

Composing with Reality: Digital Sound and Music in Documentary Film

by Holly Rogers



As creative sound design becomes an increasingly important part of digital documentary, questions of authenticity, authorship and reception have been pushed into the foreground. Digital technology presses at the fragile boundary between the fantasies of fiction film and documentary's "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson), a boundary that has received much critical attention from both filmmakers and film theorists.¹ Often, music and the use of creative sound design can help to create, or blur, this distinction. While observational documentarians and many other nonfiction film makers strive for an unmediated representation because, as director Barry Stevens explains, we must "be respectful of facts", others believe that the difficulties of producing a truly unguarded view paves the way for imaginative responses.² Non-intervention, even in the fly-on-the-wall style, is always compromised: the choice or shot, angle, focus, point-of-view; the lingering camera; the ways in which those being filmed change their behaviour when confronted by a camera; and the creation of dramatic trajectories and character development in the editing room. Such interventions belie, at various levels, a creative directorial presence. When a documentary includes creative sound design, or music, things become even more complicated. What happens when sounds from the shoot location are digitally enhanced, extended or developed? When does sound end and music begin? And where does the notion of the profilmic – or the authentic – sit on this sliding sonic scale?

Discussions of the relationship between authenticity and the documentary aesthetic are often conflicting. While many working in observational film or *Cinéma vérité* aim for minimum intervention, others consider an objective viewpoint impossible to achieve and aim instead for a more poetic relationship with their subject matter. From the self-reflexive, essay-style of modernist documentary, through to the performative, interactive and democratised phase of digital non-fiction work, the subjective has become a more welcome and established part of

1 Grierson quoted in Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.6.

2 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 40 minutes.



Figure 1, *THE THIN BLUE LINE*

the process, securely enmeshing the “two domains” of documentary and fiction.³ It is at such moments that creative sound design and music become particularly audible. Despite his desire to both penetrate and reveal, Errol Morris, for instance, insists that the aim of nonfiction film is to document: “the truth”, he says, is not “up for grabs”.⁴ And yet he famously displays a penchant for recreation, a fondness for re-enactment perhaps most clear in his investigation into the 1976 shooting of Dallas policeman Robert W Wood in *THE THIN BLUE LINE* (1988).

Here, interview scenes and talking heads are interspersed with highly interpretative, even poetic, escapades that suggest how the murder may have unfolded (it turns out that Morris’s theory – that the wrong man had been incarcerated – was in fact accurate). An original score by Philip Glass is heard throughout the film; however, it is particularly audible leading into, and during, these re-enacted scenes (figure 1). But whose musical voice is this? And what does it do to our relationship with the unfolding images?

Bill Nichols describes the tension between the profilmic and recorded artefact in terms of reproduction verses representation:

Were documentary a reproduction of reality, these problems would be far less acute. We would then simply have a replica or copy of something that already existed. But documentary is not a reproduction of reality, it is a representation of the world we already occupy. Such films are not documents as much as expressive representations that may be based on documents. Documentary films stand for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the factual aspects of this world are familiar to us.⁵



Figure 2, *DEATH FOR FIVE VOICES*

Werner Herzog takes the notion of documentary representation to an even more poetic level. For him, documentary and fiction film inhabit the same continuum, and, while some directors attempt to separate the two, he prefers to draw together the contrasting styles as tightly as possible. Although retaining the semblance of a nonfiction aesthetic, Herzog’s documentaries frequently dissolve into flights of fancy and surrealism, highly staged, scripted scenarios, and audible, musical scenes that stall the narrative and throw the elements of fantasy into the foreground (in *DEATH FOR FIVE VOICES*, his 1995 film about sixteenth-century musician Gesualdo, for instance, Herzog constructs several musical scenes, including one in which a piper plays

3 Renov, “Towards a Poetics of Documentary”, in *Theorising Documentary*, ed Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.21.

4 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 40 minutes.

5 Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.13.

his bagpipes into the cracks in the wall of the musician's ruined castle (figure 2), and another in which the director encounters Gesualdo's dead wife playing her husband's madrigals on a ghetto blaster). But, according to him, these moments do not depart from reality, but rather aspire towards a higher form of authenticity: "There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as a poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization".⁶

The ideas of "representation" and "poetic, ecstatic" truths are particularly useful for discussions of digital documentary. Used since the late 1980s and reaching the height of popularity in the last decade, DV cameras, editing equipment and digital music platforms have further called into question the utopian desire for "authenticity", or "realism", which has traditionally underpinned much documentary filmmaking. Digital image and sound are not material, mechanically reproduced imprints of what once was there, but rather a transformation of data into a succession of 0s and 1s. Digital audiovisuality, then, is highly illusory. Speaking of the arrival of digital photography, William J. Mitchell claims that the relationship between observation and intervention has become obscure: "the referent has come unstuck", he writes.⁷ Arguing along similar lines, Lev Manovich likens the digital image to animation and painting, suggesting that it harbours only an obscure relationship with profilmic events: "Live action footage is reduced to be just another graphic, no different from the images created manually".⁸ Yet digital equipment enables a certain freedom from reality not only through its material relation to what it reproduces, but also via its ease of manipulability; it's capacity to transform what was initially recorded through collage, assembly, animation, colourisation and so on. Brian Winston writes that "It is not hard to imagine that every documentarist will shortly (that is, in the next fifty years) have to hand, in the form of a desktop personal video-image-manipulating computer, the wherewithal for complete fakery. What can be left of the relationship between image and reality?"⁹

At the same time, however, digital media can, paradoxically, yield a more authentic approach than ever before possible. Easy to use, cheap, offering a longer record time than film and requiring smaller forces, digital technology can be less interventionist than film stock. As a result, a certain democratisation of information has arisen: documentarists can easily film and edit work quickly and on their own; large-scale funding is not always necessary; and digital documentary can be made widely available via a variety of internet platforms. Digital images, in other words, may be formed from unreal code; and yet at the same time, they can signify a heightened form of authenticity.

6 Herzog quoted in *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. Paul Cronin (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.301.

7 Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge Mass. MIT Press, 1994), p.30.

8 See for example, Manovich, "What is Digital Cinema", in the *Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002 reprint. London: Routledge, 1998), p.409.

9 Winston quoted in Ohad Landesman, "In and Out of This World: Digital Video and the Aesthetics of Realism in the New Hybrid Documentary", in *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2:1 (2008), p.35.

Fiction and nonfiction music

But what of sound in this new digital paradox? Speaking of nonfiction film, Nichols reminds us that “[t]he centrality of argument gives the sound track particular importance in documentary ... most documentaries still turn to the sound track to carry much of the general import of their abstract argument.”¹⁰ For Nichols, the soundtrack revolves around the spoken word in the form of voice-over commentary or dialogue taken on-site. But for me, it is the unspoken moments that hold the most power in the construction of documentary persuasion.

What many theorists of digital media forget is that the mediation of the profilmic through various “strata of truth” (Herzog) is *always* at play when creative sound and music are employed in a documentary film. Since its earliest days, fiction film has been awash with music, its role, it has often been theorised, to lessen our awareness of the technological construct that unfolds before our eyes; to encourage us, the audience, to enter into a contract and believe, on some level and temporarily, that what we are watching is real. To do this, edits, geographical and temporal cuts and evidence of the mechanics behind the film, have to be concealed, something easily achievable through a continual flow of synchronous sound. In addition, well placed music can draw out a narrative, highlight the aesthetic strands between scenes, focus attention on one thing to the exclusion of others, and help promote intense aesthetic bonding with certain characters or themes. Whether music is concealing editing cuts, or heightening emotion, however, its main role is to remove an audience from the auditorium and transport them into the heart of the story. And herein lies the paradox: our everyday lives are not ordinarily accompanied by music (we can recall Hitchcock’s question to the composer of his 1944 film *LIFEBOAT*, David Raskin: “But they’re in a lifeboat out in the middle of the ocean; where’s the orchestra?”, to which Raskin replied “behind the camera!”);¹¹ and yet, in fiction film, music is used to help us believe that what we are watching is real and encourage us to develop empathy with the characters.

But, as we have seen, the documentary feature, although “enmeshed” with fiction film, leans towards a completely different aesthetic. Documentary is often reactive, created in the moment. Recording actual events, nonfiction filmmakers do not need to erase awareness of the materiality of their projects; camerawork frequently responds to unexpected action and can be jittery, unfocused and fast moving; the director can be in shot; and the people being filmed are invited to break the fourth wall and directly address the viewer. Such gestures are all apparent signifiers of authenticity and objectivity. Like documentary images, sound recorded on location is similarly responsive and can operate very differently to the heightened and clear points of audition that characterise the highly

10 Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.21.

11 Raskin replied: “where’s the camera?”. Quoted in Robynn J. Stilwell, “Breaking Sound Barriers: Bigelow’s Soundscapes from *The Loveless* to *Blue Steel*”, in *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*, ed Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond (London, Wallflower Press, 2003), p.55.

post-produced sound worlds of fiction film. Documentary directors either work the sound equipment themselves, or perhaps use a single sound person who must be quick on her feet, as Chilean director Patricio Guzmán explains: “There’s nothing better than being in tune with your cameraman and soundman. When you’re united by an invisible cable, it’s amazing, it’s like jazz”.¹² British filmmaker Kim Longinotto speaks in similar ways about audiovisual harmony: “I think that sound is like the heartbeat of a film, if the sound isn’t good then the film’s thin ... the sound is where you get the emotion of a film”. Speaking of her attempts to film in the noisy and chaotic classrooms of *HOLD ME TIGHT, LET ME GO* (2007), for example, Longinotto describes how her soundwoman had to perform like a “ballet dancer” in order to capture the relevant sounds while attempting to physically stay beyond the limits of the camera’s viewfinder (figure 3).¹³



Figure 3, *HOLD ME TIGHT, LET ME GO*

Nevertheless, the result can be confusing. The distinctions between sonic background and foreground are difficult to negotiate under such circumstances, even with the use of shotgun or directional microphones, as Jeffrey Ruoff reminds us:

One of the major stylistic characteristics of documentaries that use sounds recorded on location is the lack of clarity of the sound track. Ambient sounds compete with dialogue in ways commonly deemed unacceptable in conventional Hollywood practice. A low signal-to-noise ratio demands greater attention from the viewer to decipher spoken words. Slight differences in room tone between shots make smooth sound transitions difficult. Indeed, listening to many of the scenes of observational films without watching the screen can be a dizzying experience. Without recognizable sources in the image to anchor the sounds, we hear a virtual cacophony of clanging, snippets of dialogue and music, and various unidentifiable sounds, almost an experiment in concrete music... While Hollywood sound tracks are typically easier to understand than sounds in everyday life, documentary sound tracks are potentially more difficult to follow than sounds in everyday life.¹⁴

As Ruoff points out, it is easy for sounds recorded under such conditions to become dissociated from their points of visual reference; visual and aural points of view may not be the same and, as sounds coalesce in the aural middle ground, run the risk of becoming not only “more difficult to follow than sounds in everyday life”, but also, and rather strangely, less realistic to ears attuned to the artificial sonic clarity of the fiction film. Sound design in fiction film ensures that the relevant information is always audible; and the supporting sounds are in no way confusing. In documentary, noise often operates at the opposite end of the spectrum. And, as all sounds coalesce into the middle ground, they run the risk of

12 Guzmán quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 1.01.

13 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 1.01.

14 Jeffrey Ruoff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary”, in *Cinema Journal* 32:3 (1993), p.27.



Figure 4, TITICUT FOLLIES



Figure 5, HARLAN COUNTY

becoming dislocated from their visual points of reference, moving instead into the non-referential realm of music.

But what role does music have within the realist, unmediated aesthetic of much documentary film? For many filmmakers, the answer is simple: it has no role. If nonfiction film must document, why place an outside voice against the factual representation of the images? As an element of postproduction, dramatic – or nondiegetic – soundtrack music is an addition with no place within the present tense of nonfiction filmmaking. Although source music has always been employed – think of Frederick Wiseman's *TITICUT FOLLIES* (1967), where the prisoners engage in various forms of music making, or Barbara Kopple's *HARLAN COUNTY U.S.A.* (1976), in which diegetic folk music and songs by local artist Hazel Dickens highlight the plight of the miners – dramatic music is less common (figures 4 and 5). It is feared that music may contradict the apparent spontaneity and naturalism of the documentary aesthetic. Although Stan Neuman has made several documentaries that make use of music, for instance, he has also made others “where there’s very little,

because I think the documentary image doesn’t support music that well. Music within a documentary tends to diminish the image.”¹⁵ Michel Brault, cameraman for *CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER* (Jean Rouch, 1960), is even more clear in his dislike for dramatic scoring, explaining that for him, “Music is an interpretation, it’s the filmmaker who says, alright I’m going to make you listen to music here on top of these images to create a certain impression. It’s impressionism. I don’t think documentary is a form of impressionism. It’s realism, and music has no place there.”¹⁶ Brault’s separation of realism from a sonic representation is misguided in several ways. First, documentary may be underpinned by a realist aesthetic, but it often remains persuasive, subjective, emotional and narrative. As soon as an aesthetic decision is made, the line between the real and the fictional begins to flex. Second, our understanding of realism in relation to sound and music in the digital age has become highly complex. Ubiquitous music in our everyday lives, in shops, on TV and on mobile media has highly attuned our sonic awareness. In addition, the saturation of music in fiction cinema has formed audiences highly accomplished in processing images with the help of musical signification. Lastly, and as we have seen, music in film is one of the most powerful illusory persuaders that what we are watching is, in fact, yet rather paradoxically, as real as possible. Unlike fiction film, documentary rarely tries to conceal itself as a constructed product. The role of music, as it is understood by many

15 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 1.19.

16 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 1.19.

mainstream fiction directors and composers, is therefore obsolete and can “diminish” the “realism” being presented: an audience doesn’t need to buy into the fiction of the images. However, it is, for many, about persuasion. And the emotion, historical referents and rhythmic persuasion of music makes the use of creative sound an extraordinarily compelling device for nonfiction filmmakers.

There are many documentary filmmakers who use music in ways very similar to those of mainstream fiction film. In general, there is more dramatic music in films about travel and animals where the message is less political, and the tone less persuasive, as John Corner reminds us: “a strong tendency has been for music to be employed more frequently the ‘lighter’ the topic and/or treatment. Right from the 1950s, this can be seen in documentaries seeking to place a comic, sentimental or lightly ironic framing on their subjects.”¹⁷ A clear example is George Fenton’s opulent scores for David Attenborough’s *THE BLUE PLANET* (2001) and *PLANET EARTH* (2006).

But music has also been used as a powerful propaganda tool, propelling many examples of early documentary such as *THE TRIUMPH OF THE WILL* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935) and many British world war II films, which were often scored by well-established concert hall composers such as Benjamin Britten (Harry Watt’s *NIGHT MAIL* in 1936, for instance). In these instances, the persuasive abilities of music are paramount.

During the 1960s, however, a move towards an observational aesthetic led to a silencing of the musical soundtrack and documentary entered a period of non-musical synchronous sound (although the rise in popularity of the music documentary and the concert film ensured that many nonfiction films still remained highly musical). When documentary filmmakers again began to include music in their work, the reinstatement of a soundtrack was highly noticeable and was often present in films that hovered, at least in terms of technology and budget, between fiction and documentary styles. One musical technique that became very popular was the use of music to suggest a move back in time as the filmmaker engaged in a re-enactment to illustrate the recollection of an interviewee. If we return to *THE THIN BLUE LINE*, this move between an observational style and that of a mainstream aesthetic is immediately obvious: Morris’s recreated –



Figure 6, *TOUCHING THE VOID*

or rather, imagined – scenes of the shooting are framed by Glass’s heavy, audible and highly persistent minimalist score. Is this fact or fiction? The music signifies that we are no longer in the present tense; but also that the subjective opinion of the director is now taking precedence.

Still a popular technique, the use of music to heighten and distinguish re-enactments from non-fiction elements of a film can be seen in *TOUCHING THE VOID* (2003), a film about two mountaineers

¹⁷ John Corner, “Sounds Real: Music and Documentary”, in *Popular Music*, 21:3 (2002), p.362.

attempting to scale a mountain in the Peruvian Andes (figure 6). The film, explains director Kevin MacDonald, combines “some elements of drama with elements of documentary...”.¹⁸ Again, his re-enactments are swathed in music (we’ll come back to this later).

More recently, music has been used to heighten tension in a highly filmic way. Two contrasting high-profile examples of this are James Marsh’s use of Michael Nyman’s pre-existent music for his Oscar-winning *MAN ON WIRE* (2008): and the original score by Bruno Coulais for Thomas Balmès’s creative documentary, *BABIES* (2010). Here, the soundtrack vies only with occasional dialogue and diegetic sound to suture together, and promote, poetic and cultural connections between the snippets from the lives of four youngsters growing up in different parts of the world (figure 7).



Figure 7, *BABIES*

But what of the notion of realism – or authenticity – in these heavily musical examples? By using the techniques of “suggestion”, or technical effacement, common to the cinematic feel of fiction film, feature documentaries that use music in the same way remove themselves from the observational fidelity of the unmediated image. What is it that we are hearing? If our eyes are given real events, what happens when our ears are offered a sonic elsewhere? In fiction film, both image and music are conjured forth from another place; but in non-fiction film, the elsewhere signified by music appears to conflict with the present tense of the images.

One film that openly delights in the movement between authenticity and flights of fancy is *BOMBAY BEACH*, winner of the 2011 Best World Documentary category at the Tribeca International Film Festival. For her first feature film, Israeli VJ and music video director Alma Har’el creates a digital world in which truth and fiction happily oscillate. Intrigued by a rundown community that resides on the edge of the manmade Salton-Sea, situated along the San Andreas Fault in California, yet unable to secure adequate funding for her project, Har’el set up camp amongst the desert community for five months. Created in the 1950s, Bombay Beach, the lowest city in America at 68 meters below sea-level, was initially a luxurious holiday resort situated on the eastern shore of Salton-Sea. However, the water, with little opportunity for outflow, increased in salinity, jeopardizing the wildlife, while the fluctuating levels of the lake frequently led to floods which left large areas of the shoreline submerged in mud (figure 8). As a result, the area became a ghost town with only a handful of the poorest families remaining. Shot on a digital camera and later edited on a laptop, Har’el’s film

18 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 108.



Figure 8, *Salton-Sea*



Figure 9, *BOMBAY BEACH*

progresses through poetic, poignant and often witty scenes of the remaining residents of Bombay Beach, focusing in particular on three main protagonists; an old timer set in his ways, a football playing refugee from LA who hopes to go to college, and a young boy with ADHD who is struggling with school and his social abilities. Although infused with unusual angles and lingering shots, the film is propelled by a clear documentary aesthetic: Har'el's handheld camera is constantly on the move; and the characters appear to carry on their everyday lives without finding the director's presence too intrusive.

However, at several pivotal moments in the film, realism disappears entirely and the diegesis floats into magical, imaginative scenes choreographed to pre-existent songs by Bob Dylan and an original score by Bierut's Zach Condon. Har'el explains how she helped the inhabitants to create fantasy dance sequences that would allow their imaginations to run free and express how they feel or what they hope.¹⁹ In one scene, the teenage football star wears a white pantomime mask and enters into an elegant dance sequence with his new girlfriend: the two twirl around a bandstand to a Bob Dylan track, finally coming to rest on the floor, surrounded by masks. In another, the young boy imagines that he stops a fire-engine that is racing towards him in a touching, yet playful display of desire to take some control of his life (figure 9).

Soundscape

However, there is a way out of this audiovisual disjunction where music signifies a departure from documentary's realist aesthetic; a way for music to keep with the present tense of the images; a way, moreover, particularly achievable in the digital era. As we have seen in the examples above, such as *PLANET EARTH* and *BOMBAY BEACH*, music and sound are often kept apart; and sound designers and composers do not usually interact. But if we return to our earlier discussion of the paradoxical unreality of real-world sounds in documentary, we can see that actuality noise, which is difficult to locate due to the problems of recording sound on the hoof, can sometimes lose its referential anchorage in the image and take on the characteristics of music. The digital age has made it particularly easy to blur the distinctions between sound design and music; advances in music technology enables documentary soundtracks to pass freely between real-world sound and musical composition, and some documentarians have consciously used digital technology to dislocate actuality sound from its visual

¹⁹ Quoted in "Bombay Beach: Feature Film Debut", at <http://www.ideastap.com/IdeasMag/the-knowledge/Alma-Harel-interview> (accessed 10 May 2013).

referent and compose with real-world noises; but in so doing, they ensure that the soundtrack keeps one foot in the image and the film a loose grip on the traditional nonfiction aesthetic. Such films achieve fidelity to the profilmic while also including a musical commentary. This is possible, I suggest, when a soundtrack confuses real-world sounds, which are ordinarily heard, with music, which demands to be listened to.

Noise, often considered to be “sound which is undesired by the recipient” (C.S. Kerse), has traditionally been considered a negative, or undesired, phenomenon.²⁰ But for Paul Hegarty, noise and music are not distinct categories, but rather occupy different ends of a continuum: “[n]oise is not an objective fact. It occurs in relation to perception – both direct (sensory) and according to presumptions made by an individual. These are going to vary according to historical, geographical and cultural location.”²¹ During the twentieth century, perception began to radically change, and the definition of noise became malleable. In 1913, for instance, Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo predicted that the idea of music would expand to include the creative treatment of sound in response to the development of new soundscapes since the Industrial Revolution, while French Pierre Schaeffer’s concept of *musique concrète* in the 1940s and 1950s proposed that everyday sounds, such as the mechanical noise of trains, could be considered as valid compositional material. In both instances, real-world sounds were dislocated from their representational function in order to create new musical timbres. John Cage, who preferred the term “organisation of sound” to the term music, was perhaps the most outspoken proponent of such an aesthetic.²² According to him, musical material can include sounds taken from anywhere, not just from musical instruments:

We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them, not as sound effects, but as musical instruments. Every film studio has a library of “sound effects” recorded on film. With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of any one of these sounds and to give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach of anyone’s imagination. Given four film phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat, and landslide.²³

These different strategies of musical composition are useful for our consideration of the soundworlds of digital documentary. But just as significant are the different modes of listening that composition with sound entails. Hegarty explains hearing as “less reflective” than listening, “a physical process we can do nothing about.”²⁴ In life, sounds are often heard and processed unconsciously in order to gain important information about our surroundings. It is only at times of possible danger – a car horn, someone shouting – that we begin to pay close attention; to listen. Although music can be consumed passively (elevator or background music, for instance), it is often intended to be listened to, followed

20 C.S. Kerse, *The Law Relating to Noise* (London: Oyez, 1975), p.8.

21 Hegarty, *Noise / Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p.3.

22 Cage, “The Future of Music Credo” (1937), in *John Cage: Documentary Monographs in Modern Art*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p.55.

23 Cage, “The Future of Music Credo,” p.54.

24 Hegarty, *Noise / Music*, p.4.

and understood. If a documentary audience is asked to listen to things ordinarily only heard on a soundtrack – if real-world sounds take on the qualities of music – the results can problematise the already-fraught relationship between the real and its digital representation. This can usefully be understood as a sonic elongation from sound into music; and from hearing into listening.

Digital technology can easily manipulate actuality sounds. Although the soundscapes of mainstream fiction film are produced during postproduction and are thus highly artificial, they are nevertheless constructed to sound as real and plausible as possible. Such a method can also be found in fictionalised, or hybrid documentary. In *TOUCHING THE VOID*, for instance, although the sounds that support the re-enactments, which are awash with creaking and expansive sounds to heighten the tension, appear realistic, they are often created through “trickery”, as the director explains:

one of my favourite pieces of sound in TTV is the sound of the crevasse. It should be something that is scary, but also something that has a human tone to it. We played around with all these different sounds and eventually the sound engineer came to me and said I've got this great sound for you, listen to this, this is the underlying sound for the crevasses, he played it to me I thought wow, that's very spooky what is it, and he said that's the sound of a leopard roaring slowed down fifty times. So it was this wonderful animal sound but it felt so deep and profound and sort of frightening but mournful at the same time.²⁵

In other places in the film, the soundscape operates the other way around: by elongating sound recorded on location into a musical score. In such instances, digital technology enables sound and music to fuse almost seamlessly. *TOUCHING THE VOID* has two composers: Alex Heffes provides the acoustic score; and Bevan Smith the electronic music. Sound designer Joakim Sundström weaves the two musical voices together from the outset: at the start, we hear a soundscape created from voices, wind sounds and highly ambient electronica; but after several minutes, the electro-acoustic sounds gradually morph into an increasingly symphonic acoustic track. At other times, we are left with real-world sounds that have been digitally enhanced into a musical wash that demands to be listened to, not simply heard.



Figure 10, *MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES*

The sound design for Jennifer Baichwal's *MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES* (2006) is another excellent example of sonic elongation. The feature-length documentary follows photographer Ed Burtynsky as he captures manmade environments, such as huge factories, slag heaps and recycling yards, in China and Bangladesh (figure 10). With very little narrative, the film progresses via real-world sounds and a particularly creative expanded soundscape. Making use of numerous photographs, the film is unusually static, as the flow is continually halted to allow Baichwal's cinematography to move from one still to another,

²⁵ Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 117.

asking the audience to dwell on visual close-ups they may not have noticed in a moving-image sequence. During these scenes, the addition of sound taken from the area, or somewhere plausible, helps to bring the photos to life, providing them with a temporality and a third, sonic dimension. At other times, when the camera is capturing moving images, sound is released from its referential status – from its position of giving a coherent audiovisual synchronicity – and takes the form of music. Baichwal wanted her sound design:

to emerge out of the industrial soundscape that we were going to be immersed in, so we gathered an enormous amount of wide sound. And I wanted the density of the industrial soundscape to be apparent in the film, but also sometimes melody or rhythm would emerge from that soundscape and you couldn't tell am I hearing, is this music or is it just the rhythm of some hammer or machine and then it would go back down into that soundscape and come out and go down without ever, only a few times emerging as a clear distinct element before subsuming itself back down into the sound.²⁶

The resultant original score by Dan Driscoll is more like visualised sound art than film soundtrack. During such moments, it is not that real-world sound is silenced; rather, it extends into a more creative realm. When actuality sound is expanded electronically, the gap between real and fictionalised is bridged. Here, sounds are removed from their original utterance, interpreted, and then placed back onto the image. Once manipulated, a soundscape can be created that remodels the boundary between noise and music just as documentary straddles the divide between real and fictional. Driscoll's score for *MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES*, then, allows us to rethink the soundscape as a musical composition; but one located in the images and the reality depicted. As locational and real-world sounds begin to sublimate and take on a new narrative voice that is at once real and imagined, acoustic and digital, the very notion of authenticity is problematised. Such moments are incredibly important to the debate regarding digital realities.

This passage between digital sound and music leads to problems of categorisation. As we have seen, one of documentary's most controversial achievements is its combination of "real life" images with the openly fictional narrative voice of music. It is commonly believed that music in film helps the audience to relax and better engage with the fiction unfolding before them. But what happens when the images presented are promoted as "real"; as a (mediated) representation of the world beyond the camera? Creating music from the sounds recorded on location can help to close this conceptual gap: but at the same time, it raises issues of authenticity and realism. In fiction film we have to suspend our disbelief; in documentary, we have to keep it activated and hold together in our minds two worlds at once. With digital documentary, the original world becomes raw material that can be creatively manipulated visually and sonically. If we return to Hegarty's distinction between hearing and listening, it is clear that digital soundscapes can move a documentary into a highly creative realm simply by asking an audience to stop hearing and to listen hard, just as Burtynsky's photographs in *MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES* ask us to look closely at things

26 Quoted in *Capturing Reality* (Pepita Ferrari, 2008): 1.18.

normally only seen. At these moments, when digital soundscapes and music close the gap between the real and the fictional, documentary film comes close to the “poetic, ecstatic truth”, sought by Herzog. Locating the moments when actuality sound moves into the realm of music allows us to identify a passage between hearing and listening which suggests the emergence of new, digital modes of documentary engagement that can be understood as sonic, as well as visual.

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