

EN Sound in documentaries as a tool of expression instead of representation

ES El sonido en los documentales como herramienta de expresión en vez de representaciónn

ITA Il suono nei documentari come strumento di espressione invece di rappresentazione

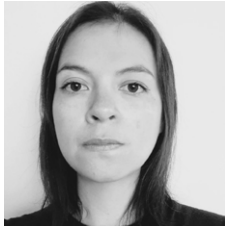
FRA Le son dans les films documentaires comme outil d'expression plutôt que de représentation

POR Som nos documentários como ferramenta da expressão em vez da representação

Diana Carolina Martínez Muñoz

Sound in documentaries as a tool of expression instead of representation


Recibido: 11/09/2020; Aceptado: 15/03/2021; Publicado en línea: 17/04/2021.
<https://doi.org/10.15446/actio.v5n1.95152>



**DIANA CAROLINA
MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ**

Universidad Nacional de
Colombia, Facultad de Artes,
Escuela de Cine y Televisión.

Correo electrónico:
dicmartinezmu@unal.edu.co

 0000-0001-6092-764X

ABSTRACT (ENG)

The concept of *reality* in the context of documentaries has always been a focus of controversy, with manipulation of captured material during the filmmaking process being disallowed or labelled inauthentic. Nonetheless, some documentaries have approached the filmmaking process in an experimental way and are using a different approach to represent reality. At the same time, sound in documentaries is still usually misunderstood as a medium in which manipulation, processing – or even more radically – the creation from scratch, is not encouraged or not properly understood. This article proposes to portray the production of sound in films as a collaborative process that enables the director to think of sound as an element of expression – a tool with which to describe reality from another perspective, capable of creating possibilities for the sound director to translate emotions and feelings into sonorities due to the versatility of human sound perception. The usage of sound should take risks; experimentation with it empowers sound to become more creative and more radical.

KEYWORDS: *sound, documentary, reality, expression, perception, audience.*

RESUMEN (ESP)

El concepto de *realidad* dentro del contexto de los documentales ha sido siempre un tema de controversia debido a que la manipulación del material capturado durante el proceso de filmación ha sido desautorizada o calificada de inauténtica. No obstante, algunos documentales se han aproximado experimentalmente al proceso de filmación y están utilizando un enfoque diferente para representar la realidad. Al mismo tiempo, el sonido en los documentales todavía se malinterpreta con frecuencia como un medio en el cual la manipulación, el procesamiento o, aún más radicalmente, la creación desde cero no se concibe o no se comprende adecuadamente. En este artículo, se propone describir la producción del sonido en las películas como un proceso de colaboración que permite al director concebir el sonido como un elemento de expresión –

una herramienta con la cual puede describir la realidad desde otra perspectiva, capaz de crear posibilidades— para que el director de sonido traduzca emociones y sentimientos en sonoridades que, gracias a la versatilidad de la percepción humana del sonido, se pueden recrear. El uso del sonido debe asumir riesgos, ya que la experimentación potencia el sonido para que sea más creativo y más radical.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *sonido, documental, realidad, expresión, percepción, público.*

RIASSUNTI (ITA)

Il concetto di *realità* nel contesto dei documentari filmici è sempre stato luogo di controversia, qualora la manipolazione del materiale preso durante il processo di tiro dei film è stata svalutata oppure si è ritenuta non autentica. Alcuni documentari, però, si avvicinano sperimentalmente al tiro dei film e si servono da uno sguardo diverso per rappresentare la realtà. Le colonne sonore dei documentari, allo stesso tempo, ancora spesso si fraintendono e non si incoraggia la manipolazione, il processo, persino neanche la creazione da zero, oppure non le si comprendono in modo giusto. Questa relazione cerca di descrivere la produzione del suono nei film come un processo di collaborazione tale che permette al regista di concepire il suono come uno strumento di espressione, come un elemento per descrivere la realtà da altra prospettiva, in grado di creare delle possibilità affinché il direttore della colonna sonora possa tradurre emozioni e sentimenti in sonorità, grazie alla versatilità della percezione umana del suono. L'uso del suono implica dei rischi; la sperimentazione sonora potenzia il suono perché sia più creativo e più radicale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *suono, documentari, realtà, espressione, percezione, pubblico.*

RÉSUMÉ (FRA)

Dans le contexte des films documentaires, le concept de *réalité* est depuis toujours un sujet de controverse. Toute manipulation du matériel visuel capturé durant le tournage est rejetée ou qualifiée d'"inauthentique". Certains documentaires,

pourtant, abordent le processus de tournage de manière expérimentale et utilisent une approche différente pour représenter la réalité. Le son dans les documentaires est encore souvent l'objet des mêmes réticences et attitudes négatives, c'est un medium où l'on n'admet ni la manipulation ni le traitement, et moins encore la création à partir de zéro. Cet article propose une approche différente : on appréhende la production du son dans les documentaires comme un processus de collaboration entre le réalisateur du film et le responsable du son : pour l'un le son devient un élément d'expression lui permettant de décrire la réalité sous un angle différent, pour l'autre c'est un outil lui offrant des possibilités de traduire en sonorités des émotions et des sentiments, grâce à la versatilité de la perception humaine du son. On encourage donc la prise de risques dans l'utilisation du son, et l'expérimentation pour en renforcer la présence et le rendre plus créatif et radical.

MOTS-CLÉS: son, film documentaire, réalité, expression, perception, public.

RESUMO (POR)

O conceito da *realidade* no contexto dos documentários sempre foi um tema polêmico, uma vez que a manipulação do material capturado durante as filmagens foi desautorizada ou qualificada como inautêntica. No entanto, alguns documentários abordaram experimentalmente o processo da filmagem e estão usando uma abordagem diferente para representar a realidade. Ao mesmo tempo, o som nos documentários ainda recebe frequentemente uma interpretação errônea como um meio no qual a manipulação, o processamento – ou ainda mais radical – a criação partindo do zero não é incentivada ou adequadamente compreendida. Este artigo tem como objetivo descrever a produção do som em filmes como um processo colaborativo que permite ao diretor conceber o som como um elemento de expressão - uma ferramenta com a qual ele pode descrever a realidade de outra perspectiva, capaz de criar possibilidades para o diretor de som traduzir emoções e sentimentos em sonoridades, graças à versatilidade da percepção humana do som. O uso do som deve correr riscos; a experimentação com ele potencia o som para ser mais criativo e radical.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *som, documentário, realidade, expressão, percepção, público.*

THE CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION OF reality in documentaries seems to be a topic for an endless discussion among filmmakers

and theorists. Nonetheless, the audience might not be conscious of the truthfulness of reality as portrayed in documentaries because once the viewer applies the concept of documentary to a film, she or he is already biased; it changes their perspective on the material. The perceived genre imposes different sets of presuppositions, whether we are talking about fiction or a documentary. The viewer has been conditioned to trust documents, recordings, archivalia, reports, or collection of pieces from real situations. Sound, being a key element in the composition of such media, must accept responsibility in the construction of these narratives as they are vulnerable to manipulation through technology – another essential mechanism to either distort or create the documentation of reality. Does documentary sound represent something that may be called real? Maybe that should not matter anymore as reality itself is difficult, if not impossible to define. Maybe it is a matter of positing an ethical distance from a social and political standpoint and taking into consideration the context in order to express a different perspective on reality. This text proposes addressing sound in documentaries in terms of an expression of reality as opposed to its representation. Technology is used for the manipulation of audio recordings, processing and distortion of sound in order to express an idea, feeling, or emotion. The creative direction of sound in films is a medium that allows the audience to perceive reality in a different way, thus giving the viewer the opportunity to create other narratives of reality.

Since this article approaches the discussion of depiction of reality from a sound standpoint, the idea of what would be “real” sound should first be broached. Objective sound might be conceived as the audio signal that a recorder captures: all frequencies in different intensities within the human auditory range, documenting the activities that take place in a given space, as seems

to be the case in real life. In order to evaluate the perception of reality through sound a simple experiment has been carried out by the author of this article on different academic events in order to evaluate perception of sound with different groups of people. A group of people and some audio recorders were standing in the same space, sharing the same situation, same time, and same actions around them – in other words the same ‘reality’. Subsequently, a conversation was initiated to discuss the acoustic experience of each person, with the untold expectation that everyone would come up with the same description. The actual result pointed to completely different perceptions of the same reality on the part of the participants. When people described their experience in auditory terms, each of them had heard a different soundscape. It almost felt as if they had all been in different places; they remembered and paid attention to different sounds and they contextualized different audio signals with the same situation. In the end, the audio captured by the different recorders was played and the impressions of the participants were even more contradictory. Some found the material totally detached from their listening experience, others discovered sounds they did not recall hearing. Some remembered activities that they visually saw but did not hear, while others did not recognize some of the sounds; a new place was revealed. The experiment raises the question about sound as a representation of reality. Who perceives reality as it is? Who has access to a precise description of reality? Should a sound recorder be considered a device that documents reality objectively? If a recorder would be considered objective documentation of reality, how would the polar pattern of the microphones and the positioning of it in space would be decided as the best spot to record? Should location sound be considered to be the sole source of sound for documentaries?

A real situation, in terms of sound, is composed of several acoustic signals according to the movements and actions that are taking place in a space in a certain timeframe. Sound depends on space, time, and movement; if these conditions are not met, living beings are not capable of perceiving sound. Ambience, background, subtle movements, specific actions, sudden movements, nature, machines, factories, technology, weather, human activities are among the factors that constitute the soundscape of reality, a complex and highly varied amount of sounds. The way human beings perceive amplitude of sound is called loudness, a concept developed within the area of psychoacoustics as defined in The Encyclopedia of Perception – “Loudness is a subjective attribute of sounds that allows us to experience

the dynamics of music, speech, and our environment” (Goldstein, 2010, p. 145). The encyclopedia goes on to affirm:

Loudness changes as the physical and psychological states of the perceiver change. For example, loudness can change depending on whether a person listens with one or two ears, whether the ears have been exposed to loud sounds, whether a hearing loss is present, and whether a person is paying attention to the sound. (Goldstein, 2010, p. 148)

Because of the many variables involved in the auditory system of humans, it was only to be expected that every participant in the experiment should have heard a different reality, therefore it is not worth discussing reality through sound because it is a problem of subjective perception. Sound perception of the world is a process that is structured as humans experience everyday life through situations which are also a socially constructed idea of how people should take in the world with their senses. A human being learns how a church, an office, a school, or a house is supposed to sound like in terms of sound sources that take place there; consequently people behave specifically in each respective space and learn what kinds of sounds are allowed there. Sound becomes a sociocultural aspect that portrays behavior related to spaces, situations, and time based on the learned experience of that environment. To the same extent, and from previous experience, people unconsciously ignore certain sounds, pay attention to others, emphasize or trivialize others without deleting them, etc. This process creates a personal idea of soundscapes that are associated with psychological aspects of these experiences – all of which are valid. All of them are true and real.

Addressing the sound for documentaries and having discussed sound as reality, the construction of the soundtrack in cinema is proposed as a process that takes its cue from aesthetics and narrative to express the reality the director and/or sound director intend to convey. With regard to the creation of reality in media Maya Deren (1960) says:

[...] reality is first filtered by the selectivity of individual interests and modified by prejudicial perception to become experience; as such it is combined with similar, contrasting or modifying experiences, both forgotten and remembered, to become assimilated into a conceptual image; this

in turn is subject to the manipulations of the art instrument; and what finally emerges is a plastic image which is a reality in its own right.

Applying the same idea to the creation of sound in films, given that in documentaries it is always accompanied by an image, sound is objected to manipulation since it will be supported by visuals that somehow contextualize it as described in the concept of reciprocity of added value between image and sound (Chion, 1994). Because of this license that can be taken with sound, it is necessary to consider under what auspices it should be produced, created, or transformed. Sound and music are related to emotions and feelings. For instance, humans seek a certain kind of music to feel empathy, which explains the desire to listen to depressive music when in a state of sadness. At this point, the construction of sound becomes a translator of emotions that are intended to be generated in the spectator as the objective of the scene in an audiovisual piece; hence close collaboration between director and the sound director is imperative. A new perception of the situation depicted through images can be created, supported, and enhanced with sound, which is why all the uses, practices, and processing of audio shall be valid in a documentary.

The construction of sound in documentaries involves a variety of aspects to discuss, but four principal features are to be exposed: (a) the narrator as a mechanism for expression and communication, (b) the privation of sounds or the discrimination of acoustic signals as an artifice, (c) the absence of sound as a method to focus attention on details in the image or to engage the viewer's imagination, and (d) music as an element to tell the audience what to feel. These characteristics are creative practices used in documentaries where the purpose is to see facts, situations, or activities from a new perspective.

Narration as a mechanism to convey information has been used as a key element in documentaries. However, the performance of the dialogue emerges as the most important aspect to consider. In the movie “Melancholian 3 Huonetta” (Honkasalo, 2004) there are three different voices as narrators: a woman, two boys, and a whispering child. The interpretation, tone, and language used by each of these voices constitute the dialogues as characters that not only convey expository information, but also feelings and emotions. The main purpose is to provide details about the war in Chechnya from the perspective of little kids, with each voice stating a different approach. The voice of the woman disrupts the usual authoritarian male voice that other documentaries use when describing conflict since it is thought that war is understood from a male perspective and feelings are just forbidden. One voice of the boy vocalizes his thoughts, while the other

narrates what he remembers. The whispering child talks about his dreams. The dialogue takes us directly into their minds, allowing the audience into their private, intimate space to understand their fears, their desires, their understanding of the war arising from a conflicted and dramatic past. From another point of view, the movie "The Atomic Café" (Loader, Rafferty, & Rafferty, 1982) uses a singular narrator – the typical American male propaganda salesman juxtaposed to images that portray, in an ironic way, the absurdity of nuclear warfare. The soundtrack has incorporated a voice as an element that the spectator can easily recognize, the tone and the performance which usually tells the audience in television advertisements that everything is fantastic, amazing, and secure; this same voice leads the viewer to criticize, analyze, and ridicule the government propaganda made in the 40s and 50s. Dialogues as used in these films demonstrate how the spoken word is not just an instrument to deliver data, information, or facts; it gives the opportunity for the audience to analyze, develop feelings, empathize with characters and criticize situations related to armed conflict.

The privation of sounds, the emphasis on certain sounds, and the discrimination of other sounds can often be perceived as the absence or the negation of reality. But sound is just as revealing for what it does not show as for what it does. The elimination of sounds or their highlighting reveals specific actions, and the attention of the audience is alerted to seemingly insignificant details that are ignored in daily life: actions and movements become evident. The audience is already seeing the frame. Sound does not have to be literal; sound should emphasize what is hard to see and most importantly, what lies beyond the frame. The auditory system lacks privacy; humans can understand and contextualize what is around them by listening and not necessarily by seeing. Sound is omnidirectional and omnipresent. The socio-cultural context of the characters and situations can be portrayed through sound. It is possible to understand surroundings, place characters in a space, and position them within the world. "Sans Soleil" (Marker, 1982) depicts the thoughts and perceptions of a traveler in different cities. The narration adds perspectives on details of daily life in different scenarios from an external standpoint and leads the spectator to experiencing these places in an uncommon approach. Nonetheless, what is remarkable is not the voice, it is the use of sound effects and ambiances in the movie. In the beginning, there are images of Japanese people asleep on a ferry in what can only be very uncomfortable and slovenly positions. The voice-over compares these images with the remains of war, memories of past aggression. Simultaneously, the sound track starts the scene with extraneous synthesized sound that slowly morphs from a representation of

travelling through sounds that recall the sea and the ship, to the representation of memories with the usage of blurry and weird sonorities. The sound does not explicitly depict an activity or a situation but instead an abstraction of reality – the absence of human sounds that help us to recognize the world itself. It is ambiguous and impossible to describe unequivocally. Nonetheless, what is clear is the feeling that it creates in the audience. A continuous, blurred, claustrophobic sound with some subtle rhythmic low frequencies of machinery conjures up an unpleasant comfort zone that, together with the images and the voice describing banality, portrays with great effect the explorer's perception of his experience travelling from Hokkaido to Tokyo. The evident manipulation of sound, which is turned into an aesthetic element, has only scant interest in portraying reality and proposes instead sound as a translator of emotions and feelings to appreciate the images in a different sense. Artificial and overproduced sound seeks to relate the audience to a reactionary or revolutionary position portrayed in a documentary.

The definition of silence in a film is another issue of note. Silence can be defined as the exclusion of certain sounds, but not as the complete elimination of sound – that simply does not exist. Absence of sound is usually experienced as uncomfortable and aggressive, but as an alternative to excessive noise it can be experienced as relief. In this sense, silence could be constructed as a sound that neglects actions. The non-existence of movement can attract attention to details in the image, giving it more impact while simultaneously stimulating the imagination of sound in the viewer. The emptiness of sound in a film can be interpreted by the audience as an active sound-maker element, as stated by Walter Murch:

The ultimate metaphoric sound is silence. If you can get the film to a place with no sound where there should be sound, the audience will crowd that silence with sounds and feelings of their own making, and they will, individually, answer the question of, 'Why is it quiet?' If the slope to silence is at the right angle, you will get the audience to a strange and wonderful place where the film becomes their own creation on a way that is deeper than any other. (Sider, Freeman, & Side, 2003, p. 100)

In "News from Home" (Akerman, 1977) the scarcity of sound in New York as the camera is taking the audience on a trip around the city turns out to represent the indifference of a daughter who lives apart from her family as well as the emptiness in her mother due to her daughter's lack of communication. The spectator does not have the opportunity to experience the streets through sound. It is known that the character inhabits the city,

but her perception is unknown, the same feeling that her mother is experiencing. Silence becomes a component that leads the viewer to imagine, to think, and to recreate, based on the narrative that the film has been building and the information that has been given of the characters. Silence makes the audience vulnerable; it exposes them to the void of the film and a process in which to relate spaces, situations, actions, time, and characters within themselves.

The conceptual and collaborative process to formulate the soundtrack in a documentary becomes a key element in contemporary films to enhance the experience of the audiovisual material. Reality is something that must be redefined in every piece. Reality itself is what people experience in daily life and new narratives approaching that reality should be tackled from a radically different point of view. The riskiness and radicality of sound have the potential to express feelings and a wealth of different emotions through acoustical signals. The world offers a huge variety of sounds to signify pain, anger, happiness, tranquillity, poverty, wellness, and a host of other emotions as expressed in different sociocultural communities. Giving the audience the opportunity to acknowledge sound as a trigger of emotions can change the impact of a documentary. Political responsibility has to be an ever present consideration. Constructivism can be considered as an idea to conceive documentaries because humans build ideas of sound based on experience, it is a social and cultural response that acts on a daily basis; hence sound can be produced under these collective experiences in order to deliver the message that the film needs to convey. The term 'distribution of the sensible,' as Jacques Rancière proposes, can be understood as

[...] the political component of any aesthetic endeavor is precisely located in the way in which certain aesthetic regimes enable certain visibilities or articulations and disable others. Thus, the political importance of documentary forms does not primarily reside in their subject matter, but in the ways in which they are organized. It resides in the specific distributions of the sensible implemented by documentary articulations. And this applies not only to corporate documentaries, but also to those documentary productions which take up their standards, their truth procedures, their formal vocabulary, and their scientific and objectivist attitude. (Steyerl, 2011)

"Human Remains" (Rosenblatt, 1998) is a documentary that exemplifies the reconstruction of reality from the absolute manipulation of images and sounds. From

information taken from a research process, which can be assumed as the reality or objectivity of the documentary, the director at his convenience takes pieces of archived videos and recreates sounds to express humanity in beings that are generally dehumanized: dictators. The voices are interpretations of other people who personify the characters, the sound effects are carefully selected to draw attention to specific details within the image, the ambiances are processed sonorities that do not correspond to the places depicted in the film, and the music is intended to put the viewer in a dramatic and ironic mood. The sound itself was not captured from real situations but rather totally produced from a perspective that the director wants to portray – a different position than the public is generally used to seeing of dictators, war, and the monstrosity that these personalities represent in a society. In this way, he subjects the figure of the dictator to a critical analysis based on the idea of banality and the mundane. The film has a documentary appearance because it uses archive footage, and sound is processed so as to make it appear dated and deteriorated. However, the aesthetics are delightfully constructed, and every aspect of the film is carefully produced. That the material is not taken from the situations that are being described in the dialog, which are the only elements delivering facts, does not detract from the veracity of the documentary. It represents facts, and provides a new perspective on some characters already known and recognized for the audience. The viewer is invited to form his own judgment, his own analysis.

Documentaries are composed of ideas and thinking processes. They should create narratives that cast a new light on existing situations. In contemporary societies people are overwhelmed by images, sounds, videos, photographs, drawings, texts, etc. According to Hito Steyerl (2011), "viewers are torn between false certainties and feelings of passivity and exposure, between agitation and boredom, between their role as citizens and their role as consumers." On the other hand, technology also surrounds us as an extension to experience the world, as an augmentation of our senses, a powerful mechanism that enables us to manipulate, distort, reshape, and redefine storytelling. Filmmakers should consider that as an opportunity to take risks, to be radical, and grant the viewer an opportunity to experience reality through different means, allowing them to develop a responsible attitude toward consumerism, authorize them to think, analyze, and formulate other ideas of reality. Living creatures are surrounded by a huge variety of sonorities and acoustic signals that describe the world and its limitless wealth of places, beings, movements, actions, ideas, relationships, feelings, and emotions. Experiencing life includes living it through sound, and storytelling should take advantage of this. Viewers are willing to take

different and alternative approaches to reality and to new perspectives; it is the artist who must encourage them to turn their backs on commodified media products and to build their own narratives.

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