



Waltz with Bashir

To guide the audience **emotionally**

Sound design is an integral part of fiction films, but is becoming essential to documentary filmmaking as well. Sound effects fill many of the spaces between spoken words, to remind the audience where they are emotionally and geographically. **TEXT JO-ANNE VELIN**

Sound designers, recordists and other sound professionals, often bemoan sound's low ranking on the list of creative jobs in film. This seems to be particularly true in lower-end fiction features, but it is also a gripe in much independent documentary.

Doing more with less money isn't the only challenge. Many directors are said to invest less of themselves, and perhaps their budgets, into creative use of sound *per se* than into picture and story.

This isn't always true, of course. Three examples demonstrate how very different films can rise a notch higher because of their sound. The first, *Waltz with Bashir*, is considered from the point of view of the sound effects designer. The second, *Burma VJ*, is considered from the view of the director who used re-enacted telephone conversations to create suspense where authentic recordings could not be had for security reasons. The third, *Far From the Villages*, is addressed from the position of a filmmaker shooting a low-budget atypical observational film in a refugee camp in Chad. The original, complex sounds of the camp were particularly well recorded, and used virtually

unmixed in post-production, to make this film a sensitive, immersive audio experience.

Waltz with Bashir (Israel, France, Germany, 2008) develops from the dialogues between the director, Ari Folman, and some of the men who served with him in his Israeli army unit in 1982 in Lebanon. Though the men are depicted speaking with Folman in various settings – a bar, a living room, outdoors – the interviews were in fact recorded in studios or “quiet rooms”. With the exception of authentic weapon fire, the sound effects were artificial, composed from several different components. Post-production audio was completed in a Berlin studio by sound effects designer, Noemi Hampel, and mixer Lars Ginzler.

The challenge in *Waltz with Bashir* was to create sound that matched the clean simplicity of the graphically unfussy, *bande dessinée* look of the animation, enhancing the men's stories without tipping into melodrama. At the same time, the sound had to guide the audience emotionally from the anxious, nightmare of the opening scene, through the director's gradual reconstruction of what happened to them all during the war, to

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Far From the Villages



Burma VJ



the sudden switch at the very end of the film to live-action archive – the real world – of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp the morning after the massacre. By then, the music is gone, the sound effects seem to vanish, and we are left with raw reality.

Hampel began with just the ADR (Automated Digital Recorded) interviews, the orchestral music, and the gunfire. “To just make a heavy film with depressing interviews and sounds about war would have been too much,” says Hampel. Her job was to bring more life to the animation, but how? Hampel began with the ADR data and the music, set to the unpainted animation. The sound supervisor, Aviv Aldema, remained in Israel while director Folman met with Hampel and Ginzler at the start of their assignment.

Hampel explains that with most films she would be given a lot more material which she would then clean and shape. This is common for the kind of location recordings that documentary filmmakers often capture: “When the sound is crude you really notice, it's not harmonious, there are sound gaps that take you out of the movie. To smooth out those distractions, adjust the levels and get rid of irritating parts is real handwork. It doesn't make the sound less authentic, just easier to understand,” Hampel explains.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, Hampel had the freedom to source sounds from anywhere, altering them through any process she chose to get the feeling that she was looking for. Often the finished effects came from unrecognisable, odd origins: “That's my job, to take sounds and manipulate them. You can take sounds that have nothing to do with the moment, you'd think, and then you work them up into the sound you want,” she explains.

The dramatic opening scene is a good example: An aggressive pack of big, black dogs charges through the streets, snarling, barking, and knocking over things. The dogs had to feel threatening but not “jump out at you,” says Hampel, “But no dog recordings sounded threatening enough,” so she added a deep lion's roar to the medley. The roar sounds plausibly canine only because that is what your eyes say you should be hearing.

Punctual, not too much, yet indispensable, sound effects fill many of the spaces between spoken words, to remind the audience where they

are emotionally and geographically. To Hampel's credit, her handiwork can be quite subtle but no less effective for it: A faint, brief dog bark outside a rural Dutch living-room evokes the mad dogs of the nightmare; soft, village church bells in the distance suggest the distance between Europe and Israel; a “woosh” of traffic and people, as the sound washes over Ari-the-soldier on leave in the city, evokes a sense of the director's own disorientation at that moment.

The effects may be precisely and sparingly placed, but the words spoken by the ex-soldiers don't “jump out at you” either. The sound effects deliver just enough hints and nudges, to mean that many viewers will not even realise to what extent they contribute to the animated film's emotional credibility.

Probably the single, most important sound design decision in *Burma VJ* (Denmark, 2008), was to re-enact telephone conversations between the Burmese video journalist “Joshua” – who had to flee Burma to Thailand – and the other VJ activists who remained in Burma during monks' demonstrations in September 2007. The video pictures from the demonstrations in Burma, however, were authentic.

“I don't look for the authenticity, I look for the emotion,” says director Anders Østergaard. “Of course I want to talk about reality. I don't invent events that weren't there. I have to work with the feeling. I have to know the facts, and then I'll make the choices necessary to represent it. The sound of the telephone line is the sound as Joshua remembers it at the time ... how it was like for the people involved.” The conversations were usually re-enacted by the people who had made the original calls and Østergaard says they directed themselves. The director decided to tell most of the story, as it unfolds in Burma, through these conversations. Moreover, Joshua's precarious and frail connection to Burma is reflected in the very texture of the sound on the telephone line, and gives edge to the film's suspense. To get that sound, Østergaard and sound designer Martin Hemmel, ran the ADR conversations through filters that replicate line tone – standard software that can provide anything from 1950s models to cellphones. It is hard to imagine how *Burma VJ* could

have touched audiences so viscerally without this and other sound devices, such as selective use of foley for the smuggled, Burmese video. It is also commendable that the film starts with a short text explaining why the director chose to re-enact parts of the story. The audience is then free to get carried away by the story, safe in the knowledge of the devices in use.

For Far From the Village (Switzerland, France, 2008) the director, Olivier Zuchuat, shot as a one-man band in a refugee camp in Chad for several months. His subjects were the Dajo people from Sudan. All the sound in the film was recorded on site, with almost no mixing in post-production. For his exceptionally clear, lush sound textures, Zuchuat credits the microphone: “Normally sound recordists try to isolate sound and make it complex during the mixing. What I have done is exactly the opposite. I knew I would be alone, and couldn't fight the complexity, but would try to capture the complexity. So I chose a microphone that is directional but also has a wide range – a shotgun and a stereo mic (in one).” He found only two, and settled on the more robust Sennheiser MK-418.

Taking turns, the refugees speak to the camera. In the film, Zuchuat offers each monologue whole. He also positioned the tripod so that the lens meets the speaker at eye level, but from a standard distance of four metres. Shooting wide, he frames the speaker in relation to the vast geography behind him or her.

The result is a film that avoids the cloying intimacy that can be so forced, and indeed exploitive, in so many other films by outsiders who portray refugees suffering in close-up, and *Far From the Village* feels all the more compelling because of it.

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She began to research independent documentary production issues in depth around 2000, while learning how to make her own first film, eventually curating a few documentary events with the independent Nova Cinema in Brussels. Currently she lives in Berlin. velininberlin@arcor.de