation material, in particular on sound, so I used the PowerPoint for visual interest and support rather than for any 'audiovisual effect'. However, I was sufficiently encouraged by the experience (and by technical assurances received from subsequent conference organisers) to adopt a more ambitious audiovisual approach at my next conference engagement, 40 Years of *Alien* at Bangor University in May 2019. My presentation, entitled *Selling the Star Beast: Alien and trailer logic*, included a close analysis of the original trailer created by Stephen Frankfurt for the release of Ridley Scott's *Alien* in 1979, focusing specifically on the editing of sound and picture. The presentation I created for the conference included looping video clips that I spoke over, clips of video with sound that I paused for and allowed the audience to watch and listen to, and images that I specifically referred to within the presentation. My third conference presentation at the University of Wolverhampton in 2019 was part of the conference *Kathryn Bigelow: A Visionary Director*. There I presented another close analysis, this time focused on the foot chase in Bigelow's 1991 film *Point Break*. And again, I took the opportunity to develop a complex audiovisual presentation to render a specific audio-informed kinetic effect to the proceedings, which I could not generate simply by reading a paper.

Reflecting on these presentations through the lens of my videographic practice, it is interesting to note where I felt it appropriate to present information asynchronously, where a silent looping video might play on the screen whilst I narrated a short passage, or where it felt natural to me (in the moment) to allow a video clip to play with no interruption so that the audience could be allowed a certain amount of thinking time. Both of these elements of my presentational style at these conferences I suggest might be considered fundamental to the mode of videographic practice that I have subsequently adopted. I am (inevitably) not the first to encounter revelations of this sort in relation to conference presentations. Eric Faden wrote about his own 'pivot to video' in 2008, noting that he had abandoned the conference paper in favour of the "media stylo," embracing the opportunity to use film as the medium of his study to comment upon itself. In a similar vein, both Witt (2017) and Vassilieva (2020) have noted the writing of Viktor Pertsov (as discussed by Tsivian, 1996, pp. 337-338). Tsivian notes that Pertsov's writing in 1926 sounds "almost like a proposal" to make films about films, where he suggests at one point, "Often by way of re-editing a film you can turn it into an

acerbic review of itself" (Pertsov in Tsivian, 1996, pp. 337-338). Both Witt and Vassilieva note Pertsov's writing as being suggestive of the form that would eventually become the video essay, reflecting on the fact that he makes the explicit suggestion that works such as this can indeed exist as scholarship. As Kevin B. Lee notes, "it's actually using the material to articulate itself, working within the medium to explain the medium" (Faden and Lee, 2019, p. 85).

Early as I was at this time in my research career, I had no intention of abandoning written scholarship, as Faden provocatively suggests (2008, p. 1). Yet, as noted by Witt regarding the teaching of audiovisual film criticism, the ready access of both digital media and the tools to edit it with has "opened up new ways of conducting close textual analysis" (2017, p. 36). As I drew closer to the start of my PhD, I was not yet a convert to videographic practice, nor was I necessarily aware of it within the context of academic study, but I was already thinking about and working with audiovisual material in the presentation of my research and study. In short, I was primed to make a small course correction towards a practice-led PhD incorporating videographic works.

Sound as practice and research.

In 2019, I published my video essay, *Pan Scan Venkman*, in the journal *[in]Transition*. It is possible to discern the course correction I have previously alluded to in my practice by comparing this first video essay work with the presentation I delivered at the Kathryn Bigelow conference in Wolverhampton in the same year. Though not created as a piece of videographic criticism, presentations of this kind can and often do find a place on the poetic-explanatory continuum, which Keathley wrote about in 2011 and which I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. In his paper on parametric videographic scholarship published in 2021, Alan O'Leary specifically refers to the "illustrated lecture" (p. 76) as existing on one end of this continuum, "a range often distilled to an opposition, first suggested by Christian Keathley, between explanatory and poetic approaches" (p. 76). As Keathley notes in his original discussion of this continuum, "images and sounds—even when carefully and creatively manipulated in support of an argument—are subordinated to explanatory language" (2011, p. 181). In videographic terms, this conference paper lands very much on the explanatory end of the video essay continuum, and the subordination that Keathley refers to is evident where my

presentation moves at the pace of my explanatory voiceover rather than necessarily seeking or indeed achieving any 'poetic' effect in the manipulation of sound and images. The visual component is (by design) secondary and supportive, and because of the nature of the conference presentation, soundtrack elements are somewhat limited. This is a piece of work where the final form has been largely dictated by the nature of the content and the intended publication, and any resemblance it might have to a video essay is purely accidental on my part. However, this relationship between form, content, and method is pertinent to my video essay practice and, in particular, to the form that *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) takes.

Pan Scan Venkman

The following section discusses the video essay *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) in some depth, and I suggest that the reader take a moment to review the video essay in full before continuing.

In the context of this thesis, *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) is the point from which I started to consider the place of sound in videographic practice. It is my first piece of videographic criticism and my first peer-reviewed publication. It is, to all intents and purposes, my videographic baseline, the point from which my practice has developed, and the point from which the idea for this thesis was born. The video essay explores how the legacy process of pan and scan, which was used to reformat widescreen films for standard definition television broadcast and VHS distribution, had a significant impact on my reading of the character of Peter Venkman played by Bill Murray. *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) reflects on my own engagement with Reitman's 1984 film *Ghostbusters*, and in particular with a scene of the (then) three Ghostbusters riding in a hotel lift. The panned and scanned VHS version of the film, which was the only version I watched for a number of years, chose to frame this scene in such a way as to cut the character of Peter Venkman from the right-hand side of the image, the result of the reduction of the frame from the original 2.35:1 (widescreen) to fit a 4:3 standard definition screen. Crucially for my reading of the film, even though Venkman is not visible in this panned and scanned version of the scene, he still delivers some lines of dialogue. Over the course of repeated viewings of the film, in this panned and scanned version, I began to suspect the absence of Venkman from the lift, and I was encouraged to read the scene in this way partly as a result of the off-screen dialogue seeming to be delivered out of time with the on-screen actors.

Pan Scan Venkman (2019c) explores and reflects on my relationship with *Ghostbusters* as it has been released and re-released over the years, with each new version being hailed as the definitive and automatically replacing (and usurping) the previous. But rather than bemoan the damage done to the film through its panned and scanned presentation, I suggest in this video essay that the process has created a much richer viewing and listening experience for me.

As a baseline for my videographic practice, *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) is the product of a number of facets of my pre-existing fascination with film and sound filtered through my new engagement with videographic criticism. In formal terms, *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) is undeniably influenced by Keathley's *Pass the Salt* (2006), which I will be discussing here in some detail. It may be useful for the reader to view the video in full, though I will also point to specific timestamps of interest throughout this discussion. In Keathley's video essay, I encountered a practice that did not shy away from its fascination (its cinephiliac obsession) with the material of study but rather embraced it. As O'Leary suggests, "Material thinking is a form of critical intimacy rather than critical distance, the performative practice of which has to do with intervening, with making something happen, rather than representing, which implies separation from the object analysed" (2021, p. 81). In *Pass the Salt* (2006), Keathley recounts his own fascination with a scene in Otto Preminger's 1959 film *Anatomy of a Murder* and then goes on to weave a narrative detailing his thesis surrounding one particular sound effect, the sound of a salt shaker being placed on a counter-top. The opening lines of his voiceover set the tone for the work: "There's this scene in Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder*. I can't stop thinking about it" (Keathley, 2006, 00.00.35). While not a direct template for my own work, *Pass the Salt* (2006) suggested to me a number of formal approaches, which I took careful note of when I started to work on *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c). Reflecting on the aforementioned explanatory mode, Keathley makes extensive use of voiceover to direct the viewer/auditor through his thesis, but he does so more as a guide than a didact, charting a path through a carefully structured narrative. *Pass the Salt* (2006) uses sound and music as an underscore throughout, and the sound effect that is at the centre of the discussion is repeated fourteen times during the video essay's seven-minute, fifty-eight-second running time. Patrick Keating refers to this as "recursive scholarship," noting that "By playing the same clip repeatedly, a recursive passage gives the viewer the opportunity to notice complications, felicities, and contradictions" (2020, para. 11). In *Pass the Salt* (2006), the repetition of this sound effect also performs another function in that it

anchors the sound in question in our short-term memory by repeating it at intervals throughout the video essay. And crucially, the very short sound effect (approximately one second long) is repeated in rhythmic groupings: twice at the start of the video essay before Keathley speaks at 00.00.19, followed by a grouping of three repeats at 00.03.55 and four repeats at 00.04.35 before the video essay finishes with the same rhythmic grouping of three at 00.07.36. Keating suggests that recursive scholarship in video essay practice raises additional questions for the maker regarding the frequency and placement of repetitions; questions that he suggests are both creative and scholarly (2020, para. 9). However, when working with sounds, particularly short-term transient sounds like those employed by Keathley in *Pass the Salt* (2006), the video essayist must also consider the fallibility of the human auditory memory. Research has shown our short-term auditory memory to be particularly poor, especially in comparison with our visual and tactile memory systems (Bigelow and Poremba, 2014, p. 1). And of particular concern to the sound-focused video essayist is that this memory is even more impaired if additional stimuli interrupt our sonic focus (Bigelow and Poremba, 2014, p. 1), for instance in the form of an explanatory voiceover. In *Pass the Salt* (2006), Keathley uses repetition to navigate this issue, and he additionally aids the viewer/auditor by pairing the repetitions with modified visuals, providing an additional detail to help us commit the sound effect to memory long enough to appreciate the argument being laid out for us. Bigelow and Poremba's study on short-term auditory memory closes with a translation of an old Chinese proverb. "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember" (2014, p. 7), which I find particularly apt given the links to Chinese history that Keathley weaves into *Pass the Salt* (2006), but also a potent warning for the videographic scholar who discounts to easily some of the complexities inherent in working with sound in videographic criticism. As a point of comparison here, I include six repeats of the line of dialogue I discuss in *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), which has a total running time of nine-minutes, five-seconds. Being that this is my own work, and I am by now overly familiar with its content, I am in no position to suggest whether this is a sufficient number of repeats, or indeed, too many. It is worth considering that recursive scholarship brings into play the very real possibility that the viewer/auditor will become bored with the repetition of elements and disengage from your efforts.

With this in mind, a point of distinction should be drawn between *Pass the Salt* (2006) and *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) as to the nature of the sound under discussion and the impact this has on the technical and aesthetic considerations for working with this material. In *Pass the*

Salt (2006), it is the sound of a salt shaker being placed on a countertop, a movement that we see on screen as the scene plays in an uninterrupted two-shot. The fact that we see the salt shaker placed on the countertop and hear a synchronised sound effect invokes Michel Chion's concept of synchresis (1994, pp. 63-64). Chion posits that we will happily accept a radically different and divergent audio/visual pairing as long as the synchronisation between the audio and visual components is seamless (1994, pp. 63-64). In *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), the sound I am interested in focusing on is the voice, and the source of the voices is both on and off-screen. This example invokes another of Chion's theoretical musings, that of sounds emanating from the uncanny, acousmatic (off-screen) space (1994, pp. 128-131). Just as Keathley does in *Pass the Salt* (2006), for each repetition of the line of dialogue I am discussing in *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), I manipulate the image by zooming further into it, making the actor's mouth (Dan Ackroyd in this case) larger and larger in the frame (starting at 00.03.10). The quality of the image degrades with each of these zooms, being that it is already derived from poor source material, but I am happy to embrace this 'liberation' of the two hundred and forty lines of VHS resolution in the spirit of Hito Steyerl's treatise on the poor image (2009). But these zooms are not just about revealing the 'face' of the VHS format; they also seek to engage with and invoke a filmmaking technique used by John McTiernan in both *The Hunt for Red October* (1990) and *The 13th Warrior* (1999). In both of these films, McTiernan uses a slow zoom on an actor's mouth to facilitate a transition in the film's language. In *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), the zoom functions as a translation matrix, forcing the audience out of a normal viewing mode to focus on the moving mouth as the spoken language seamlessly mutates from Russian to English (see 00.15.02). In *The 13th Warrior* (1999), the technique is used with more ambition; across two different sequences, the Muslim poet Ahmad ibn Fadlan (played by Antonio Banderas) learns Norse from the Vikings he is travelling with by closely observing their conversation. Initially, the camera carefully positions us, the audience, from Ahmad's point of view, showing a selection of closeups of the Vikings as they speak Norse. But as this is a demonstration of learning, the film takes the technique a stage further and employs the recursive form at both 00.15.58 and 00.16.08, where actors deliver lines of dialogue in Norse and then immediately repeat them in English, echoing Keating's recursive form.

As a narrative technique, it is a remarkably economical way of dealing with language and translation in both of these films. In videographic terms, and specifically in the making of *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), it is an effect that demonstrates my technical literacy in terms of

sound and some of the specific realities of working with sound as a creative practitioner. By zooming in on the footage in this way, I am not just focusing the viewer/auditor's attention on the line of dialogue, but rather I am attempting to leverage the full audiovisual effect of the video essay form to elucidate my argument about sound.

I choose to use the term 'audiovisual' here as it is referred to by Álvarez López and Martin, who note, "We choose audiovisual essays because: a. we all need to put an end to the casual ignoring of the decisive role of sound in every form of modern media" (2014, p. 81). I find this sentiment to be well aligned with the use of the same term here: "the most effective videographic works—those that produce the most potent knowledge effect—are those that employ their audiovisual source materials in a poetically imaginative way" (Keathley and Mittell, 2019, p. 14). To achieve this end in a piece of videographic work is aspirational and also, based on my experience with *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), challenging. In particular, I found it difficult to release my grip on the scholarly aspects of the work, which led me to rely quite heavily on my voiceover as a guide through the video essay. Though the recording, editing, and mixing of a voiceover are in themselves technical challenges, this is perhaps not the most poetically imaginative use of my sound skills in the pursuit of an audiovisual effect. In my next video essay, I would look for a way to make a more 'decisive' sonic intervention in my videographic making.

Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound

The following section discusses the video essay *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), and I suggest that the reader take a moment to review the video essay in full before continuing.

My second published videographic work, *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound*, appeared in *NECSUS* in 2020. As I suggested in my introduction, I was not intending the videographic outputs from this research to be thematically linked; rather, I looked for areas of research within film sound where I could explore the videographic process, both in methodological and technical terms. My experience with *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) and my developing appreciation of the sound work of other videographic practitioners pointed me in a particular methodological direction for this work. My audio engineering background also contributed to a particular

technical intervention in the soundtrack, which I chose to incorporate into the form of the video essay.

Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound (2020) takes the film soundtrack and suggests that it might be considered a 'soundscape' in line with the definitions and categorisations written about by R. Murray Schafer in his book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1993). Schafer's book reflected on the ever-changing nature of our sonic environment, specifically noting how certain sounds within the natural soundscape have been lost to us as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation, and population growth. His work is part manifesto to encourage an appreciation of the fragility of our soundscape and part a primer on how we might record and categorise the various sonic elements we might perceive in our soundscape. In *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), I used some of Schafer's categorisations and terminologies to investigate the soundscapes of three cinematic newsrooms: the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom of 1969 as depicted in David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007) and the two different versions of the Washington Post newsroom as depicted in Steven Spielberg's *The Post* (2017) and Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), set in 1971 and 1972, respectively.

David Sonnenschein noted Schafer's work when reflecting on the creative aspects of film sound design and the possibility that Schafer's research on the soundscape might prove useful when striving to create an authentic sounding narrative environment within a film (2001, pp. 182-184). In *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), I use Schafer's soundscape categorisations to reverse engineer the film soundtracks of these 'authentic' newsroom spaces from fixed points in time and space to better understand the ways in which they have been crafted.

Audiographics: - visualising the technical process of sound

Following on from *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), which I suggest would probably find itself further along the explanatory arm of Keathley's videographic continuum, I was keen to explore both methodological and technical approaches to the video essay form, which would bring sound to the fore. In terms of method, I noted that a number of video essayists working with sound had used images and graphics to visualise the sounds they were discussing, which I have chosen to refer to here as 'audiographics' (I note that this term is also used to refer to the content of an audio only special issue of [in]Transition published in 2019, however I find

the portmanteau to be entirely apt in describing the following videographic methods). Shane Denson's *Sight and Sound Conspire: Monstrous Audio-Vision in James Whale's Frankenstein* (2015) "offers a meditation, in three acts, on the relations between the visual and the auditory in James Whale's classic horror film Frankenstein" (Denson, 2015). In making a comparison between the soundtracks as they are heard in the 1931 original and the 1957 dub of the film, Denson acknowledges the difficulties I have already alluded to in working on sound research in a visual medium: "splitscreen techniques are excellent for making visual differences apparent, but how do we visualize sonic differences?" (2015, para. 4). His solution, which he reflects on as "crude," is to include a VU meter in his video essay, essentially a graphical representation of volume that can be found in almost every video and audio editing software application. This meter appears in Denson's video essay at 00.06.39 and, in concert with a split screen, demonstrates visually the difference in levels between the two versions of the film. As Denson notes, this method of visualisation "seeks to re-focus visual attention onto the sonic" (2015, para. 4) to the same end, but perhaps in a more explicit fashion than the zooms used by Keathley in *Pass the Salt* (2006) and those that I used in *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c). Though Denson suggests the method is crude, I find both the impulse behind the inclusion of the VU meter and the audiographic effect it creates to be incredibly effective. I suggest that it does place the viewer/auditor in that privileged position of our (the makers) point of audition and helps secure that position by using the video track at the service of the audio investigation.

Similarly in *A Very Rare Bear* (2019), Oswald Iten creates his own graphical 'pitch map' to accompany certain sections of his video essay on *Paddington* (King, 2014). Using hand-drawn splodges of marmalade, Iten visually represents certain lines of Paddington's dialogue, with the placement of the graphical elements synchronised with the delivery of the line (and in some cases individual words and syllables) and giving a clear indication of the pitch and tonality of the delivery through their placement on screen. The image below comes from a thirty-six-second sequence of pitch maps beginning at 00.08.10.

Figure 1.1 A Very Rare Bear (2019) pitch mapping.

This mapping is reminiscent of the visualisations that are often provided within pitch manipulation software like Autotune or Melodyne, and Iten uses these associations very effectively in his video essay. The audiographical technique first appears as part of the introduction (00.00.00 – 00.00.07) and is included from the outset without any additional explanation (though the connection between marmalade and Paddington is explicit). The sequence of pitch mappings represented by the image above is accompanied by some explanatory text regarding the delivery of the lines in terms of pitch and tone (00.08.21 – 00.08.45). The audiographic visualisation is transparent enough here that the explanatory text on screen is largely superfluous, perhaps even distracting, but there is no denying the effectiveness of the technique in again visually focusing the viewer/auditor on the soundtrack.

In her video essay *The Elephant Man's Sound, Tracked* (2020b), Liz Greene takes the use of audiographics a stage further than either Denson or Iten and chooses to include full-screen recordings of the Pro Tools audio editor and iZotope RX software applications. The image below shows the iZotope RX graphical user interface, or GUI, from 00.06.03 in Greene's video essay.

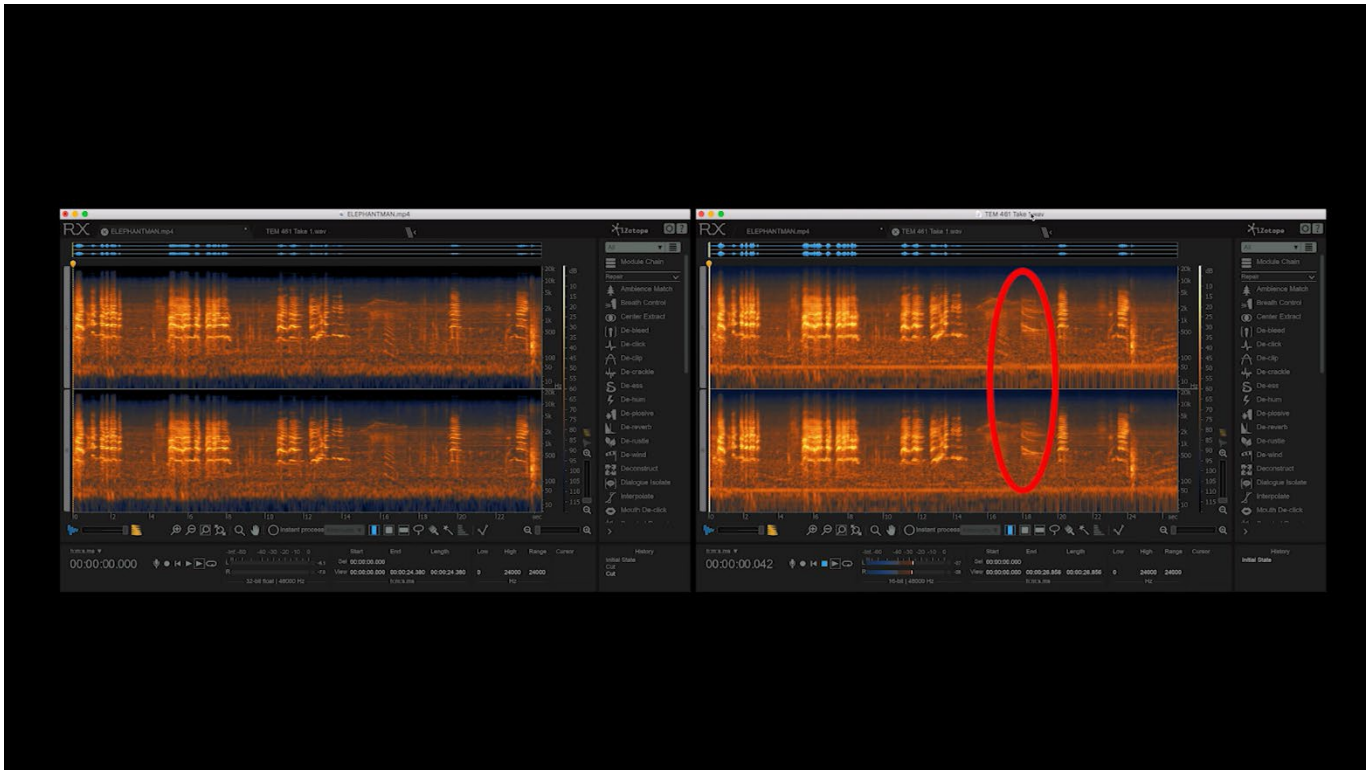

Figure 1.2 The iZotope RX interface in The Elephant Man's Sound, Tracked (2020b)

Both of these pieces of software are used in post-production sound for film and television (as well as in other audio production workflows). Greene includes them here as part of her investigation into the "clean-up of a line of dialogue, "I am not an animal, I am a human being, a man, a man," in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980)" (2020b, p. 439). Greene employs these screen recordings to demonstrate visually the audible difference between a location sound recording of the aforementioned line of dialogue and the film's final soundtrack, where a gasp of breath, which is present in the location recording, has been removed from the final mix. This is most effectively demonstrated in the split screen section, from which the above image is taken, where Greene includes spectrographic representations of the two different recordings taken from the Izotope RX software application (2020b). The value of using this audiographic method to demonstrate the difference between the recordings is that we (the viewer/auditor) do not need any specialised knowledge of sound or audio production practice to understand this difference; the visualisation allows us to see the difference in the sounds via the audiographic representation (unlike the VU meter employed by Denson, which reacted to the sound in the video essay as it was played, which therefore required us to adapt to that changing circumstance). Greene does go on to play the two different recordings to demonstrate the audible difference between the two (at 00.06.10 in the video essay), but primed as we are by the audiographical comparison, this is now a much more effective demonstration of the investigation and makes appreciating the difference

between the two recordings that much easier. As Greene notes in the statement that accompanies her published video essay in the journal *NECSUS*, “The inherent strength of the audiovisual essay is to be able to focus on a singular object of study and, through repetition, draw attention to that detail or absence (2020b, p. 440),” and in this case she returns twice more to this particular audiographical method, at 00.07.15 before moving into a more explanatory area of the video essay, and then for one final play of the fugitive gasp of breath at 00.24.15 as the video essay comes to a close.

Even if the software I have referred to here are unfamiliar to the reader (or indeed the viewer/auditor), the use of the technical software to ‘expose’ sound like this is something most of us will have had some experience of in our film and television viewing. Often procedural television series make use of these audiographics to visually shortcut the technical manipulation of sound (and indeed image and data). This can be seen repeatedly in *CSI* (Zuiker, 2000-2015) or *24* (Surnow and Cochran, 2001-2017), but these are often FUI's, which Cormac Deane notes “stands for fantasy (or fake, or fictional, or faux) user interfaces” (2018, para. 7). Of the function of the FUI, Deane goes on to suggest, “The FUI provides a scientific, or quasi-scientific, gaze that visualises an otherwise invisible or inaccessible object or environment” (2018, para. 7). In the case of these videographic works, sound is the invisible object we are seeking to visualise, but the difference in the case of both Denson and Greene’s work, and an important distinction to make here, is that their audiographical visualisations make use of real software applications as opposed to the fabricated FUI. Indeed, the software that Greene used, iZotope RX, has since transcended the need for a FUI, being deemed a sufficiently transparent gaze onto the invisible world of sound as to have been used in *The Valhalla Murders* (Palsson, 2019) and *Smile* (Finn, 2022).

In *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), I explored the use of an audiographic effect to re-focus, as Denson suggests, the attention of the viewer/auditor onto the soundtrack. I chose to incorporate a masking effect into my video essay, using the visualisation of the audio waveform in the DaVinci Resolve editing application to create a mask that moves across the video in synchronisation with the film's soundtrack, essentially creating a window onto the video essay's visual content in the 'shape’ of the soundtrack as it is heard, as shown in the image below from 00.04.35 in my video essay.

Figure 1.3 The waveform mask audiographic from Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound (2020)

I consider this to be a sonically informed methodological intervention, which perhaps has more in common with the marmalade splodge pitch mapping employed by Iten than with the software visualisations of Denson and Greene. I suggest it is a method that moves towards the poetically imaginative, and crucially, one that relies on a certain technical expertise to realise it within the editing software as well as a certain sound literacy to consider the audiovisual value it might deliver to the work.

"Videographic criticism enables us to break the seal that binds a film as a finished work and then engage with its component parts" (Mittell, 2019, p. 226). *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) is a product of a videographic engagement, such as Mittell suggests, in that I could not have made this video essay or explored these specific newsroom soundscapes without first unpacking the film in the video editing software. This is in contrast to my experience with *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), where the argument, and the discovery were entirely external to the videographic process, and in that instance, the video essay was the best means by which I could present it. *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) was conceived from the ground up as a piece of videographic research, and as such, it began with the process of bringing these three films into the video editing software.

From a technical standpoint, the modern digital film soundtrack presents the videographic critic with a number of components we can engage with. Since 1995, home media consumers have had access to discrete multi-channel surround soundtracks, first on LaserDisc, then DVD, and now on a variety of physical and streaming media (Holman, 2007, p. 21). Many films released before 1995 have also been reissued on some or all of these new formats (just as *Ghostbusters* was in 1999 on DVD, 2009 on Blu-ray, and 2016 on UHD Blu-ray) with re-mixed surround soundtracks where previously they might have only had a mono (single channel) or stereo (two channel) soundtrack. The term discrete here refers to separation between the individual channels of the soundtrack as they are routed to separate speaker channels, and at a minimum, a modern film soundtrack will have at least six channels of sound split into the following configuration: left, centre, right, left surround, right surround, Low Frequency Effects (LFE). This configuration is widely referred to as '5.1' or simply the catch-all term 'surround sound' (Holman, 2007, p. 1). For the videographic scholar interested in studying film sound, the multichannel soundtrack offers a further layer by which we might access the components of our object of study. And more broadly, I would argue that an awareness of the multi-channel soundtrack being available to any videographic scholar, regardless of their research interests, could be hugely beneficial to the creation of sonically rich and engaging videographic works.

Most video editing software allows you to access the six individual channels of a surround-sound film soundtrack, assuming that the media has been digitised with the individual channels intact. The result is an entirely novel listening experience, where individual channels of the soundtrack can be isolated, auditioned, and analysed. This is not a true deconstruction of the soundtrack into its fundamental sonic building blocks; the six channels we have access to within the surround soundtrack are the result of the mixing of hundreds (if not thousands) of sounds through various stages of the post-production sound process. Rather, we might consider these six channels to be loose ecologies of sounds that follow certain broad conventions of sound dubbing (Kerins, 2010, p. 71). The centre channel will generally carry most of the film's dialogue and foley sound effects, i.e., those sounds created by living beings interacting with objects in the film world, footsteps being a prime example of this. The left and right channels are generally regarded as a stereo pair and are often the 'busiest' in sound terms, comprising sound effects, ambience, music, and off-screen voices. The surround channels are again generally considered a stereo pair and may also carry music as well as

additional ambient effects. The LFE channel only carries the lowest frequency sounds and may offer support for music as well as louder elements such as explosions and impacts.

The ability to access the individual channels of a digitised film soundtrack appears to be a niche pursuit within videographic scholarship (aside from myself, I am only aware of Oswald Iten having tried this approach), and I do not believe it has gained traction as a method for film sound research in the wider film studies community either. In this instance, I suggest that my background in audio engineering and film sound provides me with a slightly different perspective on the nature of the film soundtrack. Where Mittell and Keathley discuss the sealed archive of the media object, I have had practical experience of the creation of the film as an "archive of moving images and sounds" (2019, p. 12), and crucially in this case, I am aware of how the archives are packaged in a technical sense and how they then might be most effectively unpacked by the videographic scholar. In the specific instance of the making of *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), the ability to access the individual tracks of the multi-channel soundtrack of *Zodiac* (Fincher, 2007) allowed me to focus my analysis and the attention of my viewer/auditor on specific sounds only audible in the surround channels of the film's soundtrack. And likewise, in discussing *The Post* (2017), I could isolate only the LFE channel to highlight its use in a pivotal scene (which can be found at 00.08.58 in my video essay). In film sound research terms, this technical awareness of the multi-channel soundtrack has proven to be invaluable to me. But I suggest that in the broadest conception of videographic scholarship engaging with film and television, this kind of technical understanding could be equally as invaluable to any scholar engaged in making videographic criticism.

Limitations of Presentation

Whether choosing to publish your video essay on either YouTube or Vimeo (the two main platforms used by videographic critics) at the time of writing, they only support videos uploaded with a stereo soundtrack. This does not appear to be a drastic limitation for the videographic scholar as, for the most part, the expectation is that the work will be viewed/audited on a laptop or small screen and listened to on stereo speakers or headphones (*Visual Disturbances* by Eric Faden from 2018 is the only video essay I am aware of that has a true multi-channel sound mix, and this was only created for limited theatrical presentation).

Furthermore, even where the work might be shown at a festival or screened in a cinema, few exhibitors are expecting video essays to be delivered with anything other than a stereo soundtrack. However, given the focus of my research in *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) on the soundscape and the fact that I had access to the individual channels of the film soundtrack, I was keen to seek out a means by which I could best translate the listening experience to the viewer/auditor in a way that was authentic to the original film sound mix. Here I was concerned with the spatial relationship of the sounds, and so I turned to a binaural processing plugin called Ambeo developed by Sennheiser. The plugin worked directly within my video editing software (DaVinci Resolve in this case) and allowed me to re-mix the soundtrack of my video essay in such a way as to create a pseudo-surround effect that could be delivered over headphones. This is not true surround sound; however, it is a means by which a surround sound effect can be delivered within the limitations of the publishing platform (in this case Vimeo). I previewed the effect at the start of the video essay, at 00.00.08, using a 'channel test' as might be found on a DVD or Blu-Ray setup disc. The test features a voice naming each of the multi-channel speakers in turn (front left, front centre, front right, right surround, left surround), and I mixed it using the Ambeo plugin to simulate these spatial positions within the video essay's stereo soundtrack mix. As this is playing, I included a title card with the following text: "This soundtrack has been mixed binaurally to represent the original film mixes as closely as possible. Some elements have been remixed to highlight them within the soundtrack. Headphones are recommended" (Donnelly, 2020). And as a final technical and aesthetic nod to the era from which these newsroom soundscapes heralded, I chose to record my voiceover using a Nagra reel-to-reel tape machine built in 1969.

The limitations I am alluding to here are not just those imposed by the video publishing platform (in this case Vimeo) but also the limitations in knowledge and skill in relation to technical sound practice, which I have already touched on. My own background in practical sound production, sound editing, and music mixing has given me a significant head start where I am experimenting with elements like the multi-channel soundtrack or binaural sound mixing (or indeed recording on tape). The application of this knowledge in the making of *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) is part of my process of "discovery and experimentation" (Mittell, 2019, p. 228) towards a sound literate videographic practice. I view *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) as fertile ground in this regard, where the research, the discovery, and the experimentation led to the making of a video essay that serves as a marker for the value of

technical sound skills as part of the video essayists toolkit. And whilst I do not suggest that I have defined any specific methods in this work that might be adopted by the wider videographic community, it is worth noting that the video essay *Le Plaisir: Voices and viewpoints* published in *NECSUS* in 2022 by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye also makes use of binaural sound elements and includes a title card at the opening, encouraging the viewer/auditor to listen on headphones. The suggestion here being that the approach to sound mixing I adopted for *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) may have had some impact in terms of suggesting a more considered approach to sound mixing rather than any specific methodological or formal element such as my use of audiographic masking. This demonstrates a shift for me in the thinking process of the videographic scholar, where they are considering not just the careful dissemination of knowledge to their audience but also taking note of how that dissemination might be creatively and artistically packaged for maximum effect. Rick Warner argues that "what distinguishes the most capable essayists working with sounds and images is a "pedagogical" mission to pass on to the spectator not simply ideas and arguments but a particular way of seeing" (2013, p. 1). I would add that this must now include a mission to actively engage their auditor in a particular way of listening, which in turn requires that the videographic scholar seeking to advance the state of this form of practice must reflect on the quality of their technical sound skills, being as they are an essential part of this mission.

I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank

The following section discusses the video essay *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), and I suggest that the reader take a moment to review the video essay in full before continuing.

I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank was published in the journal *Screenworks* in October 2021. This is the final video in what I have chosen to call the first phase of my video essay practice. A number of elements carry through to this work from *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) in that *Mank* is a David Fincher film (2020), and as with *Zodiac* (2007), the sound team is led by Ren Klyce. My research and presentation again focus on surround sound, though in this case I am concerned with the space of the room in which *Mank's* (2020) soundtrack was re-recorded and how this translates to the spaces in which the domestic audience might

watch and listen to the film (being that this was a Netflix film where the largest part of its audience would be reached in their homes).

This video essay reflects on some of my earliest engagement with film sound research when I wrote a guest post for the blog *Designing Sound* on worldization in 2012. Worldization is a sound practice employed by Walter Murch early in his career, where access to high-quality artificial reverberation processors was difficult. Murch would take pre-recorded sounds, voices, or effects and play them back in real spaces using a portable tape machine and speaker. The sound as played in the real space would be re-recorded on another tape machine, and this reverberant recording would subsequently be mixed with the original sound to give it an acoustic sense of existing in that real space (Donnelly, 2012). The article I wrote was based on a practical experiment I undertook using two Nagra tape machines to re-record a selection of sound effects in an underground garage, thereby informing the re-recordings with the sound of that garage. Though the technique is most often associated with sound designer and editor Walter Murch (*THX-1138*, 2004), Ren Klyce attributes his own experimentation with re-recording sounds in rooms to the composer Alvin Lucier and specifically to his piece *I Am Sitting in A Room* from 1969 (*Se7en*, 2000). In *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), I link Ren Klyce's recollection of this piece from the audio commentary for *Se7en* (2000) with his later treatment of the soundtrack in *Mank* (Walden, 2020).

In making *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), I employed a number of the videographic methods that I developed through *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) and *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020). I use still images where I am keen for the viewer/auditor to focus on the sounds within the video essay presentation. I make limited use of audiographics, in this instance a full waveform representation of Lucier's composition taken directly from the DaVinci Resolve video editing software. And I continue to use the multichannel soundtrack as both an element of my research practice and to inform the making of the final video essay. But the central idea within *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank*, the fact that the entire film soundtrack has been played back and re-recorded in another space, suggested that I might engage in a collaborative making process.

We are Sitting in our Rooms

I started working on *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* in 2020 during the second national lockdown in the UK, and I am in little doubt that this influenced my thinking when working on the video essay. The importance of the videographic community became much more apparent at this time, and the success of the *Video Essay Podcast* homework assignments (DiGravio, 2020) led me to believe that there was likely a desire, or at least a will, within the broader community of practitioners to engage in a small collaborative sound experiment working towards a videographic output.

I put out a general call on Twitter for collaborators and asked them to record the sound of *Mank* (2020) playing in their own rooms, asking that they record the sound of the same opening scene lasting approximately three-minutes. The five recordings I sourced (six including my own) form the conclusion of the video essay beginning at 00.09.13, being edited into a two-minute-long montage where the viewer/auditor is invited to listen to the soundtrack, not just as they might hear it in their own rooms but also getting an inkling of how others might hear it in theirs. This is also a nod to my own fascination with Lucier's work (1990), and this experiment gave me an opportunity to explore the sound of rooms, within rooms, within rooms as it were. The nine-minutes of video essay that precede this aim to bring the viewer/auditor to this moment fully equipped to engage with the listening experiment. As such, there is a certain amount of explanatory 'process' in the earlier part of the video essay.

Explaining Sound

In *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), I felt it incumbent on me to explain certain technical aspects of the particular surround sound mixing process employed in *Mank's soundtrack* (2020). *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021) is more closely aligned with the production of the film soundtrack itself than either *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c) or *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), and whilst I sought to embrace this alignment with the process of the film's production, I also felt it needed some clarification within the video essay. I approached the opening section of *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021) as an experimental engagement with the explanatory mode, attempting to remove as much of my own explanation from the process and leaving it to the voices and words of others.

Referring to the aforementioned continuum of video essays, from explanatory to poetic (Keathley, 2011, p. 181), I suggest that *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021) moves along this continuum through its running time, opening with explanation and closing with the poetic, performing analysis at the conclusion in a way that is "immersive rather than explanatory" (O'Leary, 2021, p. 93).

Jennifer Walden's interview (2020) with Ren Klyce forms the basis for the opening of the explanation, and this is achieved using text on screen with the editing rhythm being as much about the musical score (taken from the film's opening) as it is about the time the viewer/auditor might need to read the text. Ren Klyce's own voice then takes up the explanation, introducing the link between his work on *Se7en* (2000) and Alvin Lucier's composition *I Am Sitting In A Room* (1990). I chose to edit carefully between Klyce recalling the composition and Lucier performing it, solidifying the link between the two. The most challenging piece of the explanatory build-up was graphically explaining the re-recording and mixing of *Mank's* (2020) soundtrack. I achieved this using an explanatory audiographic- a visualisation of a domestic listening space complete with a surround sound speaker system. By selectively muting channels within the soundtrack mix and hiding the corresponding speakers in the graphic, it was possible to quickly explain to the viewer/auditor the very specific nature of the production process involved in the re-recording and mixing of *Mank's* (2020) soundtrack. This graphical representation owes something to Iten's video essay work, in part to the aforementioned *A Very Rare Bear* (2019), but I draw a more direct link to his video essay *Beyond the Catchy Tunes: George Bruns and the Craft of Transparent Underscoring* (2020), which was published in *NECSUS* alongside *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020). Iten has a background in animation, and in *Beyond the Catchy Tunes* (2020) he replicates some of the pitch mapping effect from 2019's *A Very Rare Bear* (see the sequence beginning at 00.10.20) but also includes graphical depictions of musical instruments, scores, and audio events, such as at 00.13.10 and the chase sequence beginning at 00.17.57. His graphics and audiographics are sometimes animated to reflect the music or sound events, and as noted earlier, they often offer more than sufficient 'explanation' without the need for additional voiceover or text, though these often accompany the audiographic element.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, this first phase of practical making was as much about me exploring the potentials for sound and film sound to be explored within videographic criticism as it was about coming to understand the nature of videographic

criticism and the video essay as a form of practice. In reflecting on these three video essays, I can see where my interest in film sound and my practical background in sound production have led me to rely somewhat on my sound literacy in my approach to videographic making. This has contributed to my video essays employing certain technical aspects of sound manipulation and mixing that are not widely used in videographic criticism, and while I acknowledge that given that sound is my own area of expertise that I might be more sensitive to this, this phase of my making highlights to me the distinct value that a better technical understanding of sound and its manipulation within the context of videographic work might benefit all who choose to partake in the discipline, regardless of their subject of study. I am also keen to note here that my experience of making has demonstrated to me that to achieve an audiovisual effect, it is not just a case of being technically adept but also understanding how these technical skills might be employed in a decisive, poetic, and creative way to prove both beneficial to the making of the work and its dissemination to an audience. Faden suggests:

> Knowing how to technically use Microsoft Word doesn't necessarily make for a good writer, and the same goes for filmmaking. Especially for creating media, more people are learning the technical ability to create works, but fewer are learning the aesthetic sensibilities to create interesting works (2008, p. 2).

Whilst it is not the place of this thesis to suggest how a videographic critic might acquire the aesthetic sensibilities Faden refers to, I suggest that the nature of the technical skills he alludes to here, their extent and value to the development of videographic criticism as a form, aesthetically as well as technically, is an important consideration and one which I explore further through the next phase of my practice and research.

Chapter Two

The publication of my third video essay, *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), coincided with the start of my third year of study as a PhD researcher. The three video essays I reflected on in Chapter One of this thesis developed organically over the first two years of my PhD research through my critical re-engagement with film sound theory and my interest in exploring the affordances of sound and technical sound skills in videographic criticism. These video essays reflect on some of the early film sound research undertaken by Michel Chion (1994) and Mary Anne Doane (1980) and on craft histories and film sound practice through the work of Walter Murch (specifically *THX 1138*, 2004) and Ren Klyce (his work with Fincher on *Se7en*, 2000; *Zodiac*, 2007; and *Mank*, 2020). And also with a broader base of sound research through my re-deploying Murray Schafer's soundscape theories in the classification of the film soundtrack (1993). Through these works, I was becoming aware of the potential for what seemed to be the pursuit of genuine academic research in film sound through the video essay form, in tandem with a growing appreciation of the importance of technical sound skills to elucidate that research. Lee notes the inherent logic of the video essay as a research form: "to use video work to explore and explain video work" (Faden and Lee, 2019, p. 85), again very much in the vein of Pertsov's proposal to make 'films about films' (Tsivian, 1996, pp. 337-338), and here I was adopting and adapting that idea to use film sound to explore and explain itself, employing some of the aesthetic qualities of the film sound track in my work, just as I was also applying the same practical sound skills used in the production of the film soundtrack. At the same time, I was learning about the broader form of the video essay and some of the methods and approaches being used by other videographic critics interested in sound and music.

The three video essays from phase one of my research displayed a distinct ambition to engage with a sound-led and sound-literate videographic practice, one that used sound in pursuit of an audiovisual effect and which engaged creatively in the dissemination of that to an audience. And when reflecting on my videographic practice in the context of other videographic works published at the same time, I perceived there to be a methodological gap in the broader context of video essays I was watching, which warranted some further investigation. This second phase of my research focuses on the factors that I perceive have led to this point and also reflects on the videographic portfolio *Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth* which has been accepted for publication in Screenworks in 2024 and contains

three videographic works: *Sound Stack* (2024a), *Sound Stack Tutorial* (2024b), and *Taking Delight* (2024c).

Sound in the shadow of the image

This title paraphrases Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda's introduction from *Lowering the Boom*, an edited collection of critical writings on film sound published in 2008 (p. 2). Beck and Grajeda refer here to a persistent disparity in the critical attention given to the image over sound within film and television studies. And whilst they couch this comment in light of a growing critical interest in film sound, they are echoing sentiments that regularly permeate academic discussions on the topic, the origin of which is suggested quite explicitly here by Altman. "Early filmmakers' skepticism (sic) about the value of sound has been indirectly perpetuated by generations of critics for whom cinema is an essentially visual art, with sound serving as little more than a superfluous accompaniment" (1980a, p. 3). I do not raise this to seek to perpetuate or materially engage with this discussion, but rather to explore the intersection of this imbalance in critical attention and its impact on videographic criticism and my own research.

In his 2008 paper *A Manifesto for Critical Media*, Eric Faden notes, "this is the last essay I'll ever write" (p. 1). He goes on to clarify that his academic practice would now consist of making "media-stylos" (video essays by any other name) "using moving images to engage and critique themselves" (2008, p. 2). Faden's manifesto is reiterated by Kiss and van den Berg in 2016: "Writing about moving images or representing moving images through writing is, by its very nature, reductive" (Chapter 1). And so the video essay suggests a method of research and critical analysis that avoids this "technological dissonance" (2016, Chapter 1). Even as these comments appear to herald the way for a new critical media practice, they do appear to continue to privilege the image at the expense of sound. Writing in 2015, Grant notes that sound-related works are distinctly in the minority within the burgeoning new form of the audiovisual essay, suggesting that "This won't surprise anyone working in "sound studies," of course, since this unfortunate under-representation simply mirrors the long-standing ocular-centricity of existing, written film and moving image studies" (para. 1). The video essay may well challenge the dissonant practice of writing about moving images, but in transitioning to this new form of practice, does the status quo, the visio-centric hegemony, persist?

Reflecting on how sound is discussed within existing critical writings on videographic criticism, it is evident that there is a distinct preoccupation with the voice, though this rarely has to do with any technical aspect of its capture, editing, or mixing. In his 2020 article *Writing About the Scholarly Video Essay: Lessons from [in]Transition's Creator Statements* Garwood notes that whilst sound (at that time) attracted the most commentary in creator statements in respect of its "scholarly purpose," it was "often revolving around the use or omission of voiceover" in videographic practice (para. 13). This connects to my previous discussion of the video essay continuum, from poetic to explanatory (Keathley, 2011, p. 181), where the inclusion of a voiceover might be seen as a signpost for the explanatory mode, which comes with its own scholarly baggage. As Grizzaffi notes, the presence of a voiceover is often "Unfairly considered inherently didactic, or "not artistic enough" (2017, para. 5). The performative nature of the voice also attracts comment, such as in respect of the "hyper-narration" (Lee, 2017b) employed by Tony Zhou in his YouTube video series *Every Frame a Painting* (for example in *Akira Kurosawa – Composing Movement, 2015*) or in a more aesthetically driven form, such as the particular tone and delivery adopted by Kathleen Loock in her video essay *Reproductive Futurism and the Politics of the Sequel* (2019), which is suggestive of the vocal performance of Sean Young as Rachael in the *Blade Runner* films (Scott, 1982; Villeneuve, 2017). A number of publications feature more general comments on the value of sound to videographic criticism, with Solomon noting, as I already have in this thesis, the distinction that might be drawn when invoking the term audiovisual, to "signal our commitment to the use of sound (including voice, music, and effects) both as an important part of the repertoire of the audiovisual essayist and as a rich field in itself for audiovisual essayists to interrogate" (2019, p. 450). The technical aspects of sound practice in videographic making appear to receive little commentary in these discussions, and where these aspects of videographic work are noted, I have found them most often in peer review statements written by sound literate peer reviewers (for example, Greene on Elduque's *Hunger and Rotten Flesh: Cinema Novo, Pasolini, Eisenstein,* 2016; Rogers on Korsgaard's *Music Video Space*, 2024), suggesting that whilst there is evidence of a broad ambition to feature and foreground sound in videographic work, this has yet to encourage any significant critical discussion of the technical implementation of sound skills within the field. In his report on the symposium *Interrogating the Modes of Videographic Criticism* held in 2022, O'Leary sums up the discussion at the panel on sound with the question, "What happens when sound comes first?" (2022, para. 24), a question I hope to pose to the wider videographic community.

It is worth noting at this juncture that I do not present this research as a ‘paranoid reading’ of the current state of technical sound implementation, or indeed technical skills more broadly in videographic criticism. I use the term ‘paranoid reading’ as explored by Sedgwick (1997, p. 128) and in the context of its use by Peirse in discussing her project *Doing Women’s Global Horror Film History* (2024) on *The Video Essay Podcast* (DiGravio, 2024a). Peirse notes that ‘paranoid reading’ tends to “point out all the gaps, and the failures, and all the flaws, and kinda wagging a finger,” where taking a reparative position is more about nurturing and the use of new knowledge gleaned for a positive purpose (DiGravio, 2024a). Reflecting again on Sedgwick, the idea “that knowledge does rather than simply is” (1997, p. 124) is crucial to the reparative stance this thesis takes. As such, I am not suggesting that video essayists view film solely as a visual artform, but reflecting on my own making experience, I do see how the enticement of the image, for a variety of reasons, can lend to a visio-centric approach to the form. When I started making video essays, I had what I deemed to be enough editing experience to ‘get by', to paraphrase Catharine Grant in her interview for the second episode of *The Video Essay Podcast* (DiGravio, 2019). But I think it is worth clarifying what experience might be deemed necessary to the making of a videographic work such as a video essay. In reflecting on their approach to the *Scholarship in Sound and Image Workshops*, Keathley and Mittell note that they had “everyone start making short videos on the very first day,” despite acknowledging that some of the participants may have no prior experience with editing software (2019, p. 11). This speaks somewhat to the technical skills barrier to making a video essay, which you might infer from this statement to having been set quite low, as opposed to the artistic/creative burden, which can be as high as the maker might wish.

This is not to say that video essays cannot (and do not) demonstrate highly sophisticated editing and related technical skills. As noted in Chapter One, there are other videographic scholars whose work demonstrates highly developed technical skills in sound practice and a number of active scholars with significant technical skills in both hardware and software use. Video essays such as Alan O’Leary’s *No Voiding Time* (2019), Eva Hageman’s *shiplap* (2022), and Barbara Zecchi’s *Once Upon A Screen: That Moment* (2023) also feature highly accomplished soundtracks featuring complex editing, mixing, and use of effects to a very specific end, demonstrating a significant audiovisual effect in the combination of sound and image. The image below taken from the edit for *No Voiding Time* (2019) shows the complexity of the sound mixing adopted by O’Leary for this piece.

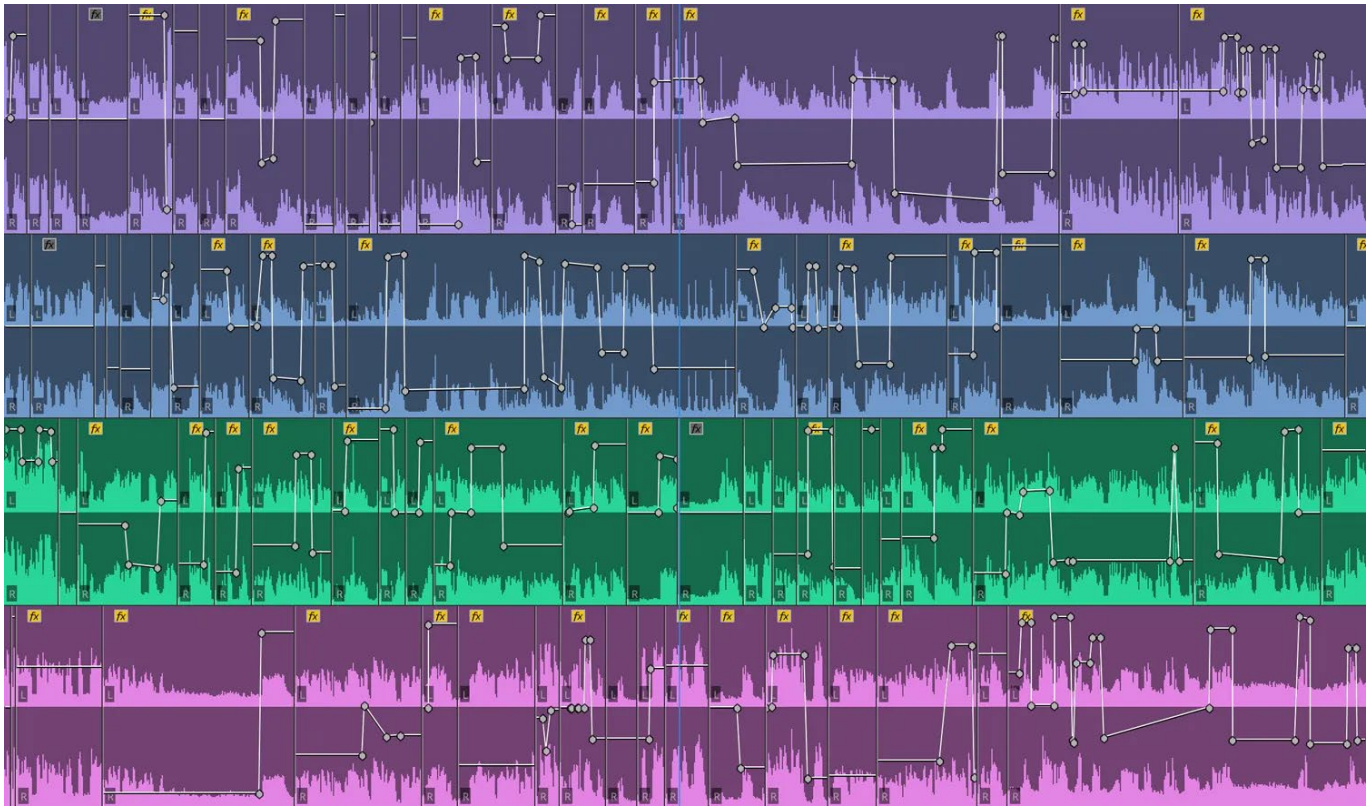

Figure 2.1 Sound mixing in No Voiding Time (2019)

But the fact remains that the fundamental skills that the Middlebury workshops demonstrate to new videographic scholars are deemed to be basic enough to be grasped in short order and have been deemed sufficient to allow for the making of a video essay, and indeed have formed the basis of many works that have been published and which I hold in high regard, such as Hageman's *shiplap* (2022). Not all videographic scholars are able to take advantage of these workshops, with ninety participants passing through the Middlebury workshops since 2015. But the impact of the workshop has extended beyond these 90 participants through the publication of the book *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image* (Keathley, Mittell, and Grant, 2016 and 2019), and then further still via the freely accessible online Scalar book, *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy* (Keathley, Mittell, and Grant, 2019). The critical writing and exercises contained within these publications have formed the basis of a number of curricula in videographic criticism and video essay making (including my own), but it is worth noting that they contain scant detail relating to the technical aspects of videographic practice. I acknowledge, of course, that these publications are not presented as technical primers, but as Richard Misek suggests in the blurb to the 2019 edition of the book, they are offered as being "of great value to teachers, students, critics and videomakers" (Keathley, Mittell, and Grant, 2019), and their popularity is a clear indication of this value. So while participants in the workshops may be afforded technical skills training, these critical accountings of the workshops place little emphasis on the significance of these skills.

A factor that might account for the lack of focus on technical sound skills is the user-friendly nature of the video editing software that is central to the making of videographic work, be it Adobe Premiere Pro, Final Cut, DaVinci Resolve, or open-source solutions such as Shotcut. These pieces of software are designed from the ground up to help the editor with their tasks. And given that the editor's task when using this software is (predominantly) video-based, these applications are inherently and fundamentally visio-centric. This is reflective of the traditional mode of large-scale media post-production practice that still holds true today, where sound editing is largely siloed from the video editing, generally taking place in a different software application (such as Avid Pro Tools), and with sound and picture only coming together in the final mastering of the media, where its synchronicity is "reproduced by an illusionistic technology," as Altman suggests (1980b, p. 79). These factors contribute to and aid one of the guiding principles of the videographic community: that there be as few obstacles as possible between the novice videographic scholar and the production (and dissemination) of their work. This was codified in an editorial written for the German journal ZFM by Johannes Binotto and Evelyn Kreutzer (2023). In their piece, *A Manifesto for Videographic Vulnerability*, they open with the declaration "There is no best practice" and go on to note "Let's not make video essays in order to master anything" (Binotto and Kreutzer, 2023). Sentiments which I do not necessarily disagree with. However, it is my contention that by striving for an inclusive videographic practice, by championing the value of taking an 'amateur' approach to videographic work, and through the machinations of overly helpful editing software, the community has inadvertently marginalised technical sound implementation as part of this practice. To be clear, I am not suggesting that this is the visio-centrism Altman (1980a), and Beck and Grajeda (2008) referred to in more traditional film scholarship manifesting within the videographic community; indeed, there are a number of scholars pursuing sound studies within the community (as noted in Chapter One). I see this more as an unconscious illiteracy in sound that has come to be accepted within the community, largely as a result of a lack of any significant critical debate existing around the technical aspects of videographic making, which I suspect is the result of a positive effort to ensure the broadest possible adoption of the practice. I see this research then as opening a new line of critical discussion in favour of and in support of a more technically adept and technically aware videographic criticism, particularly where sound is concerned. I do not present this as an opposition to Binotto and Kreutzer's manifesto (2023); rather, it might be thought of as a divergent critical response to some of the same "desires and anxieties" about "videographic thought and practice" that instigated Binotto and Kreutzer's work (2023). In my case I sought to quell some of my anxieties about engaging in this novel form of practice by

relying on my pre-existing technical skills in sound, thus bringing me to this discursive moment.

“None of us know more than the others in the room, but we all know different things.”

This is another of the manifesto headlines from Binotto and Kreutzer (2023), and it points towards the next phases of my research. Implicit in this statement is (I feel) an encouragement to those of us who know these “different things” to share them with the community. But in the case of sound literacy and the video essay, I argue that this needs to be quite explicit if the form of the scholarly video essay is to continue to develop as a form of research and scholarship. What form this literacy might take and what might be considered literate enough to get by is less clear. I am not in a position to, nor do I want to, advocate for additional barriers to be placed in the way of the novice video essayist. And I have to acknowledge Faden’s cautionary here that knowing Word does not make one a writer (2008, p. 2). While my own background in sound practice has given me an advantage (of sorts) in this regard, my own sound literacy has not afforded me an innate understanding of a sonically informed videographic practice. To help shape this new practice is not just to have sound skills that transcend the fundamentals of video essay making, but to also acknowledge that new methods might need to be explored and experimented with to make video essays that take the utmost advantage of a sound literacy that is scoped specifically for a community of videographic scholars. Where Grant suggests “we are creating ontologically new scholarly forms” (2014, p. 50), the challenge is to understand what sound specific methods and practices might contribute towards that.

In this chapter, I will explore the framework of experimentation that I established in pursuit of the form and method of a sound-led, sound-literate videographic criticism and reflect on a number of videographic works that resulted from this, considering aspects of method as well as the technical sound skills that informed them. I will also reflect on the videographic portfolio, *Sound Stack*, *Soundwalk*, *Southworth* (2024), which manifested through this experimental process.

“Seek process, not outcome!” A framework for experimentation

Binotto and Kreutzer’s manifesto (2023) reflects here on one of the more challenging aspects of the practice of videographic criticism, and in particular that practice, which seeks to stretch the definitions of the discipline through the implementation of new methods. The reality is that the scholarly practice of the video essay does come with some expectation regarding the outcome; in this case, “new knowledge” (Galibert-Laîné, 2020, para. 10; Morton and Ferguson, 2020, para. 2). But as I have suggested here, part of the process of encouraging a move towards a sound literate videographic practice relies on experimenting with method and process, which accepts that in the profligacy of the experimental process not all outcomes might be considered new knowledge. It is therefore work undertaken in the spirit of, and perhaps in partial answer to, O’Leary’s question, “What would a scholarship be that was rich in texture but uninterested in interpretation?” (2021, p. 80). In pursuit of this experimental goal, I am following in the footsteps of a number of practitioners within the community whose exploratory work I have referred to previously, most notably Jason Mittell through his deformative practice (2019 and 2021) and Alan O’Leary through his work in the guise of OuScholpo (2021 and 2023). A reflection on the work and approach adopted by both Mittell and O’Leary in this regard suggests a means by which my own experimentation might be undertaken.

Deformative practice and videographic experimentation

Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann coined the term “deformative criticism” in the context of Emily Dickinson’s suggestion to read a poem backwards as a means of refreshing the mode of interpretation (1999, p. 28). They suggest that poetic deformations such as that commented on by Dickinson are less about finding meaning but rather a method, or investigative strategy, by which the “possibilities of meaning” of an imaginative work might be exposed (1999, p. 28). Their article suggests a number of poetic deformations that might achieve this end: reordering (such as reading backward), isolating (reading or focusing on only certain parts or elements of a text), altering (variation, changing spatial organisation), and adding (such as the use of markup or hypertext to create linked texts) (1999, pp. 36-37). And whilst these are quite specifically textual deformations, they embrace a transformative impulse to “make the original work strange in some unexpected way” in the quest for a new critical perspective on it (Mittell, 2019, p. 231). While film and media scholars have been much slower to adopt such

deformative techniques in the study of film and television texts, a number of videographic scholars have embraced deformative practice within their videographic criticism. As Mittell notes, “this [reticence] stems from the challenges of transforming moving images and sounds into data that can be treated algorithmically” (2019, p. 224). These challenges include the complexities of the computational infrastructure required to digitise, store, and manipulate a film's sounds and images, which is significantly more involved than that required for text data. And then, even for the scholar who might wish to explore the possibilities of deformative practice, there is the question of method. In what way might they make the work strange? In his 2019 chapter *Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method*, Mittell argues that the imposition of “arbitrary parameters” on videographic practice might “generate works that emerge less from aesthetic intent than from unexpected generative outcomes” (p. 231). Mittell suggests the popular deformative practice of the videographic PechaKucha is a good example of an investigation based on a set of simple parameters, which allows a scholar to ‘play’ with the material (albeit within the constraints set) and also to replicate the process on other media texts, using only video editing software. This play, which Mittell suggests is part of the PechaKucha, is echoed by filmmaker Jennifer Procter in her article *Teaching avant-garde practice as videographic research* (2019). Reflecting on Sample’s Deformed Humanities, she refers to it as “a practice of play...all for its own sake” (2019, p. 468). Procter goes on to suggest that avant-garde filmmaking, particularly that which works with found or pre-existing footage, “involve deconstructing, destroying, rebuilding, deforming, reorganising, decentring, erasing” (2019, p. 469), making a case for employing avant-garde in videographic practice as “a small resistance to disciplinary disparities in academia” (2019, p. 474).

In respect of the parametrisation of videographic processes, Mittell mentions Oulipo, the French artistic collective founded in the early 1960’s that explored constraint-based writing (Mittell, 2019; Thomas, 1988). The collective also features in Alan O’Leary’s article *Workshop of Potential Scholarship: Manifesto for a Parametric Videographic criticism* (2021). O’Leary suggests a “luxury [videographic] scholarship,” one that embraces waste and employs arbitrary parameters in its creation, in the making (2021, p. 82). He also embraces Mark Sample’s maxim that “the deformed text is the end” (2012, para. 13), suggesting that “this videographic pataphysics aspires to be sufficient in itself and treats as incidental any empirical findings about its 'source' texts” (O’Leary, 2021, p. 82). O'Leary’s work is part provocation, part invitation to the wider videographic community to engage in an iterative

experimental process that might result in novel deformative methods, not unlike Mittell's PechaKucha. His subsequent deformative video essay, *Men Shouting: A History in Seven Episodes* (2023) demonstrates some of the results of his own experimental process, working with a programmer as collaborator who used the programming language Python to deform the source media objects in line with instructions provided by O'Leary. The resulting video essay, one of the most avowedly deformative works to be published in a peer review journal, is redolent of O'Leary's "cyborg scholar" (2023, p. 79).

Accepting either the provocation or invitation implicit in Mittell and O'Leary's work is to acknowledge that moving towards a form of videographic practice that more readily embraces technical aspects of sound literacy requires research and experimentation at the likely expense of an outcome (the expected practical outcome here being a complete and publishable video essay). Mittell suggests, I feel, a valuable insight in respect of this endeavour and one that offers some encouragement to the process;

> Too often, the humanities frames "research" as the finished products of scholarship: the book, the essay, the lecture. But research and its associated methodologies are not limited to the final product of scholarship; rather, the processes of discovery and experimentation are often the more exciting and insightful parts of scholarly endeavors, and it is in such processes that methodologies are used and developed (2019, p. 228).

It is also through Mittell's deformative research that I first encountered the idea of applying this kind of experimentation to sound within videographic practice. In reflecting on one of the deformations he undertook as part of his 2021 project *Deformin'in the Rain: How (and Why) to Break a Classic Film*, he notes that an asynchronous experiment featuring "the sound lagging around two seconds behind [the picture] was simply annoying, not revelatory nor pleasurable" (para. 4). A review of the other deformations he presents as part of this project shows how sound does figure (as part of his equalised-pulse deformations, for instance), but it is most often deformed as a by-product of the parameter or constraint applied to the media object as a whole, most often led by consideration of the image as opposed to a sonically informed deformation. And of course, some of the deformations—the gifs, the volumetric

investigations—neglect the soundtrack entirely. Mittell addresses the difficulties of sonic deformations, noting that "sound is the realm of deformation that needs more expansion and development," and he acknowledges the wide-ranging possibilities of sonic deformation that might be explored in the future" (2021, para. 49).

This second phase of my research then centres around a period of experimental practice, where I seek to gain a better understanding of how sound literacy and a sonically informed method might contribute towards the developing form of the scholarly video essay. This is informed and encouraged by the work of Mittell (2019, 2021) and O'Leary (2021) and chooses to embrace the opportunities to undertake playful (and perhaps wasteful) research with less concern being given to outcome and more focus on process and method. To give some direction to this phase of practice, I have defined three broad categories of deformative methods that are worth consideration based on a review of the literature on the topic.

The first are those deformations that derive from literature studies and are largely text-based in nature. While there is a possibility that text-based approaches could be applied to scripts and screenplays, the broader intention of the deformations is more encouraging of a parametric basis for sonic deformance. For instance, in the context of reading backwards, Anne McGuire adopted an approach very similar to this in her work *Strain Andromeda The* (1992), which presented a deformed version of Robert Wise's 1972 film *The Andromeda Strain*, where she "re-edited it shot-by-shot precisely in reverse, so that the last shot appears first and the first last, though nothing is actually running backwards" (Video Data Bank, 2024, para. 1).

Second are deformations which employ specific software to facilitate the making of the new material. Software in this category might be adapted for use in deformative practice, though it is often not developed for that purpose. Software such as ImageJ, developed by Wayne Rasband (and its successor Fiji), or StarStaX, developed by Markus Enzweiler, each have a specific primary function, but they can (and have) also be adapted/adopted for the purposes of informative videographic criticism (such as Kevin L. Ferguson's *Volumetric Cinema,* 2015). Other software might be leveraged into use for the purposes of videographic (or sonic) deformations against its original design (a deformation of its original usage if you will). This is

likely to be a fruitful avenue of exploration in sound terms, where there are a host of small applications (plugins) that run as part of a Digital Audio Workstation or video editing software that might be used for tasks such as noise reduction, equalisation of frequency, and management of volume (a good example being the Izotope RX software referred to in Chapter One). Conscious misuse of these tools may offer up some interesting deformative strategies for sound.

The third category of deformations are largely based in the video editing software already used by videographic critics. Video editing software already accounts for the production of a number of deformative endevours in videographic criticism, such as the PechaKucha and Mittell's 'equalised-pulse' as well as Matt Payne's constraint-based experiments as discussed by O'Leary (2020). But even the simplest video essay has at its heart a deformative impulse, where a new text is created through the manipulation, destruction, and remaking of the original work. The current crop of editor-based, constrained deformations tends to default to the shot or the frame as their metric for selection and dissection (such as O'Leary's *No Voiding Time*, 2019), and this is likely not an approach that will benefit a deformative practice where the focus is on sound, for as Chion notes, "the editing of film sounds has created no specific sound unit" (1994, p. 41). There are, however, other aspects of the editor that are worth investigating in sound terms, such as the ability to unpack a multi-channel soundtrack into its individual component tracks (as discussed in Chapter One). Each of these three deformative categorisations forms the basis for a body of explorative, sound-led works as part of this phase of my research.

The manner of presentation of this phase of practice bears some consideration as it pertains to the direction of travel that my thesis takes into Chapter Three. In respect of this phase of practice, I chose to launch a public blog (*Deformative Sound Lab*) to publish and reflect on my experimentation. A number of videographic critics already host some form of blog or website to collect and reflect on their practice (Johannes Binotto, Evelyn Kreutzer, Oswald Iten, and Alison Peirse have well developed online presences). Mark Sample also hosts a blog, which he uses to explore and expand on his deformative projects in the Digital Humanities. In these cases, there is a balance between critical analysis, thought-shaping, and the exploration of work, both published and in progress. In discussing the blog as part of the PhD research process, Efimova describes its value in "dealing with fuzzy insights, sense-making,

and turning ideas into a dissertation text" (2009, p. 289). The choice of a public blog also opens this aspect of my research to the wider videographic community. As noted earlier in this chapter, I see this phase of research and experimentation as the opening gambits in an ongoing effort to explore and expand on a form of videographic sound literacy. To do this 'in the open' so to speak, seems like the most effective way of beginning that process and engaging with practitioners who might find some common ground with the work I am doing.

Deformative Sound Lab

I approached the *Deformative Sound Lab* blog in the spirit of Mark Sample's maxim, "The deformed work is the end, not the means to the end" (2012, para. 13). Sample makes the point in this blog post that his assessment of deformative work in the humanities (at the time) demonstrated a tendency for the deformance to circle back to the original text, suggesting that the deformative process and experimentation had to then lead to an outcome (Binotto and Kreutzer's 2023 manifesto cautions against this). As noted earlier, this is an inevitable consequence of practice within the academic space. Something like O'Leary's "unnecessary, luxury scholarship" is only provocative because it flies in the face of received wisdom (2021, p. 82). My blog seeks to make a similar statement/provocation and is explicit in the use of the 'lab' moniker.

In her 2004 article, *The Exegesis and the Shock of the New*, Barbara Bolt considers the nature of research practice, noting that, in an ideal situation, it "cannot know or preconceive its outcome" (p. 3). She argues that rather than approaching research with a preconceived notion of the end product, the goal should be to avoid intentional thinking to fully explore the "shock of the new" as part of the experimental form (2004, p. 2). Bolt suggests that this output is then exposed to scholarly exploration through exegesis. It is in this phase of the process that the written word might be used to confront and reflect on the idea arrived at through practice. My blog acknowledges this ambition, with each experiment embracing the potential "shock of the new," but then also being subject to a text-based interrogation and reflection to explore how and if any formal or methodological discoveries made through the experiment might contribute to my ongoing research. At the time of writing, there are eighteen entries in the blog. Not all are videographic, and not all have proven relevant to the development of this thesis. I contend that all, however, have been useful in terms of honing

an experimental (and playful) practice. The following offers a reflection on three of these interventions guided by the deformative categorisations I referred to above. I have included a link to the full blog in Appendix I.

Deformative criticism (as coined by Samuels and McGann, 1999) is couched in literature studies and, as such, is chiefly concerned with experimental modes of reading and textual deformations. Intervening in a film's text could take a number of forms, but I chose to take a quite literal approach and use the script as a means of deformation. In keeping with the iterative practice I referred to in Chapter One, I chose to work with a film I already had digitised in my editing software, David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995). The goal with this first deformative experiment was to find a way to engage with the textual elements of the film while at the same time removing as much of my own agency from the process as possible, so as to have the output be as truly reflective of the experimental process as possible. The approach adopted here was partly directed by Ferguson's writings on digital surrealism (2017) and digital humanities. Ferguson's work suggests that we (film and media scholars) might embrace digital humanities methods as part of our research and analysis. Miriam Posner offers a broad but useful definition of the digital humanities as "the use of digital tools to explore humanities questions" (2018, p. 331). Posner reflects on the use of the word 'explore' here as a purposeful nod towards the fact that many, if not most, humanities' questions "do not have cut and dried answers" (2018, p. 331). She acknowledges that this definition looks to incorporate the broadest possible church of Digital Humanities and does indeed go on to suggest the inclusion of videographic criticism in it (citing Grant's *All the Pastiche Allows*, 2012). Ferguson's work is more explicitly software-driven; in his *Digital Surrealism* project (from 2017), he uses the medical imaging software ImageJ to create summed images of Disney films, and in discussing the work and the manner in which we (film and media scholars) might engage with the digital humanities, he includes the following from Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, suggesting that we "reduce the text to a few elements, and abstract them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, artificial object" (2005, p. 53). For this experiment, entitled *Se7en Sin Subtitle Edit* (2022a), I have followed Morretti's suggestion quite literally. Sourcing a subtitle file for the film, I chose a word (in this case 'sin') and searched the subtitle file for all the occurrences, thus the process of reduction. I created a new subtitle file that included only those lines featuring the word 'sin' and used that to create an EDL. An EDL, or Edit Decision List, is a simple file that can be read by most video editing software and contains information about the location and duration of edits to be

made to a piece of footage. In this case, the EDL file instructed my video editing software (DaVinci Resolve) to make edits to my digital copy of *Se7en* (1995), extracting each line where the word ‘sin’ was used and abstracting this word from the film’s text. These clips, eleven in all, were then lined up and exported as a new video, bringing about my newly constructed object. I suggest that the reader take a moment to review the *Se7en Sin Subtitle Edit* (2022a) experimental video before reading any further.

In keeping with my stated goal for this experiment, my agency in this process is minimal, limited to the choice of word and film, which I tried not to dwell on for too long. The cut points and the length of each clip are dictated by the timing in the subtitle file, so the end result is actually driven by timing choices based on the subtitle reading speed rather than the absolute synchronisation of sound and visual information. From a technical standpoint, this experiment might seem largely devoid of the need for any sound specific editing skills, but I suggest that this is actually a good example of where the invisible aspects of sound editing are apparent. The lack of agency afforded to me in the editing of the clips in this experiment resulted in hard cuts across the film’s audio track, which could result in a digital distortion (an audible ‘click’) occurring at the transition between clips. This is a simple reality of the audio editing process, which can be dealt with through either careful choice of the audio edit point or the use of a small fade-in or fade-out at the cut point. In this particular instance, these edits did benefit from short fades being applied, only a few frames in length. Too short to be noticeable to the viewer/auditor, but long enough to remove the audible click of distortion at the edit point. This is a minor technical skill, one which would be considered fundamental to a sound editor, but as I have suggested already, one which is not necessarily fundamental to the videographic critic, who may not be aware of the need for such a technical intervention, never mind how to undertake it. The result of not appreciating the value of this particular aspect of sound literacy is cumulative, with a single video essay possibly featuring tens if not hundreds of edits that could produce an audible click. This might only seem to be a small issue within the larger complexities involved in the making of a video essay, but its omission (manifest in many video essays I have watched and listened to) is emblematic of a broad lack of technical sound skills.

Shortly after completing this piece, I became aware of Sam Lavigne’s software project *Videogrep*, which achieves the same end as I have here but automates the process more than

I've been able. *Videogrep* is a Python-based program, and though I have had some success using Python in other deformative experiments, I was unable to get *Videogrep* to work on my particular computer. More recently, the website getyarn.io offers users the option to search a database of video clips by quote (or word), which does note quite achieve the same end result but does offer some interesting functionality in terms of the arbitrariness of the results one might get for a particular search.

The following section discusses the experiments *From the Next Room* (2022b) and *Noisy Jaws* (2022c), and I suggest the reader review these two short videos in full before reading further. The use of specific software in this research phase opened up a number of interesting avenues for experimentation, and quite a few of my experimental works exploit the vast catalogue of software already available for the manipulation of sound. In some cases (such as the experiment *From the Next Room*, 2022b), I have used the software as intended, in this case a reverb processor, which allowed me to create the impression of overhearing a film, *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), playing on a television in another room. In other cases, I have misused the software, such as with *Noisy Jaws* (2022c), where I have used a piece of noise reduction software called Deconstruct (by the company iZotope) to enhance the 'noise' it perceives to be present in certain clips from Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). In the written reflection on both of these pieces, I have noted those aspects of the new deformed work that I find interesting or surprising. I do not make (or at least try not to make) any claims to new research discoveries or revelations through these processes, but I do present them as novel uses of audio related software where there exists research potential and also to simply showcase the fact that this software exists. In this respect, I take some inspiration from Binotto's *Metaleptic Attack* and its use of specific video and audio tools (in this case, physical devices) to "attack the film" (2021). Where both mine and Binotto's experiments tend towards a deformed or extremist use of audio software and hardware in the making of experimental videographic work, they also indicate the existence of more 'utilitarian' audio software, more in keeping with the reverberation processor I used in *From the Next Room* (2022b). Effects such as equalisation, which allows for the boosting and cutting of audio frequencies, or dynamic control, which can help to even out the volume levels of a voiceover performance, are built into all modern video editing software (alongside a variety of other audio tools), but their use, unlike perhaps the use of fades as mentioned earlier, does require a certain sound literacy. This literacy, first and foremost, is one that is able to identify the need for a software intervention, and as I have noted already, if this is a literacy whose value

is not promoted within the community of videographic critics, then this ability is less likely to be promoted within that community. So, my experiments here (and indeed my use of the Ambeo mixing plugin in the making of my 2020 video essay *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound*) also function as a promotion of the existence of this software, to bring a discussion of sound literacy and the value of this to videographic criticism into sharper relief.

As noted earlier, where the video editor has been employed as a means for deformative experimentation and play, the prevailing tendency has been to focus on the image content in the video. Some works, though, such as in the case of Ferguson's *Volumetric Cinema* (2015), take a multi-stage approach to the deformative process, using additional software alongside the video editor to select, deform, and then compile the newly deformed text into a coherent video essay. While the deformations employed by Ferguson are distinctly image-led, they have the advantage of not necessarily adhering to what Anderson refers to as "cinema's traditional unit of analysis: the frame" (2020, para. 7). In reflecting on Ferguson's work, Anderson goes on to suggest that it is this very negation of the frame that might explain why "such techniques have not gained broader acceptance among video essayists" (2020, para. 7). But for this project, it is this very negation of the frame that opens up the possibility of employing some of Ferguson's deformative methods to the soundtrack, which also negates the frame.

The video essay, which would eventually become *Sound Stack* (2024a), began as a *Deformative Sound Lab* experiment inspired by Ferguson's ongoing work on *Film Visualization* (2024). Here Ferguson uses the medical imaging software ImageJ, but this time the goal is to visualise the entirety of a film in a single image. The process involves extracting images from a digital copy of the film (Ferguson suggests one frame every two to three seconds), which are then processed through ImageJ using a function called Z Project. This process stacks all the extracted images on top of each other, summing together their contents into one composite image. Ferguson has performed this process on over three hundred films, which are collected on his blog. I based my initial experiment on this process but added an extra step starting in the video editor. Using a scene from *The Double* (Ayoade, 2013), I annotated all the sound effects I could hear in a short scene, adding a text layer on top of the video that stayed on screen for the duration of that particular sound in the scene. For instance, the scene featured a prominent copier sound, so each time that sound effect occurred, the word

‘copier would appear on screen. The annotated video was then exported from my video editing software and run through the frame extraction and Z projection processes that Ferguson uses. The result is a composite image of the scene, with the addition of my textual annotations listing the sound effects. Because I had added the text in white, and through the process of the summing of the individual frames, my final visualisation image shows the sounds that could be heard in the scene, with the most prominent being easily readable in bolder text and the more fleeting sounds being much fainter.

Figure 2.2 The Double Sound Stack annotated sound visualisation (2022d)

Movement is fundamental to the production and propagation of sound, and so, in a literal sense, a stilled image lacks the guiding element that Belton notes is required for the sonic “realisation” of the moving image (Belton and Weis, 1985, p. 70). However, the still image has been and continues to be an important artefact for both the film scholar and the cinephile. In her preface to *Death 24X a second: Stillness and the moving image* Laura Mulvey elaborates on the difficulties inherent in accessing a true film still in the 1970’s when she began writing about film: “Only professionals, directors, and editors had easy access to the flatbed editing tables that broke down the speed needed to create the illusion of ‘natural’ movement” (2006, p. 7). The elusive nature of the stilled film would only come within the easy control of the scholar (and the consumer) with the advent of VCR’s, then LaserDisc, and on to DVD and the current crop of digital delivery formats (and as I noted earlier, these formats also brought with them the multi-channel digital soundtrack). Each successive iteration has delivered a

higher-quality image, giving an ever-increasing amount of access to the detail that Barthes sought within the still (Wollen, 2003, p. 76). With this detail in mind, Mulvey's book is something of a remediation of close textual analysis as liberated through technological advancement (Fischer, 2017, p. 431). However, within this mode of close reading, Mulvey acknowledges a tension that exists between a holistic view of the narrative in its original form and the desire to slow down the film's forward progression. Mulvey's noting the problematic nature of what she calls "delayed cinema" (2006, p. 8) and its impact on the film takes the theorisation of the stilled film beyond Barthes' aesthetic preference for photography, which resolved as something of a "prejudice...against narrative" (Wollen, 2003, p. 76).

This experiment is my attempt to bring the still image and sound together within what Wollen refers to as Barthes 'free rewriting time' (2003, p. 76), allowing for what Santas refers to as the "deliberate process" of reading a film, which can only take place "after the fact," i.e., the watching of the film (2002, pp. 76-77). In the normal course of events, any engagement with Mulvey's "delayed cinema" (Mulvey, 2006, p. 8) in this fashion would be a silent one, and I acknowledge that the result here, *The Double Sound Stack* (Donnelly, 2022d), is indeed silent, but crucially, the soundtrack is still represented within the stilled image. After I published this blog, Alan O'Leary suggested that I could take this experiment a stage further by engaging with Ferguson's later work with ImageJ in the creation of his video essay *Volumetric Cinema* (2015).

What would eventually become the video essay *Sound Stack* (2024a) and the attendant portfolio of additional research began with this suggestion from O'Leary. I feel it is worth reflecting on this intervention as it suggests a validation of sorts for the "luxury scholarship," which O'Leary himself proposed (2021, p. 82). I presented *The Double Sound Stack* (2022d) as the deformed text on my blog. It was, as Sample suggests, the end in itself, not necessarily the means towards the making of anything else, but a provocation to myself and others, presented in much the same way as O'Leary presented his manifesto or Mittell's deformative works on *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen and Kelly, 1952). It is only through O'Leary's subsequent intervention and his suggestion regarding the onward progression of the experimental process that a formal method of research was derived from the experiment. As part of my rationale for the formation of the *Deformative Sound Lab* blog, I did suggest that it might provide a

means for engaging with the wider videographic community, and this small, though incredibly valuable, intervention by O'Leary is the first hint of the value I will find in a more significant collaboration with the videographic community in my final project, *Super Volume*.

Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth - a practice as research portfolio

The following section discusses the research portfolio *Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth* which comprises three videographic works. I suggest the reader view the video essay *Sound Stack* (2024a) in its entirety before reading further. The *Sound Stack tutorial* (2024b) and *Taking Delight* (2024c) are both significantly longer works, and I will refer the reader to specific portions of each for review during the following discussion.

Where I quoted Anderson earlier, reflecting on Ferguson's original *Volumetric Cinema* video essay, he wrote, "I would speculate that the reason such techniques have not gained broader acceptance among video essayists is not the technical complexity of the software" (2020, para. 7). My experience of extending my initial experimental method using some of this software (and others) shows that there is a significant complexity here, one that elongates the (sometimes) already protracted process of video essay making and one that can lead to significant bottlenecks and dead ends in the workflow. This is a technical complexity entirely aside from that which I have already alluded to in terms of sound literacy, but the fact remains that the wider community of videographic critics and scholarly journals does not, and has not, set any expectations on technical literacy for the videographic critic or technical standards to be adhered to in the creation of a piece of videographic criticism. I believe this is an intentional decision based on inclusivity with the goal of maintaining a low entry level of technical skills required to create a piece of videographic criticism, but it also means there is (potentially) a significant jump from this low entry level of skill to the complexities required to make something like *Volumetric Cinema* (2015), or indeed the technical sound skills I have discussed already. *Sound Stack* (2024a) provided me with an opportunity to embrace this technical complexity in the spirit of my experimental process and seek to exploit it in the exploration of the sound led videographic form.

The method that I used to make the video essay *Sound Stack* (2024a) is a multi-stage process involving video editing software, the medical imaging software Fiji (an upgraded version of

ImageJ), and the sound and image toolkit FFmpeg. In the process of defining the method, however, I was still mindful of the goal of this kind of experimentation and play: to try to adhere to Bolt's suggestion to avoid intentional thinking and any preconceived notions about what the outcome of the process might be (2004), but to also seek to explore the form of the scholarly video essay with a view to engaging the community in a discussion about sound literacy. I felt that any new formal videographic method that I might define through this phase of experimentation might be best employed in revisiting my earlier video essays to see how or if I might be able to extend that research. My choice to revisit *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2022) was (in the early stages of the experimentation) less about the soundscape research that had informed that work and more about the need to select a film (and a scene) to work with. As noted in Chapter One, *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020) explored the soundscapes of three newsrooms as represented in the films *Zodiac* (Fincher, 2007), *The Post* (2017, Spielberg), and *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976). In the making of this video essay, I spent some time working with *Zodiac* (2007), in part because of the iterative process I have discussed previously, which directed some of my experimental work, but also because Fincher's long-time sound designer Ren Klyce has spoken quite a bit about his work on Fincher's films. Given that the experimental method I was working with concerned the annotation of scenes in terms of the sound effects they contained, Klyce's incredibly detailed work re-creating the sound of the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom seemed an appropriate experimental testbed.

The process of creating the *Sound Stack* visualisation is, as previously noted, quite complex, but a brief overview of the steps involved might usefully expose where the experimentation in this work stops and the practice as research begins. As with the blog experiments that birthed this method, the process begins in the video editing software with the annotation of the sounds heard in the scene. In this case, I was annotating an early newsroom scene from *Zodiac* (2007), which included a number of layers of sounds. So as to allow for maximum flexibility in the manipulation of the video and text in the volumetric visualisation, the video and text were exported as two separate files from the editing software. Again, following the original process, frames were extracted from the video files, which could then be imported into the medical imaging software Fiji and image 'stacks' created. These stacks were then manipulated in 3D space using a text-driven animation plugin for Fiji. This allowed for the stack of images, both those extracted from the film scene and those extracted from the sound annotations, to be viewed and explored from a number of angles and through a number

of animated moves in 3D space. These animations (when complete) could then be output from Fiji, transcoded to an appropriate video format, and brought back into the video editing software where they could be further edited (if desired). Even this brief exploration of the process reveals something of its complexities, but it also contains the seeds of what would become the video essay *Sound Stack* (2024a).

As I revised and reviewed the method of creating the annotated visualisations, I realised that the annotation process itself was a significant variable. Working as I was with a scene that I had already researched, I was already aware of the specific models of typewriters used in the scene (the IBM Selectric Type 1). This information is not revealed within the film, and I am not sufficiently expert in typewriter identification to know this myself, but as with other films that purport to offer representations of real events, times, and places, there was a significant amount of paratextual material around the film that revealed this information. So my annotations reflected this detail where I could find it. But my annotations were also reflecting other, more generic sounds, particularly those that seeped into the newsroom from the city beyond. In *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound*, I reflected on these sounds as the "hi-fi representation of the lo-fi city soundscape" (Donnelly, 2020), referring here to the soundscape research by Schaefer (1993). These sounds were easy to classify: sirens, engines, and horns, but I could find no specific information about their origin or their authenticity within the San Francisco soundscape. It was at this point then that this method of sound annotation and visualisation suggested the direction that this particular video essay might take. *Sound Stack* (2024a) questions the perceived allure of authenticity within the film soundtrack, particularly where that information (such as the specific model of typewriter) is not a material part of the diegesis. The direction in which the final video essay takes is largely indebted to another soundscape researcher, Michael Southworth (1967), who was writing about the soundscape around the same time as R. Murray Schafer but doing so from the perspective of city planning, where he was concerned with the sound design of cities. The questions raised by the annotation and visualisation about the authenticity of the soundscape jibed with Southworth's findings about the (often) anonymous nature of city soundscapes and the lack of 'delight' that one might take in an aural appreciation of the city.

The final output from this process of experimentation, iteration, and research is a practice as research portfolio, which, I feel, gives a good account of this particular phase of my project

towards a better understanding of how, and where, technical skills, sound literacy, and experimentation with sound, method, and form might contribute towards the development of videographic criticism and practice. The portfolio consists of three linked works: the video essay *Sound Stack* (2024a), a tutorial video on the *Sound Stack* visualisation process (2024b), and an annotated recording of a soundwalk in Boston (2024c). The tutorial video is included here for a number of reasons. In the original blog post about my first experiment, I included a short how-to video, which was as much about playing with the form of the tutorial as anything else. It did remind me of the value I had found in watching YouTube tutorials over the years (Andrew Kramer's extended series on After Effects, for example), but also in the very specific case of using the medical imaging software Fiji, I was indebted to the YouTube tutorials created by Johanna M. Dela Cruz (2021). Given the difficulty I have already demonstrated earlier in this chapter explaining the method of the annotation process, I decided quite early in the making of the *Sound Stack* (2024a) video essay that I would create a tutorial to cover the process. I saw this as an opportunity to lay open the making process, much in the way that the *Deformative Sound Lab* blog had allowed me to do with some of my shorter videographic experiments, but also to do so in a way that engaged directly with the videographic community in the exploration of a technically challenging and sonically inclined aspect of making. I chose to run two online tutorials with other video essayists in late 2023, where I discussed the *Sound Stack* (2024a) visualisation process. This gave me an opportunity to gather 'real world' questions, which I could feed into the final thirty-four-minute tutorial video, as well as to engage directly in a discussion about the potential value of this kind of software intervention in videographic making. An example of how this interaction with the tutorial participants informed the final tutorial video can be seen in the *Sound Stack Tutorial* at 00.18.36 (2024b).

Taking Delight (2024c), the annotated soundwalk, which I include here, is almost another form of O'Leary's "luxury scholarship" (2021, p. 82). I was able to arrange a three-hour stopover in Boston on my way to a videographic workshop taking place in Bowdoin, Maine, in summer 2023. Southworth's original soundscape research, *The Sonic Environment of Cities*, which he wrote as part of his Master's studies in 1967, included a soundwalk that he took participants on (some blindfolded and pushed in wheelchairs) so they could 'report' on the soundscape as they encountered it. At the time, Southworth noted that he was unable to make a satisfactory recording of the sound walk (1967, p. 24). Using the map included in Southworth's thesis, I reconstructed the original walk (taking account of some architectural

changes to the city) and retraced Southworth's route, making an audio recording of the entire route. The eighty-eight-minute video is annotated with reflections on Southworth's original research and my own reflections on the process.

While I welcome the reader to review the soundwalk in its entirety, I have selected here some points of interest that give a good overview of the content, tone, and technical process of making the soundwalk. I suggest that the reader view/listen to the opening three-minutes thirty-seconds, which gives some explanation of the context of the soundwalk and also some insight into how it is structured. At 00.05.15 I note how the nature of the city soundscape has clearly been affected by technology and changing commuter habits, factors that have significantly altered the city in the years since Southworth's research and which are evident in the current soundscape (see, for example, 00.31.22). The fact that I have no recording of the 1967 soundscape to compare to and must rely on the observations of Southworth and his participants for context does invoke Schafer's entreaties to archive our soundscapes before they are lost to us (1993). The technical aspects of recording this soundwalk are reflected in my attempts to mitigate wind noise at 00.19.33 and again at 00.42.27, where I question the source of some interference in the recording. Though I acknowledge that the portfolio might not need this soundwalk to complete it, the opportunity to undertake it, to not only practice the research but to participate in it in a way, was a revelatory experience.

Reflecting on this phase of my research validates a number of the drivers for this thesis. I set out in this phase of my work to better understand how sound features in videographic scholarship, both in a formal and a technical sense, which led me to a process of exploration and experimentation informed by deformative practice. My blog became a useful platform with which to engage in the wider videographic community and promote my research, as well as proving a useful resource for me in terms of applying my technical sound skills and knowledge to videographic criticism. The value of the blog and of this experimental phase of practice is reflected in the publication of the practice portfolio *Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth,* which has been accepted for publication in Screenworks in 2024. But the value of this work, in particular the *Sound Stack Tutorial* (2024b), is crucial to the stated aims of this research. The online tutorials that I ran with other video essayists demonstrated to me a willingness within the community to engage in a more technically informed videographic criticism, particularly one that encourages the scholar and maker to think differently about

sound and how they might use it or expose it through their videographic practice. The next phase of my research would seek to build upon this initial dialogue with the community, seeking to engage in a more specific, more focused discussion on the value of sound literacy in videographic criticism with a larger audience.

Chapter Three

Moving into the final phase of my thesis research, I was keen to find a way in which I could create a videographic output that could extend my research into the wider community of videographic makers. The portfolio of work I had created around *Sound Stack* (2024a) showed me a way that I could undertake a videographic project with a broader scope, developing my research in an open access framework, and engaging with the community in the making of and exploration of the work. I was heartened by the response and attendance at the online *Sound Stack* tutorials, and I inferred from this engagement that there was an appetite within the community to explore technical methods of videographic making (something of an extension of the engagement I had found in the making of *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank*, 2021). This experience suggested to me that any lack of technical skills, sound or otherwise, that might exist within the community of makers is not intentional or wilful but rather a reasoned position taken based on the minimum skill set that the community has elected, unconsciously or otherwise, as a collective to accept in the making of videographic work. As previously noted, just because I perceive this minimum skillset to exist does not mean that it exists equally across all makers, or indeed across all aspects of technical inclination. O'Leary has embraced the use of Python programming in the creation of his video essay, *Men Shouting: A History in 7 Episodes* (2023). In the completion of this work, he was assisted by the programmer Lucie Vršovská, making the best use of the coding language while perhaps not getting mired in the frustrations of learning the code. But I contend that my experience working in and with the videographic community has demonstrated to me that sound and the technical skills required to manipulate it are less of an immediate concern within the myriad aspects of video essay making. In the final reckoning of this thesis, I felt that my project needed to disrupt this broad culture of acceptance in some way and engage directly (if somewhat obliquely) with the gaps in sound literacy that I perceived to exist within the videographic community. In many ways, the project would perform the role of a FUI, the fantasy user interfaces that are so often seen in film and television, which I discussed in Chapter One, offering participants a way to "visualises an otherwise invisible or inaccessible object" (2018, para. 7), the invisible object in this case being the technical sound skills gap I perceived to exist. Just as the *Sound Stack tutorial* had encouraged a number of the participants to experiment with volumetric visualisations in their work, I hoped that this project might encourage more practitioners to consider the value of sound in their videographic practice and thereby the value of becoming more sonically aware, with a more

developed technical aptitude then paving the way for greater latitude in the exploration of the aesthetics of sound practice. To this end, I created a participant experiment called *Super Volume*.

Super Volume: A Videographic Project about Depictions of Volume in Television & Film

Super Volume acknowledges (and exposes) a number of important factors about the presence of any sound in a film: the fact that it is subject to manipulation, that it is carefully chosen, edited, and mixed by a number of expert individuals. Also, it is subject to certain conventions of sound production practice, and it is also governed by limitations that exist regarding the maximum permissible volume that might feature in a film soundtrack created for public exhibition. All of these factors shape (and are shaped) by the way in which we might see the volume of a sound manipulated by a character on screen, but nothing perhaps as much as the 'performance' of the manipulation by a sound engineer, mapping their movements to those they see on screen.

Figure 3.1 Volume mixing in Berberian Sound Studio (2012)

My background in sound production and practice suggested that I direct the participant aspect of this project towards a practical engagement with sound manipulation, mimicking, in some sense, professional sound production practice. I settled on volume as the focus of this project for a number of reasons. Though something of an abstract concept, it is also one that everyone has some experience with, both in conceptual and practical terms. It is a key

technical and artistic component of almost every piece of audiovisual material, and, in terms of my own provocations for this project, the mixing and manipulation of volume for various audio sources is a foundational aspect of the creation of a video essay, given that most videographic works will feature at least two audio tracks playing simultaneously, and in some cases, many more than this (a brief survey carried out on the Videographic Discord community page showed video essays in progress to feature anything from four to nine simultaneously playing audio tracks). My own video essay *Sound Before Picture* (2023) featured sound clips from 39 different films mixed into an audio montage lasting five-minutes and forty-six-seconds. This was both an editing and mixing challenge, with the number and selection of clips changing every few seconds, requiring the careful balancing of the volume of several simultaneous audio tracks. *Sound Before Picture* (2023) was also made specifically with cinema exhibition in mind, with its first public screening being at the Marienbad Film Festival in 2023. This added an additional layer of technical challenge, where I also needed to consider how my sound mix would translate when played back in an auditorium or cinema. Given that more festivals are now accepting video essays for exhibition, more careful thought needs to be given to the translation of the video essay soundtrack, from laptop to headphones to potential playback in a cinema space. The control and manipulation of volume is key to this translation.

The impact that volume manipulation can have on the success or otherwise of a piece of audiovisual media has been felt by the wider viewing and listening public. In 2014, the BBC received over one hundred complaints about the unintelligibility of the dialogue in its new flagship drama, *Jamaica Inn* (Lowthorpe), forcing it to re-mix the sound levels for episode two before broadcast. More recently, filmmakers have been widely criticised for the mixes of their films being either too loud (Newell et al., 2016) or, again, featuring dialogue that is impossible to hear (Johnston, 2014; Mapp, 2019). Christopher Nolan has received several accolades for the quality of the soundtracks in his films (with his sound team winning Academy Awards for the sound work on *The Dark Knight* 2008, *Inception* 2010, and *Dunkirk* 2017), but Nolan has also received his fair share of criticism, again centred on the intelligibility of dialogue in his films. Altman notes that this model of intelligibility, focused squarely on the paramount significance of the narrative content of dialogue, was in place in the early 1930's as a form of technical standardisation for making sound films (1992a, p. 25; 1992b, p. 58). Despite the many advances in technology in the intervening years, in film practice, and in our sophistication as media consumers, Nolan still received multiple

complaints about the soundtrack for *Interstellar* (2014), a film the broad viewing public deemed did not adequately engage with this nearly one hundred-year-old practice of mixing sound to prioritise the intelligibility of the dialogue (Clark, 2014). Reflecting on this, Nolan notes, “It was a very, very radical mix. I was a little shocked to realize how conservative people are when it comes to sound” (Shone, 2020, p. 307). Volume, then, specifically the balancing of volume between two or more sound elements, carries significant power in the creation of audiovisual media, and for this project, it would prove to be a simple yet immensely effective means of beginning a videographic conversation about sound and its technical components.

Super Volume is a departure from my previous videographic work, though the project’s design is influenced by some of my earlier experiences. When I was working on *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), I found some real value in the participatory element, which formed part of my exploration of the film soundtrack in real listening spaces. This was participation on a small scale, but it did provide me with valuable material for my video essay and an opportunity to take some steps into collaborative making in videographic work. Through this collaboration, I saw some potential in how the raw material for video essay making, the audio and visual content, might be sourced through and from the wider community. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Sound Stack Tutorial* (2024b) extended on this idea of participation, though here I was purposefully engaging in a two-way process of engagement, where through the delivery of the online tutorial session to participants I was able to gather the content I needed to create a videographic output based on the tutorial. Using these interactions to gather this source material for my videographic work felt like a strong motivating factor, given how it encouraged a dialogue between myself as the researcher and the contributor/collaborator, and also noting how this dialogue could be extended as long as I was able to develop meaningful outputs based on their contributions. This then was a method of videographic practice I wanted to extend further in the *Super Volume* project, creating a project that would engage with the videographic community in such a way as to encourage a dialogue about sound as a technically crafted component of video essay making and one that relied on skills entirely apart from those required to edit video. It would create a project where the videographic outputs were based on the participatory inputs. And finally, it would create a project that is materially engaged with sound.

This point, concerning material engagement, was the most pivotal in terms of defining the *Super Volume* project, giving me a clear direction for the design of the participatory element of the project. The idea of material engagement, or "material thinking" (Bolt, 2007, p. 30), has been an important and ever-present aspect of my professional and research practice. Grant reflects on Bolt's research on creative practice and material thinking in terms of her own turn to videographic work (2014). For my own part, I have tended to focus on the idea of 'material' in a much more literal sense, seeking to engage, where possible, in a physical interaction in the making of my video essays, where the material is manifest, and I can interact with it through means beyond keyboard and mouse. In *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), this was an explicit part of the making process, given that the video essay pivoted on my relationship with the film on VHS. In *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), I chose to record my voiceover on an era-appropriate reel-to-reel tape machine (a Nagra IV made in 1969), not because my research demanded it but rather because it fit with the aesthetic intent of the work and provided me with an opportunity to become personally entangled with the material of my study. As Mulvey suggests, "there is always a personal edge to the mix of intellectual curiosity and fetishistic fascination" (2006). As previously noted, in *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), I photographed and recorded my own listening space and sourced material from others to enhance my understanding and exploration of the soundtrack. But the soundwalk I undertook in Boston (*Taking Delight*, 2024), retracing Michael Southworth's original research route, is perhaps the most meaningful 'material' engagement I've had with my research to date, where I felt that I was able to intervene in the original research and connect with it in a way that would have been impossible to achieve from my desk. This is a mode of videographic engagement that continues to grow in popularity within the community, with the Bowdoin workshop I attended in 2023 focusing on embodied practices, and Binotto and Kreutzer noting in their manifesto, "Videographic practice is an affective, multi-sensory, and bodily experience. We use our bodies, our memories, our intuitions, our flaws" (2023). For *Super Volume*, then, I was looking for a project that would continue this trend of physical, material engagement but also be an intervention, both in terms of the research itself and the impact (if any) that the outputs of this research might have on the broader videographic community.

In terms of its research design, *Super Volume* takes some inspiration from a participatory research framework. Though most research methods might be considered 'participatory' to a certain extent, participatory research is defined by what Cornwall and Jewkes refer to as

“the location of power in the research process” (1995, p. 1667). In this sense, the participation is active, both in terms of the engagement in the research and in terms of helping to define the direction the research might take and exploring the outputs and learning that might be derived from the research. My intent for this project is sympathetic to the aims of participatory research in the broadest sense, even if my design and implementation are a little looser. Where participatory research, and indeed participatory arts-based research as discussed by Nunn (2022), may feature sustained participant engagement over the course of the project, I intended my project to have a longer output ‘tail’, where the initial participation would set the tone of the research and the subsequent videographic outputs would maintain the engagement and continue (and expand) on the conversation.

Given that this project would rely entirely on the input from participants to fuel its outputs, I planned an alternative publishing strategy for the outputs based on the positive experience I had had with the *Deformative Sound Lab* blog. My first consideration was the potential for longevity within this project, where outputs might develop over an extended period of time, depending on community engagement. This did not necessarily fit with the publishing model I had previously adopted, looking to peer-reviewed publications to place my work. It also seemed to be outside of the scope of a portfolio publication like *Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth* given that there was no clearly defined end point to these investigations. And in both of these cases, the pace of academic publishing did not seem appropriate for a project where I was keen to engage in a dialogue with the participants and the wider community, which I would like to maintain but also respond to in a reasonably timely fashion. With these factors in mind, I decided to self-publish the outputs from this project, hosting them on a specific project page on my blog. Though I intended to host the videographic outputs on Vimeo (the hosting platform where all my previous work has been published), I wanted to take this project as an opportunity to explore the extent of self-publishing videographic work.

Super Volume Participatory Experiment

In July 2023, I was invited to attend the Embodying the Video Essay Workshop at Bowdoin College in Maine. The workshop was organised by Joel Burges, Allison Cooper, Lucy Donaldson, Colleen Laird, Dayna McLeod, and Alison Peirse and focused on a number of questions specific

to videographic practice and embodiment: “How does the video essay frame, shape, and enhance positionality, relationality, and intersectionality? How do embodied practices inform our screen-based scholarship? How do we connect to each other in the videographic criticism community? (Embodying the Video Essay, 2023).

In applying for the workshop, I outlined the basic framework of the participant experiment I aimed to run with the other members of the workshop cohort (all videographic scholars from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines). The experiment I proposed was based around a short clip from Peter Strickland’s 2012 film *Berberian Sound Studio*. In the film, Toby Jones plays a sound engineer working on the soundtrack for an Italian horror film. The film features a number of extended sequences of Jones’s character Gilderoy working in the sound studio, mixing the various sound elements of the film’s soundtrack. One scene in particular shows Gilderoy mixing three different audio tracks on his mixing desk, moving three volume faders (linear volume controls) to do this. I felt that this clip offered a simple yet useful way to begin the participant experiment, where my participants could take the virtual seat of a sound mixer, using this clip as their guide. I sourced a small, midi-capable mixer that featured three fader volume controls similar to those depicted in the film.

Figure 3.2 Super Volume midi capable mixer

Participants in the experiment were presented with a screen playing back the clip from *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012) and this volume control box. They were asked to first watch the short scene and note as closely as they could the specific movements Gilderoy made when interacting with and manipulating the volume faders. On the second viewing of the clip, they were asked to perform the same actions using the volume control box. This was an exercise in embodied performance and did not involve the manipulation of any actual audio material. What it did was give participants the opportunity to become comfortable with the controls on the box and also provide me with some useful performance information. I filmed this part of the experiment, focusing on the participants' hands as they manipulated the volume faders. I also recorded data from the volume faders into the Digital Audio Workstation software Reaper. Capturing data from the participants' volume manipulations meant that I could play this back (within the software) at a later date. For the final part of the experiment, I asked the participants to select three sound files from a small selection of sound effects and ambience recordings. The participants were then free to mix these sounds in any way that they wished over the course of a single playback, which lasted approximately sixty seconds. This part of the experiment did not have any video accompaniment and instead focused on the participants' exploration of sound and use of the volume control box. I again filmed each participant's hands during this part of the experiment and also captured further data into the Reaper software. This was followed by a short, semi-structured discussion about the participants' experience of the experiment (see Appendix VII for example questions). An audio recording was made of this for transcription after the fact. Thirteen videographic scholars participated in the experiment across a single day.

A Tactile Art

The following section discusses the video essay *A Tactile Art* (2023), and I suggest that the reader take a moment to review the video essay in full before continuing.

A Tactile Art (2023) is the first videographic output from the *Super Volume* participatory experiment. The video essay is influenced by Michel Serres's research concerning the senses (2008) and by Bates's writing on tactility and record production, in which he argues "that in order to understand the production of affect, or perhaps the affect of production, we need to pay attention to bodies, to the senses, to the practices of audio engineering and musicianship" (2009, para. 5). In the context of my research and for the purpose of this

experiment, this focus on tactile engagement was crucial and informed the choice to have the participants in my experiment use the midi volume mixer. Though I have noted above the importance of familiarising my participants with the volume mixer and the manner in which it worked, the use of the physical volume mixer was actually valuable in de-familiarising the participants from their previous experience of manipulating volume. In videographic making, most operations with the video editing software are carried out either through manipulation of the mouse or keyboard shortcuts, and this includes the manipulation of the volume of an audio track. Indeed, the largest part of our manipulation of software applications, for creative purposes or otherwise, is through the mouse (or trackpad), so being able to break that connection here was a crucial element of engaging the participants in a tactile recognition of their manipulation of volume. And it is this that I chose to focus on for *A Tactile Art* (2023).

The video footage that I collected from the experiment showed only the participants hands as they worked through the two tasks I set them. The first 'familiarisation' task asked the participants to perform the actions of volume manipulation that they could see on the screen without having any material impact on the actual volume of any sounds. The second task gave the participants the freedom to manipulate the volume mixer in any way they wished, in the service of creating their own three-track soundscape. The footage from this second phase of the experiment offered the most interesting and informative responses, both in the volume manipulations themselves and also in the subsequent discussion. There is a mimetic quality to this work in that the participants seen in this video essay have just watched Gilderoy's performance in *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012). It is impossible to suggest how much of their performance with the volume controls is in response to what they have seen and how much is their own response to my brief. This first video essay does not necessarily engage directly with that question, or indeed with the broader scope of this thesis in terms of sound literacy; this is a more 'artistic' response to the participants' direct engagement with the embodied nature of the process. This video essay reflects on my attempt to find "a model of a viewer [listener] who participates in the production of the cinematic experience" (Marks, 2000, pp. 149-150). And through this engagement with the production of a soundtrack, albeit in this strictly limited form, they are then exposed to the practical reality of what it means to manipulate volume over time. This is volume as an embodied act of performance rather than the often hidden, discrete, and fragmented process of setting volume levels with a mouse in video editing software, and in the case of this experiment, this fact seemed to resonate with

my participants. The fact that this mode of participation is a novel experience for most of them forced them to consider the simple act of volume manipulation from a fresh perspective, which became apparent during the semi-structured interviews that followed.

Reflections on participation in Super Volume

Each of the thirteen videographic scholars who participated in the *Super Volume* experiment also took part in a short, semi-structured interview directly after their participation in the practical experiment (see Appendix VII for example questions). Where *A Tactile Art* (2023) presents a version of the experiment filtered through the embodied experience of participation, these interviews provided valuable context as to how this experience impacted on the participants from their perspective as videographic scholars.

Whilst all the participants had some experience working with sound in their video essay making, none had made extensive use of a physical mixing interface such as the volume mixer I presented them with here. The mixer then did prove to de-familiarise them from their previous experience of working with volume and also give us a platform to discuss their experience of the experiment. A number of participants noted how the physicality of the volume mixer immediately impacted how they approached the task of mixing the sounds, with participant A suggesting “there's a moment where you become, because of the design of this, you become as if this is like a cyber extension of yourself.” In a similar vein, participant B indicated of interacting with the volume faders, “I felt more like dancing with them,” and went on to note an awareness of the effort it took to move the faders. Participant C observed that they found the experience akin to playing a musical instrument, and with this observation in mind, it is interesting to note the dynamic approach most of the participants took to the volume mixing task. As noted previously, the majority of video essays will feature a number of audio tracks playing simultaneously. To successfully blend these sound elements together in such a way that they serve their stated purpose will often require them to be mixed dynamically, i.e., where the volume level of each of the tracks changes over time. An example of this that most videographic critics will have encountered is balancing a voiceover recording against background music or film soundtrack elements. Because a film soundtrack is itself a dynamically mixed element, and a voiceover recording will tend to have natural peaks and dips in loudness, it is not always a case of simply setting one volume level for each track.

Rather to ensure, for example, that the voiceover is always legible over the background track, both elements may need to be dynamically mixed over time. The need for a mixing approach like this is not always immediately apparent to the maker, particularly one who may not be sound literate. The first hurdle in this instance then is to appreciate that a dynamic approach needs to be taken to the volume mixing process, with the next problem being how to technically achieve this. In this experiment, the presence of the volume mixer provided my participants with a simple and obvious means by which they might engage in dynamic volume mixing, and it was interesting to note that many of the participants naturally adopted this mixing process, even though I had given them no direction to do so. As participant C noted, "there's something very inviting about that [the volume mixer] and the urge to push them up." In this instance then, and within the very specific context of this experiment, these participants not only became aware of the desire to control the individual volume levels of the sounds they were mixing, but they were clear on how to do this. The experimental design offered them an embodied experience of volume, a means by which the abstract concept of 'volume' could be concretised (Özcan and Sonneveld, 2009).

When I set out to run the *Super Volume* project, I had the ambition that it would have a 'long tail' of productivity, potentially generating multiple videographic outputs. But as with the *Deformative Sound Lab*, and in the spirit of Bolt's thoughts on pure experimental endeavour (2004), I was unsure what the results of the project might be. As it stands, the project has generated a videographic output in *A Tactile Art* (2023), which, despite not perhaps being an explicit intervention concerning technical sound skills, does reveal and clarify the physical process of manipulating volume. Binotto noted the following in respect of the video essay: "Abstract and visceral at the same time it is this experimental video essay that made me suddenly and fully understand and feel what "working with sound" could mean" (Meadows et al., 2023). This statement, I feel, suggests the potential broader impact that further direct interventions like this project could have in bringing an appreciation of sound and technical sound skills to videographic criticism. As noted in respect of the *Sound Stack* Tutorial, and in keeping with my intentions for this work to be deemed reparative, not focusing on the gaps, here I sense that there is an appetite within the community to learn more sound specific skills. And further, I can see where these skills might be best exposed and explored through further experimental interventions like *Super Volume*, offering an embodied and experiential means of engaging with these new concepts and skills, focused very specifically on the concretisation of the concepts in terms of their contribution to videographic practice. This is

perhaps not the long tail of the project I had initially envisaged (being initially more focused on my own videographic outputs), but I deem this to be a much more valuable legacy for the project.

Conclusion

I began this thesis by reflecting on the growth of videographic criticism as a form for practical academic research and publication in moving image studies. I discussed the development of videographic criticism as a scholarly pursuit, reflecting on the discussions and critical discourse that surrounded its formation and noting how a community of practice has coalesced around the form of the scholarly video essay. The early critical discussions taking place within the community considered how and indeed if the video essay could be considered scholarly, what formal elements it might adopt, and what platforms it might seek publication through to secure its academic credentials. This question of the validity of videographic criticism within the academy has continued to be central in the critical discourse within the videographic community, with a recent episode of *The Video Essay Podcast* reflecting on this (DiGravio, 2024b). Other early critical discussion, specifically by Keathley (2011), considers the very form of the work itself, proposing that videographic criticism might fall on a continuum of practice, ranging between the poetic and the explanatory. This conception has taken root as a central debate within the wider videographic community and just recently has seen suggestions that the continuum be adjusted to a triangular mapping including an exploratory point of practice (Mittell, 2024, p. 20). It is along this exploratory or experimental arc of the videographic spectrum that some of my own work finds itself. The fact that these discussions continue suggests to me that the field and community of videographic critics are invested in discussion and debate about their chosen field of practice.

I reflected on my initial investigations in videographic criticism, which were informed by my background in professional sound practice and, in particular, in film sound. In the first phase of my videographic practice, I made three video essays, *Pan Scan Venkman* (2019c), *Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound* (2020), and *I am Sitting in a Room, Listening to Mank* (2021), and through the process of making each, I came to better understand the form of the video essay and the tensions that exist within it as both a creative, artistic pursuit and also one that relies on a particular technical set of skills based around working with digital video and audio files and manipulating this inside video editing software. Where my first videographic works focused mainly on sound and film sound research, I looked to other practitioners working in similar research areas, and through close analysis of selected works, I was able to identify methods and forms that appeared to ‘suit’ the evocation of sound studies through video essay

practice. I discussed the implementation of ‘audiographics’ which offered a visual means by which sound might be exposed to the viewer/auditor, and interrogated within the video essay. This analysis, alongside a reflection on the impact made by my own work, also highlighted where the implementation of technical sound skills in the making of videographic works contributed positively towards achieving an aesthetic audiovisual effect, reflecting here again on the explanatory-poetic continuum as discussed by Keathley (2011, p. 181), though perhaps not, as yet, engaging with the exploratory as suggested by Mittell (2024, p. 20).

To better understand how sound literacy and a sonically informed method of videographic making might contribute towards the developing form of the scholarly video essay, I undertook to launch an experimental practice blog called *Deformative Sound Lab*. This phase of my research and practice embraced O’Leary’s provocation to a wasteful experimental practice (2021, p. 82), and during this phase of my practice I created eighteen short videographic experiments, drawing on my own background in sound production and audio engineering to inform these experiments as well as exploring the work of others, in particular Ferguson’s *Volumetric Cinema* (2015), which would go on to inspire my video essay *Sound Stack* (2024a). Through my blog and this research portfolio, I sought to expose the technical aspects of my sound practice, including detailed discussion of form and method, and in the case of the *Sound Stack Tutorial* (2024b), creating a thirty-five-minute video as part of a series of online tutorials. During this phase of my practice and research, I noted something of a gap in the critical discussion within the community about the technical skills of making, and in particular around technical sound skills. I noted where these skills did receive some critical focus tended to be as part of the peer review process, where those reviews were undertaken by technically adept videographic scholars.

This phase of practical engagement sought to make a contribution to the discourse within the community as an initial overture in favour of a more technically informed videographic making, specifically where sound skills are concerned. Reflecting on the recent manifesto by Binotto and Kreutzer (2023), I noted that my stance on this point was not an oppositional one but rather a divergence of critical thinking from the same nexus of “desires and anxieties” that had informed their manifesto. I am adopting a position as advocate for a critical discussion within the videographic community in terms of the technical skills employed in videographic making, the nature and extent of those skills, and an appraisal of the value of

technical sound skills and sound literacy to the development of videographic criticism in the broadest sense.

To bring this discussion directly to the community, I designed and ran the participatory experiment *Super Volume*, involving a number of videographic critics in the process. This experiment yielded the video essay *A Tactile Art* (2023) and clarified for me a means by which further interventions in this skills space might be conceived to make strides towards a more sound led and sound literate videographic practice.

Research Question One: What factors have contributed to the development of a videographic community of practice where technical sound skills are mitigated in the critical discourse?

In respect of this question, I have noted the existence of works by practitioners whose research is directly involved with sound and music, which feature a technically rich and nuanced approach to sound within the form of the work. And I also note where critics not working exclusively in sound or music research are also creating aesthetically rich and technically complex soundtracks within their video essays. This clarified for me the distinct value that sound literacy brings to videographic criticism, in particular when seeking to engage in practice where the ambition is to create a true audiovisual effect. I have noted that where there is discussion of sound in videographic work, it tends to focus on the voice and the impact of voiceover on video essay practice, particularly in respect of the aforementioned poetic/explanatory continuum (Keathley, 2011). Rarely does this discussion about the voice delve into technical aspects of recording or editing, with the performance of the voiceover itself appearing to be considered largely distinct from the means of its capture and manipulation. It is interesting to note that outside the 'scholarly' field of video essay making, I am aware of prolonged and detailed discussions on these very same technical issues, and by contrast, less discussion of the place and impact of the voiceover (*Video Essay Library*, 2024). The lack of any developed discussion, critical or otherwise, around the technical aspects of sound work in videographic criticism can, I suggest, be traced to the adoption and development of the form within the academy, where the focus has been on securing the validity of the form and ensuring a relatively low technical skills requirement for engagement with it. While I fully appreciate the impulse to seek to broaden the community

through the removal of technical barriers to participation, I also suggest that in the pursuit of academic validity, these technical aspects of the work should be embraced to ensure the development of a robust field of practice and perhaps further solidify its academic credentials.

Videographic criticism is a mode of scholarly expression that was born digital, only becoming viable in the context of Mulvey's "delayed cinema" and the ready availability of powerful home computers and editing software (2006, p. 8). I suggest it is a technically informed practice as much as it is an academic and artistic pursuit, and if it is to develop further as a form of scholarly engagement, then it must embrace the technical aspects of its making. I am at great pains to note here that I do not perceive this mitigation of technical sound skills within the development of videographic criticism to have taken any purposeful form. The combination of factors I have already alluded to, coupled with the fact that modern video editing software is by its very nature visio-centric, often obscuring the nature of sound as a separate medium that can be accessed and manipulation through their 'overly helpful' interfaces. The videographic community has appropriated these professional and semi-professional software applications for their own ends and, in doing so, has consciously or unconsciously defined what might be considered a level of technical skills that is acceptable for the making of a scholarly video essay, largely excluding any consideration of technical sound skills. In noting all these factors, it is perhaps inevitable that we find ourselves at this point in the development of the field. In a recent episode of *The Video Essay Podcast*, O'Leary commented specifically on this development and on the state of the field of videographic criticism as it were, noting:

> we're in…a meta-academic moment where the, because of the transition from one medium, prose, to the videographic, to the digital, the assumptions, the protocols, the standards, the conventions, and the rhetoric of scholarly practice has been raised up to view…I do think there's a sense that we're in a moment where the paradigms are being quizzed (DiGravio, 2024b, 00.17.18).

I suggest that my conclusions here are part of this 'quizzing', a reparative provocation to the community to consider the value of a more technically aligned and sound literate approach to

videographic practice. I do not feel this suggestion runs contrary to the broader community's intent for an open and inclusive space for this scholarly endeavour, rather, I am simply suggesting that we as videographic makers embrace the fact that our ambition now should be to move into a mode of making that is at least as technically informed as are the media objects with which we choose to work.

Research Question Two - What interventions might be made to move towards a more technically sound literate videographic criticism?

I ran the participatory experiment *Super Volume* as a means by which I might begin a dialogue with the wider videographic community about technical sound skills, and in this case, the manipulation of volume. I chose to focus on volume as it is a deceptively simple concept, and yet the manipulation of volume is fundamental to the making of any piece of videographic work featuring more than two tracks of audio. The performative manipulation of volume is also one of the few physical interactions with sound that is depicted on a regular basis in film and television, giving me a way to link this research to my videographic practice in sound and film. The embodied and interactive aspect of this experiment proved to be a very effective way of concretising the concept of volume for the participants, all of whom were videographic critics, and subsequently engaging them in a useful discussion about their experience of the experiment. The experiment has yielded one videographic output to date, *A Tactile Art* (2023), which has allowed me to expose some of the performative aspects of the experiment in videographic form.

The long tail of this experiment, which I initially envisaged as further videographic outputs based on the video and data I collected, has instead manifested as an ongoing dialogue with participants about the technical application of sound in their own videographic work. This demonstrates not only a willingness within the community to engage with and explore technical skills acquisition, but perhaps a method by which it might be achieved, in a quite uniquely videographic sense.

Skains notes, "In practice-based research, the creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge" (2018). The practical videographic works presented here are a

meaningful contribution to knowledge in that they demonstrate the value of sound literacy and technical sound skills in the making of works of videographic criticism. As a collection of video essays, they also function as an extended, experimental testbed, the analysis and reflection on which has informed the broader themes discussed here and the material interventions I have made into the videographic community in support of a broader sound literacy and an appreciation of the value of technical sound skills. In the final reckoning, the value of these skills is, I feel, best demonstrated through the form itself, expanding on these sound led experiments through engagement and collaboration with the wider videographic community as willing and eager participants in the development of the form.

Appendices

Appendix I – Links to videographic work

Pan Scan Venkman - published in [in]Transistion, September 2019

Available at [in]Transition - https://intransition.openlibhums.org/article/id/11433/

Backup link - https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=YGNWFcnjb

Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound - published in NECSUS, November 2020

Available at NECSUS - https://necsus-ejms.org/sonic-chronicle-post-sound/

Backup link - https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=Zo3NOCieN

I am Sitting in a Room, listening to Mank – published in Screenworks, October 2021

Available at Screenworks - https://www.screenworks.org.uk/archive/volume-12-1/i-am-sitting-in-a-room-listening-to-mank

Backup link - https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=A1QrWgaKk

Se7en Sin Subtitle Edit– Published in the Deformative Sound Lab blog, March 2022

Available at Deformative Sound Lab - https://deformativesoundlab.co.uk/2022/04/03/se7en-sin-subtitle-e/

Noisy Jaws – Published in the Deformative Sound Lab blog, May 2022

Available at Deformative Sound Lab - https://deformativesoundlab.co.uk/2022/05/13/noisy-jaws/

From the Next Room – Published in the Deformative Sound Lab blog, June 2022

Available at Deformative Sound Lab - https://deformativesoundlab.co.uk/2022/06/17/from-the-next-room/

Sound Stack – accepted for publication in Screenworks, 2024

Available at – https://vimeo.com/1014049265/681eb77824?share=copy

Sound Stack Tutorial - accepted for publication in Screenworks, 2024

Available at – https://vimeo.com/1014048434/8c1a7acc5f?share=copy

Taking Delight: Soundwalking Boston in Michael Southworth's Footsteps - accepted for publication in Screenworks, 2024

Available at – https://vimeo.com/1014048760/491ea761fb?share=copy

A Tactile Art – published in Deformative Sound Lab, September 2023

Available at - https://deformativesoundlab.co.uk/2023/09/27/super-volume-a-tactile-art/

Backup link – https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=oN5zSFo4X

Appendix II - Pan Scan Venkman creator's statement

In "Pan, Scan, Venkman," I consider the impact of selective framing on my interpretation of the narrative in Ghostbusters (1984) and specifically Dr Peter Venkman's place in it. This is not framing as defined on set by the director or cinematographer, but rather the re-framing of the widescreen image for release on VHS, employing the much maligned Pan and Scan process (James, 2001; Salas, 2003). It is hard to think of any circumstance where a process which might result in as much as 50% of the image being stripped away is thought of as a good thing. However, in "Pan, Scan, Venkman," I offer some mitigation for Pan and Scan, or at least in this very specific case.

I have been a fan of Ghostbusters since I first saw it in the early 1990's, and my thesis concerning Peter Venkman and his place in the film developed over multiple viewings of the film. This was not the result of any investigative agenda on my part, but rather my desire as a fan of the film to engage with every aspect of it as closely as possible. As such, some of these viewings were partial or spread out over multiple days, while others where the film played in the background. Crucially, though, these viewings and my formative experience of the film was on VHS. It was that specific format of the film's release which led to my 'enhanced' understanding of Dr Venkman's place in the film. And it was not the image alone, or lack of it, that influenced my reading of the film. Sound also played a role and, in particular, lines of dialogue delivered from the off-screen space, 'acousmatically' as Chion would term it (2012). Though entirely derived from the inherent restrictions of the VHS format, my reading enriched and enriches my appreciation of the film. It formed a textual template that I used to engage with the rest of the film, uncovering an additional level of complexity which I would later discover was solely predicated on the vagaries of the Pan and Scan process.

In creating this visual essay I digitised my VHS copy of Ghostbusters, an ex-rental version produced by RCA in 1985. It is a fascinating physical artifact of the film, and indeed of the VHS rental process itself, and it raises some questions for me about film authorship and versioning. Though at the time this RCA VHS was considered a 'definitive' release of the film, it is not representative of the film shown in theatres. The soundtrack and picture have been intentionally modified for the transfer to VHS, and then further modified by the quality of the playback medium and, over time, the inevitable decay of that medium. Whilst there exists a

‘new’ definitive version of Ghostbusters on 4K Blu-Ray (released in June 2019) I cannot discount the authenticity of the experience I had with the VHS version, nor the pleasure and surprise I derived from uncovering my own cinephiliac moments within the film, all thanks to Pan and Scan.

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Appendix III - Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound creator's statement

In this audiovisual essay I suggest that film soundtracks might be best considered a 'soundscape' as defined by R. Murray Schafer in his book The Soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world (1993). Schafer established The World Soundscape Project in the late 1960s out of a growing concern for the rapidly changing sonic environment. His book (first published in 1977) suggests that we should seek to analyse and record our sonic landscapes, capturing sound events before they are lost. Using some of the terminology defined by Schafer I have chosen to explore the soundscape of three films, in particular three newsrooms from the late 1960s and early 1970s which can be situated quite specifically in time and place as a result of the events that they were witness to. David Fincher's Zodiac (2007) is partly set in the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom of 1969. Steven Spielberg's The Post (2017) and Alan Pakula's All the President's Men (1976) are both set at the Washington Post but in very different newsrooms, set in 1971 and 1972 respectively, either side of the relocation of the newsroom to a new building.

The newsrooms depicted in these 3 films follow the open plan principles of Bürolandschaft (office landscape), a design concept attributed to the German consultants Ebehard and Wolfgang Schnelle in the early 1960s.[1] Whilst founded on ambitions of a democratised working space devoid of hierarchy and focused on productivity[2] the 'office landscape' also helped with the soaring costs of city centre real estate – more workers in less space. By 1972 Brookes notes the open plan office concept had been implemented in at least a dozen large US corporations including Eastman Kodak, DuPont de Nemours, and IBM. Our view of the cinematic office is inextricably tied to Bürolandschaft, whether in the forced perspective set where C.C. Baxter toils in The Apartment (Wilder, 1960) or the suffocating cubicles of The Matrix (The Wachowskis, 1999) and The Incredibles (Bird, 2004). The open plan office brings scale and depth to the visuals, and in All the President's Men Gordon Willis explores this using split diopter lenses to bring more of the office into focus. Similarly, the open plan office is defined by its complex soundscape which travels freely within the space and is only partially ameliorated by privacy partitions, modular furniture, and strategically placed plants. These are the soundscapes that I am seeking to explore here.

I have taken a number of steps in the creation of this audiovisual essay to not only access the soundscape of the newsrooms within the film soundtracks but also to draw attention to these soundscapes. Michel Chion uses the term ‘synchresis’[3] to describe the melding of sound and vision in a synchronised event, one which carries considerable perceptual power which I suggest might prove a distraction to any analysis of the soundscape. Through the stilling of the image (choosing a ‘decisive moment’[4] to represent the scenes under discussion) I have mitigated the viewer’s natural quest for synchronising events within the moving picture. Where possible within the multi-channel soundtrack I have also removed the centre channel from the sound mix, as this is largely responsible for carrying the dialogue, location sound, and Foley effects. And to further disentangle the soundscape from the film image, the particular scenes chosen for analysis are viewed through a visual mask created using the waveform of the soundtrack itself (tangentially reminiscent of the process of printing optical soundtracks on film). This approach draws directly on Chion’s suggestion that we might engage in ‘reduced listening’ when seeking to analyse a film soundtrack, making the sound ‘the object to be observed instead of as a vehicle for something else’[5]. The visual masking also acknowledges (to a certain extent) Chion’s argument that removing the film image breaks the audiovisual structure and brings those sounds that were previously perceived as offscreen onto the same plane of listening as the rest of the soundtrack.

To allow for the best possible translation of the soundscape through the audiovisual form I have created a headphone optimised binaural mix for this video essay using Sennheiser’s AMBEO Orbit plugin[6]. I have mixed and remixed the soundtrack of this essay to represent as closely as possible the intended spatial positioning of the original multi-channel soundtracks. In the case of All the President’s Men the original monaural soundtrack is presented here with no additional mixing.

In this audiovisual essay I suggest that Schafer’s lexicon of soundscape terminology facilitates a discussion of film sound which is sympathetic (and perhaps symbiotic) with Chion’s reduced listening. The vocabulary of the soundscape bypasses the technical aspects of the soundtrack creation, shifting the analytical focus from individual sound effects to ‘sound events’[7] and from the practical concerns of sound production to the evocation of time, space, and place. In remixing and manipulating the soundtrack of this video I hope to encourage an engagement with these places, and specifically with the unique components of their soundscapes. Thus,

the film image is mitigated, not just to remove any potential for distraction, but rather to provide a visual conduit to the soundscape through the waveform masks.

Schafer's soundscape concept encourages appreciation as well as analysis and is fundamentally concerned with preservation in the face of change. In our current, rapidly shifting global circumstances, where the workplace is now a fluid concept, these cinematic office soundscapes exists as fixed points, and yet are also evocative of a much more recent past.

Author

Cormac Donnelly is a PhD student in Cinematics and Photography at Liverpool John Moore's University. His research focuses on film sound and the still image and includes a number of audiovisual essay investigations. His video essay 'Pan Scan Venkman' was published in the journal [in]Transistion in 2019 and featured in the Sight & Sound 'Best Video Essays of 2019' poll.

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Appendix IV - I am sitting in a room, listening to Mank creator's statement

Research Questions

Some of the decisions taken in the creation of the soundtrack for Mank (David Fincher, 2020) raise interesting questions about the reception of film sound in the domestic viewing/listening space. This research in particular focuses on the re-recording of the film's soundtrack on the Skywalker Scoring Stage and the impact this 'spatialisation' of the soundtrack has on our listening experience.

How is home media reception shaped by the manipulation of the sonic space of Mank's soundtrack?

Might the re-recording process used on Mank's soundtrack suggest a method by which films released into the domestic market could retain the reverberant sonic signature of cinematic exhibition?

Context

My research intersects with the broad base of existing theoretical work concerning the film soundtrack. The spatialisation of recorded sound and the attendant reverb characteristics of the recording have been noted across the body of sound research, not just in relation to film. From Bela Balázs in 1970 "A sound recorded in a cellar remains a cellar sound even if it is played back in a picture theatre" (p.214) to Andy Birtwistle in 2017 "The quality of reverberation that contributes to the temporal profile of a sound is also inextricably linked with the physical space in which a sound event takes place" (p.16) there is a clarity concerning the manner in which the sonic characteristics of a space can inform a sound reproduced (and possibly recorded) in that space.

In terms of the multi-channel soundtrack, Michel Chion coined the term "superfield" which is "…the space created, in multitrack films, by ambient natural sounds, city noises, music, and all sorts of rustlings that surround the visual space…" (1994, p.150) and Mark Kerins has subsequently developed this into the Ultrafield, "… the three-dimensional sonic environment of the diegetic world…" (2010, p.92).

Whilst considerations of the reverberant nature of sounds (and spaces) is key in the exploration of Mank's soundtrack, it is also apparent that the approach taken by the filmmakers in spatialising Mank's soundtrack is somewhat anomalous within recognised soundtrack production practise. Both the superfield and ultrafield are distinct in their

contention that the multi-channel soundtrack is an evocation of the film's diegesis, but in this case the entirety of the films soundtrack (music, sound effects, dialogue and Foley) has been mixed in such a way as to carry the reverberant characteristics of a non-diegetic space.

The closest analogue to the process adopted here is "worldization", a concept attributed to Walter Murch and employed by him notably on THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971). In a guest post for the website Designing Sound I defined worldization as "…a technique Walter Murch developed early in his career where he would take a piece of music, dialogue or FX, reproduce it in a real space using a portable tape machine and speaker, and then re-record it on another machine in an attempt to inform the original sound with some of the acoustic properties of the space" (Donnelly, 2012). As Murch employed it, the process is used as a means of adding the sound of a particular space (its characteristic reverberation) to a 'dry' sound which would then be mixed into the final film soundtrack. Where the Mank soundtrack deviates from the recognised process of worldization is in the global nature of its application to the film soundtrack, and also in how carefully it has been mixed "…to taste…" (Tonebenders, 2020). The process is somewhat similar, but the end result needs to be considered in a different context.

The work of Alvin Lucier itself, and 'I Am Sitting in a Room' (1969) in particular, suggests a method that we might use to interrogate the spatialisation of Mank's soundtrack. Rather than consider it as a piece of soundtrack production which has been created for maximum compatibility and translatability in our domestic listening environment, we might perhaps better understand it as a recording of a one off installation performance (Davis, 2003). Just as the recording of Lucier's composition that I use in this essay can be placed very specifically in space and time, so can Mank's soundtrack. Though it might be composed of many disparate elements of sound, voice, and music, recorded across many different times and places, they are all homogenised through the 'performance' and re-recording of the soundtrack on the Skywalker Scoring Stage. The spatialised soundtrack then acts as a perceptual bridge of sorts, between the time and space in which we might choose to watch Mank, and the specific corresponding instant of the film's playback on the Skywalker Scoring Stage.

The question of soundtrack reception I raise in the body of the video essay is framed around the research of Johan-Magnus Elvemo and Mark Kerins. Kerins suggests the goal of the digital surround soundtrack is to place the audience "…in the middle of the diegetic environment and action," whilst Elvemo expands on this, suggesting that the surround soundtrack also impacts on our spatial perception of the room we are watching and listening to the film in. I make the point here that these discussions must now also consider the domestic

viewing/listening space as well as the cinematic, particularly in light of recent global events and the shifting fortunes of theatrical film releases. Again, the particularities of the creation of the soundtrack for Mank place it in something of a category of its own in terms of reception. The careful mixing of the soundtrack, and the fact that the spatialisation effect is the only element mixed in the surround speakers of the multi-channel soundtrack, places the soundtrack somewhere in the hinterland of 'space perception' as noted in work by Neofytos Kaplanis et.al. (2014). Where Elvemo's research considers the two representational spaces we encounter when listening to a film (the cinematic and the receptive) Mank introduces a third space which I suggest serves to mediate between the other 2, redefining the space in which we listen to the film and potentially unifying the receptive and the cinematic.

Methods

The research by Elvemo, which I refer to in my video essay, is underpinned by elements of gestalt theory and phenomenology which inform the discussion of the cinematic and domestic viewing/listening space (2013). Here I have also considered how the perception of space might be impacted in relation to Mank's soundtrack (Kaplanis et.al. 2014). This theoretical consideration intersects with certain practicalities of soundtrack post-production which, in this specific case, are described by Ren Klyce in his interview with Jennifer Walden (2020) and which are more generally explored in works such as Tomlinson Holman's 'Surround Sound: Up and Running' (2007).

I chose to use the video essay form to present this research as it offers distinct advantages to the investigation of the film soundtrack. To attempt to render this research solely using the written word would require a translation into language which would struggle to convey the nuance and subtlety of the sonic elements under discussion. The video essay not only permits a foregrounding of "…the poetic force of the source materials…" (Keathley and MIttell, 2019), it also promotes careful consideration of the time and perceptual space that are given to the sonic materials contained within. In this video essay the sound, rather than the image content, dictated the final form of the piece, and also informed the manner in which the research was narrated and conveyed.

Using Alvin Lucier's composition 'I Am Sitting in a Room' as a framing device for the research suggested to me that the sound and texture of my own voice recording needed careful consideration. As such I recorded my voice in a naturally reverberant space which I hope helps the listener situate me as an acoustically grounded voice, rather than an amorphous voiceover.

The short sequence of crowd sourced recordings included in this essay is by no means exhaustive. It is not included here to suggest any empirical findings from this research, but rather to illustrate the impact of the spatialised soundtrack in domestic listening environments, and perhaps to suggest that it appears to imbue a certain sonic 'commonality' to these different spaces.

In the production of the video essay I have taken care to create a soundtrack which is representative of my research intentions. To this end I have mixed the soundtrack elements from Mank to mirror as closely as possible the spatial position of the original 5.1 mix using Sennheiser's AMBEO Oribit plugin. And with both Alvin Lucier and Ren Klyce in mind, I have suggested that the video essay be played back on speakers (where possible) to encourage a further engagement between the sound of the film, the video essay, and the room that it is being listened to in.

Outcomes

This video essay highlights a particular post-production decision in the creation of the soundtrack for Mank and suggests how, in its deviation from the modern norms of soundtrack production, it raises questions about the reception of film sound in the domestic space and also how those spaces react to sound.

This research also considers the potential value that this re-recording process could add to films which receive simultaneous, or near simultaneous release to streaming platforms (Barnes and Sperling, 2020; Rubin and Donnelly, 2020). The addition of the reverberant sonic signature of cinematic exhibition to original film soundtracks could provide a valuable perceptual link between the domestic viewing/listening space and the 'big screen' experience.

On a more fundamental level I hope to continue to explore the value of the video essay format for the investigation of the film soundtrack, both in terms of its production and reception.

Dissemination

This submission is the first dissemination of this particular piece of research. It does exist as part of the larger body of research I am currently engaged in for my PhD and I have published some of this work in NECSUS (Donnelly, 2020).

This research will inform my conference presentation ‘Monochromasonics – the Sound of Black and White’ which I will be delivering at Futureworks, Manchester in June 2021.

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Filmography

I Am Sitting in a Room (Alvin Lucier, 1969, USA)

Mank (David Fincher, 2020, USA)

Se7en (David Fincher, 1995, USA)

THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971, USA)

Appendix V - Sound Stack, Soundwalk, Southworth creator's statement

Research Questions:

The video essay Sound Stack queries what value there is in the quest for sonic authenticity within film soundtracks, and what are the apparent extents of this authenticity?

The tutorial video interrogates the particular means by which the Sound Stack video essay employs volumetric visualisation. It is my attempt to address how formal methods of videographic research and experimentation might be shared within the wider community of practice.

The portfolio as a whole questions the extent to which a scholar (me) might go before they consider a piece of videographic research to be 'complete' or at least to have been engaged with as completely as possible.

Context:

This work is a direct response to and extension of my previous video essay, Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound (2020). In that work, I focused on reading and categorising the film soundtrack using the soundscape research of R. Murray Schafer (1993). Schafer's research focused on the fugitive nature of the soundscape (an analogue of the landscape), noting in particular how radically it had changed since the industrial revolution. In my video essay, I took Schafer's methods of soundscape categorisation and applied them to the soundtracks of 3 newsrooms: The San Francisco Chronicle from Zodiac (Fincher, 2007), and the Washington Post from both The Post (Spielberg, 2017) and All the President's Men (Pakula, 1976). This was a work that I had some ambition to revisit, but was unclear how this might manifest until I became aware of Michael Southworth's soundscape research (1967), which originated in the late 1960s (as did Schafers) but was instead focused on urban design and the soundscape of the city.

Southworth completed his masters thesis, The Sonic Environment of Cities, in 1967. The aims of the thesis as set out suggested to me something of a road map for the video essay that would become Sound Stack. Southworth aimed to develop "techniques and language" for recording the soundscape of the city, Boston in his case (1967). I was keen, through my initial annotation experiments, to find a similar method of recording the soundscape of a film, extending my work beyond the broader classifications I had used previously and which were informed by Schaefer's research. Though the methods I used to record and annotate my

soundscape differed from those employed by Southworth, I found significant value in the analytical method he applied to his graphical recordings of the soundscape. In particular, his suggestion that most of the sound settings in his soundwalk sequence (the same sequence I undertook for my recording) “did not seem to be singular” (Southworth, 1967). This concept of singularity, that one location might be sonically defined and identifiable from another, leaked into my own analysis of the soundscape of Zodiac (Fincher, 2007), and specifically that of the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom.

In revisiting and extending this previous research, I am acknowledging that in my own video essay practice, I have perhaps too easily accepted the end credits of my video essays as synonymous with the completion of a particular piece of research. The self-contained nature of the published video essay on Vimeo does not perhaps readily invite revision and expansion; rather, there is a compelling completeness to a finished video essay which often encourages me to move on.

Returning to the work allowed me to approach the newsroom soundscape employing a novel form of visualisation via the volumetric process. This is a method of visualisation pioneered by Kevin L. Ferguson in his 2015 video essay, Volumetric Cinema. The process makes use of the medical imaging program ImageJ (or the slightly newer version I use here known as Fiji) to visualise time along the Z axis of a cube, making it possible to manipulate a volumetric ‘stilled’ version of a video clip. In Sound Stack, I returned to the soundscape of the San Francisco Chronicle as portrayed in Zodiac, and through a process of sound annotation within the volume inspired by Southworth’s work, I came to question the sonic authenticity of the city soundscape as portrayed in the film (as opposed to the richly detailed and sonically authentic newsroom). In my analysis, I found a direct and fascinating connection between the creative design of the city soundscape in film and that of the real city as observed by Southworth. The tantalising question of authenticity then balances on the fine line between fiction and reality: whether the fictional city soundscape should be reflective of the largely anonymous real city soundscape observed by Southworth, or whether it might reflect an ambition to creatively render a soundscape unique to its location through some sonic delight?

It has long been a gripe of film sound researchers (such as Altman in 1980 and Beck in 2008) that film studies is an image-led field, a sentiment echoed in Southworth’s research, where he notes that city design “has been visually prejudiced” (1967). In Sound Stack, I have sought to turn this visual prejudice against itself by employing the eye-catching volumetric process to bring focus to the film's soundtrack.

Following the screening and discussion of Sound Stack at the 'Theory and Practice of the Video Essay' Conference at UMass in September 2022, the work languished somewhat as I debated what I should do with it. I wanted to seek a venue to publish, but the conference experience had left me questioning if the work was 'complete'. Reflecting on my prior experience publishing video essays, I was drawn to the headings that Screenworks used for this very statement, specifically 'method'. In the making of Sound Stack,I employed a specific formal method (the volumetric process), which, whilst not new, had taken me some time to tease out. In this method, I saw perhaps a means where I could engage in a collaborative dissemination process, offering a tutorial to other videographic scholars on the volumetric method as I employed it. I view this 'publishing' of the method in much the same way that research in hard science might capture their experimental method in step-by-step detail for later researchers to replicate. The difference here is that it is not a replication of the method I am hoping for but rather an extension into other videographic research, which might further illuminate me regarding the path towards a sound-led videographic criticism. It is not my place to seek to define this path, but I hope that through collaboration and engagement with the wider community, certain directions it might take will become apparent. The tutorial as presented here is based on 2 online sessions I ran with 11 videographic scholars. This allowed me to incorporate their experience (and issues) into the final tutorial in a way that I hope makes the process more readily useful to others who might watch it.

At the conclusion of the Sound Stack video essay, I suggest that perhaps the urban film soundscape is as anonymous as the Boston soundscape, which Southworth investigated in his 1967 thesis. During the period in which the work languished (as previously noted), I wondered if I should make another sequel—an iteration on an iteration, so to speak. But earlier this year, a research trip to Maine found me with 3 spare hours in Boston, which was just long enough to walk and record Southworth's original 1967 soundwalk. The annotated video presented here (which is eighty-eight-minutes long) presents the entirety of the soundwalk, as I was able to follow it. I named the soundwalk 'Taking Delight' in part to refer to the concept of delight that Southworth sought within the urban soundscape. But here I am also reflecting on the deep sense of delight I felt in being able to practice this particular piece of research in a very real sense. The process of walking, re-tracing, and recording provided me with an opportunity to embody Southworth's research in a way that I could not do simply by reading the thesis (similar in many ways to Eric Faden's argument for making his first media stylos; why write about films when you can make films about them [2008]). I find again that

Alan O'Leary's words can help clarify some of my feelings about this soundwalk, with the following from his discussion on material thinking in relation to Catherine Grant's Touching the Film Object (2011): "Material thinking is a form of critical intimacy rather than critical distance, the performative practice of which has to do with intervening, with making something happen, rather than representing, which implies separation from the object analysed" (2021). This was then my chance to take delight by intervening in Southworth's research.

Methods:

As noted, the Sound Stack video essay makes use of a volumetric imaging process made possible through the use of the medical imaging program Fiji. My use of this method builds on the previous formative work undertaken by Kevin L Ferguson (2015). Beyond this formal method, the video essay also acknowledges its debut as a conference presentation through the inclusion of a 'quiz, which was timed in such a way as to allow for participant engagement in the room.

The use of the medical imaging software Fiji for this video essay was not a fait acompli, but rather an extension of a short annotation experiment that I published on my blog, *Deformative Sound Lab*, in April 2022. This initial experiment (and indeed the blog as a whole) is an attempt to engage with O'Leary's "luxury scholarship" (2021), a provocation to videographic practitioners seeking to goad them into experimental work that might lead towards new deformative and parametric methods of practice. Where Sound Stack is inspired by Ferguson's Volumetric Cinema, this first experiment reflected on his earlier work on Film Visualization, which also used medical imaging software to create a single image, summing together the frames from a film. In my version, I worked with a short clip from The Double, annotating the clip with all the sounds I could hear in it, then summing the frames from the clip together. The resulting summed image retains a ghost of the film soundtrack in these annotations, where the dominant sounds in the scene are rendered in bolder text while more sporadic sounds fade into the image.

On sharing this first image on my blog, it was Alan O'Leary himself who suggested taking this annotation idea further into Ferguson's subsequent volumetric work. That prompt led to this first annotated volume, where I sought to catalogue all the sounds present in the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom as rendered in Zodiac (Ficher, 2007). The resulting annotated volume seemed to take me a stage beyond Mittell's unbound archive. The volume rendered

the scene anew, a novel material object that I could directly interact with. One that represented time, space, and sound but was not reliant on temporality for critical engagement. In the manipulation and annotation of this 3D volume, I found the question about sonic authenticity, within and without the San Francisco Chronicle newsroom.

My soundwalk reflects on some of the earliest interventions in soundscape research, but through the recording of the soundwalk, it also reflects on the developing network of soundscape and soundwalk recordists (such as Radio Lento). I appreciate that presenting the soundwalk as a video might be seen as sullying the experience (Southworth blindfolded some of his participants and pushed them around in wheelchairs so they could listen unencumbered by sight), but I felt it was important to take this somewhat unique opportunity to see what further revelations might be gained through this intervention into the research. Barring one short video clip, I did not film the walk, as that, I feel, would have likely privileged the image over the sound, to the detriment of my experience and that of the subsequent listener.

The tutorial video is somewhat formally aligned with more technically focused tutorials that can be found on YouTube. I do not imagine I am the only videographic scholar who has turned to channels such as Premiere Gal or Vince Opra to refresh myself on a tricky feature of the software, and my tutorial by and large follows the form of these. Given that this version originated from a series of online Zoom sessions, I chose to retain the Zoom meeting aesthetic, which helped frame the tutorial.

Outcomes:

The existence of this video essay is a validation of O'Leary's provocation to luxury scholarship and, by extension, my own efforts to experiment with videographic methods through a public-facing blog. I suggest that this work also reflects on the continuing relevance of Ferguson's Volumetric Cinema, where in this case the volumetric method itself has contributed towards my research question and the formation of this portfolio.

The video essay raises questions about the pursuit of sonic authenticity and how audiences receive and respond to that. It also somewhat forces me to question my own bias towards sound over vision and whether any of this drive for authenticity in sound brings a real sonic benefit to the final film and, by extension, to the audience watching and listening.

By presenting the video essay within this larger portfolio of work, I am hoping to encourage further collaboration and extension of the research and/or the formal method employed in its making. As noted previously, I am suspicious that my own videographic pursuits in film sound

can lend themselves to niche thinking, and I am keen to broaden this thinking through collaboration and discussion with the wider videographic community.

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Films

All the President's Men (Alan J. Pakula, 1976, USA)

The Post (Steven Spielberg, 2017, USA)

Zodiac (David Fincher, 2007, USA)

Appendix VI – Super Volume Participant Information Sheet

College of Art

Participant Information Sheet

Super Volume: Turn it Up

A short audio/video experiment into depictions of volume levels being changed in film.

You are being invited to take part in a short research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be given a copy of this Participant Information Sheet and the signed consent form to keep.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to capture data on how people who take part in the study respond physically to being asked to mirror the actions they see on screen of a film character manipulating a volume control. This output of this study will contribute towards my PhD in Film and Television Studies.

2. Why have I been invited to participate?

This experiment is taking place during the Theory and Practice of the Video Essay Conference being held at UMass and participants are being recruited from the attendees at the conference. There are no specific inclusion or exclusion criteria for this study.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to watch a short video, lasting approximately 60 seconds, on a laptop screen. You will be given a pair of headphones on which you can listen to a piece of music from a small selection made available, or you can choose to listen to white noise, or you can choose to not listen to any content. You will be given a small box with 2 volume controls; one slider type and one knob type. As you watch the video you will be asked to mirror the action you can see on the screen using these controls.

Whilst you are watching the video, and mirroring the actions on the screen, a camera will film your hands.

After you have completed the video there will be a short semi-structured interview.

You can choose to only complete the first part of the experiment, and you do not have to be filmed or take part in the interview if you do not wish to,

Your participation should take no longer than 10 minutes, (including the semi-structured interview).

5. What do I have to do?

You will be asked to watch a short video and (optionally) listen to some music on headphones. You will be asked to respond to what you see on the video by manipulating a control knob, a slider, or both at your own discretion,

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There is no direct benefit for taking part in this study,

7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you, or responses that you provide, during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by an ID number, and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of serious harm, or risk of serious harm, is uncovered. In such cases, the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Any data in paper form will be stored in locked cabinets in rooms with restricted access at the University of Glasgow. All data in electronic format will be stored on secure password–protected computers. No one outside of the research team or appropriate governance staff will be able to find out your name, or any other information which could identify you.

You may also choose to be a named participant in this study. This would mean that your name would be linked with your data recorded during the study, and your name could be used in any publication resulting from this study. If you are happy to participate in this study, and be named, there is an option to indicate this on the consent form.

8. What will happen to my data

We may be collecting and storing identifiable information from you in order to undertake this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. We may keep identifiable information about you [until the completion of the PhD thesis] and will not pass this information to a third party without your express permission.

Your rights to access, change or move the information we store may be limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personally-identifiable information possible. You can find out more about how we use your information from Cormac Donnelly email - c.donnelly.2@research.gla.ac.uk.

Researchers from the University of Glasgow collect, store and process all personal information in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018).

- All study data will be held in accordance with The General Data Protection Regulation (2018)
- The data will be stored in archiving facilities in line with the University of Glasgow retention policy of up to 10 years. After this period, further retention may be agreed or your data will be securely destroyed in accordance with the relevant standard procedures.
- Your data will form part of the study result that will be published on the internet and student theses, and may form the basis of further publication in expert journals, and monograph form. If you have agreed to participate in this study as named then your name may be used in these publications.

9. What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this study will form the basis of an independent online publication which will include written and audio visual material. Video and data captured during the study will be featured as part of this publication. Quotes from interviews may be used as part of this publication. The results will also form part of my PhD thesis and may be used in a future monograph publication.

10. Who is organising and funding the research?

This study is organised under the guidance of The University of Glasgow

11. Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed by the College of Art.

12. Contact for Further Information

For further information please contact Cormac Donnelly email -

Appendix VII – Super Volume Semi-structured interview questions

Can you describe your physical response/experience of this experiment?

- How did it feel to physically perform these actions?

How aware were you of changes in the volume levels as you went through the experiment?

- Did the sound affect your manipulation of the volume controls?

Did you feel like you were in control of the volume during the experiment?

How did you feel about using the different volume controls?

- Did you have a preference between them?
- If so, why?

Do you have any further thoughts on your experience of this experiment?

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