From Content to Context: Considering Embodied Implications for Film Sound Practitioners

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EXAMINING THE CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF PROFESSIONAL FILM SOUND WORK REVEALS the ways in which practitioners negotiate the physical, mental, financial and social strains that affect their professional and personal realities. Through this, the wider scope and enduring impacts of sound work become apparent. 'Film sound practitioners' are defined here as those who perform a diversity of sound roles, including location recording, Foley, sound design, sound effects (sfx) and dialogue editing and mixing. Film sound professionals work under the broader rubric of film, video and gaming production, as part of the creative industries. These sound professionals are responsible for capturing and/or creating a production's soundtrack elements of dialogue and/or effects. As will become apparent, employment in the creative industries is fraught with issues that directly and significantly impact the individual embodied experience of those professionals involved. And importantly, detailed studies specifically investigating the experiences of these specific sound professionals within the film industry are scarce. Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor note that after decades of being 'displaced' in media studies by a focus on texts and audiences, '… the labouring lives of people working in the cultural and creative industries are now firmly on the research agenda' (1).

This discussion will firstly identify the problem with popular conceptions of 'creative work'. Through the mapping of some trends of scholarly writing on film

sound, it becomes evident how there is still much room to further develop practitioner-focused scholarship for film sound practitioners specifically. The discussion then unpacks the creative industry/industries, and draws on cultural theorists to consider the current models of creative work. The point here is to demonstrate why these may be problematic for practitioners, and to raise important questions around personal relationships, as well as mental and physical wellness. By foregrounding these key issues, we may identify a number of constraints which can result in practitioners being reluctant to express concern, as well as challenge assumptions about the way health should be managed, all of which have been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. New findings indicate that these issues around practitioner wellness are ongoing and still need to be addressed.

The aim here is to complicate the popular conceptions of sound work that obscure the real bodies behind narratives of technological prowess, and the implicit—but erroneous—assumptions of invulnerability. This is in line with Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, who argue that '(unpleasant) affective experiences—as well as the pleasures of the work—need to be theorized to furnish a full understanding of the experience of cultural work' (16). For a sound practitioner specifically, micro and macro implications and questions arise; on one hand, about how the relationship between individuals and sonic material is navigated in the presence of difficult sound work; on the other, how the structural or industrial aspects of professional sound work affect the lived experience of the practitioner. It is the latter question that will be focused on in the present discussion, acknowledging that exploring lived impacts of professional sound work demythologises creative work and 'the bourgeois myth' of 'an autonomous subject as the wellspring of creativity' (Banks 81). By prioritising an understanding of the bodies that must endure both challenging sound work and a precarious industry, this discussion problematises 'work as play' conceptions of creative work (Deuze, Martin and Allen 347).

Living the Sounds: In Recognition of Practitioner Experience

The interdisciplinary field of what we may now term 'sound studies' has covered much ground in the decades since it first emerged. Over the years, debates and investigations have traversed areas as diverse as listening practices, aesthetics and technologies to name but a few. It has considered ontological questions as well as artistic practices that both inspire and provoke. The materiality of audience encounters with film sound for audiences has been a concern emerging in film sound theory in recent years. Critically, accounts of embodiment and lived experience during the *production* of film sound have often been neglected. There is still much work to be done in understanding and theorising the embodied experiences of those who work with sound professionally. I argue that 'bodies' and the embodied experience of these professionals are often obscured or erased by

industry literature and some academic accounts. There is a tendency to focus on technical pathways to achieving sonic works (Casanelles; Isaza; Klinge; Martin) or celebritise the work of a select few high-profile professionals made famous for their contributions to certain iconic films (Costantini; Greene; Jarrett). In other words, those academic and industry sources that do discuss sound professionals are often framed in terms of technical knowledges and tools, where sonic achievements via technology are fetishised and valorised, rather than the bodies producing the work. Such an approach bypasses the rich lived complexities inherent in sound production, and also overlooks the potentially fraught issues inseparable from professional sound work, such as problematic industrial work practices or mental and physical health concerns.

It is helpful to examine the degree and breadth to which certain aspects of sound work may influence and alter the lived experience of those who work with sound professionally. Further, this recognises that such work is not only about the production of *content* and the phenomenological experience of sound itself. It is also about the industrial contexts that define working practices for those practitioners who are players in this larger system. A significant amount of film scholarship and film sound analysis has traced materialist theories of resonance to consider how listeners feel a film (see Batcho; Eidsheim; Quinlivan; Donaldson). While these perspectives are very useful and pertinent, there is still considerable scope to investigate the lived experience of sound production work. This is not only because contextual encounters with sound are markedly different for audiences as opposed to practitioners. Even in industrial discourses, the tendency to conflate film sound work with technology reduces or removes the space for bodily experience—particularly challenging experiences—to be acknowledged and discussed. This in turn restricts the ability for discussion to prompt and provoke needed changes.

For the film sound practitioner, sound work is created and constrained within industrial contexts, which in turn shape and define material encounters with sound. As Veit Erlmann reminds us, hearing is a sensory experience that involves the entire body: '… it is not only the ear that listens … our entire rich interior world also acts in response to the ear…' (125). Such a perspective is useful in avoiding reductionist ideas of listening to an auditory mechanism located in the ear, rather highlighting the coaction of bodily responses that occur during a listening experience. Yet this heightens the stakes for those who are materially immersed in sound as an occupation, particularly when either the sound or the narrative content is particularly challenging. Yet this is only one portion of the equation, for sound practitioners are embedded in a network of professional practices and contexts that constitute the creative industries.

It's important to note that while there is a multiplicity of 'local' industries that operate within their own particular political and economic contexts and constraints, they are also connected in the global circulation of creative commodities. Further, the nature of 'the industry' means that work is increasingly considered borderless, where sites for the production of cultural goods are increasingly mobile. As Mark Deuze, Chase Bowen Martin and Christian Allen have identified in the structure of the gaming industry, there is now a global shift towards 'flexible cultural labour, whereby '… skills, workers and sources of financing are distributed across national boundaries, both within and between firms or corporations' (342). Drawing on A. Aneesh, these authors also characterise the creative industries as 'transnational virtual spaces', which features the transfer of skills and labor abroad (Deuze, Martin and Allen 342). Yet despite the apparent flexibility and possibility offered by a trans-national model of creative industry employment, the reality of reliable, sustained and gainful occupation, particularly for those in smaller industries, reveals troubling trends that directly impact practitioners.

Further, the use of the term 'film industry' is in some ways problematically simplified, and does not adequately reveal the complexity inherent in a global business network, and professions that traverse geographical boundaries, or engage a wide range of creative commodities. Indeed, the impetus and ideology behind work in the creative industries varies among regions, for as John Hartley pointed out, '… in the USA creativity is consumer- and market-driven, whereas in Europe it is caught up in traditions of national culture and cultural citizenship' (5). Further, for local industries described as 'porous to both America and Europe', such as Australia and New Zealand, these two very different agendas produce tensions between 'consumer and culture' and 'market and citizenship' (Hartley 5), a polarity which impacts industry structure. Nonetheless, professional sound work is physically performed by living bodies that must navigate and negotiate the distinctive challenges that characterise the creative industries.

Phenomenological film theorist Jenny Chamarette asks scholars to consider: 'What cinematic encounters go beyond the cinema?' (235). Chamarette was not speaking directly to film sound scholars, yet her question is nonetheless provocative in a wider sense. It has been argued elsewhere (Walker 2018) that the experience of film sound be theorised as 'cinesomatic', a neologism intended to encapsulate how film sound provokes an embodied and extended sensory experience for listeners. Conceptualising film sound in this way avoids limiting sonic analysis to textual readings, and prioritises the role of the body and subjective lived experience in interpreting and responding to sound. However, it is imperative to expand this concept further to situate the lived experiences of the sound practitioner. To discuss only audience experiences of sound engagement—or to frame discussions from an audience perspective—is to overlook those bodies and embodiments

responsible for producing content. It also over-emphasises the reception of a completed work, or the content itself, missing the process of sound work-in-progress, within which the embodiment of the practitioners is thoroughly emmeshed. And, importantly for this discussion, the audience/text focused discussions of cinematic and sonic engagement are insufficient to account for the wider frameworks, structures and influences that create sonic content for film, or how these are a factor in the difficult embodied experiences of the sound professional.

Enquiry into the corporeal dimensions of lived experience for sound professionals is not only overlooked by film sound scholars. Industry-based publications, online forums and blogs abound, yet specific and involved discussions around the impact of work practices on physical and mental health, social relationships and wellness are relatively sparse compared to the overwhelming focus on technical tools and techniques. This is despite the fact that, as new research is demonstrating, professional sound work can have significant impacts on all aspects of a practitioner's life, including health, finances, interpersonal relationships and family dynamics (Walker, *(In)habiting Film Sound*). Emerging research in the music industry is also discovering similar findings, suggesting complex relationships between creative work and mental and physical wellness, as well as interpersonal and professional relationships (Gross and Musgrave). In looking closer at this critical scarcity, implications about the industry itself, as well as cultural norms and narratives concerning working bodies becomes apparent. Minimising or ignoring the corporeal dimensions of sound work—especially as concerns potential difficulties and compromising conditions—is demonstrably structural to the industry itself. To counter this tendency, arguing that the foregrounding of embodiment in research into film sound production enables scholarship to create a space in which corporeal realities, both positive and negative, are identified and validated.

Rendering Reality: Industrial Conditions for Practitioners

Professional sound work is often defined by challenging experiences that impact on lives of the practitioner. However, the details of these difficulties are absent from many public and professional forums for sound. Industrial pressures are arguably a factor here—for instance, the highly competitive aspect of the industry means that practitioners are required to exhibit a high level of competence and a 'can-do' attitude. A global feature of the creative industries, including postproduction sound, is that it is governed by unpredictable and highly competitive work that is obtained through networking and personal reputation (Bennett and Hennekam 1455). However, as Daniel Ashton argues, concepts of 'professionalism' are not neutral, and '… industry norms can be evaluated and contested' (555).

One of the key findings of studies into the creative industries is an operative assumption that it is an 'antidote to work' (Wright 316). Indeed, the mythology and mystique of creative work may be because, as David Lee has found, creative occupations are perceived as being more interesting and glamorous than other jobs, and media work is seen to promise autonomy, self-expression and social recognition for one's labours (486). Within such an ethos, for creative workers, a long-established doctrine of creativity is perpetuated, in which the narrative of work is framed as deeply pleasurable, rewarding, emotionally intense (Lee 483). Similarly, a major theme emerging from research by Julie van den Eynde, Adrian Fisher and Christopher Sonn was that of industry workers expressing an 'overwhelming passion' for their creative work (2). These authors suggest that such 'passion' is a 'collective strength' and a 'powerful element to bind the industry', and, importantly, they argue that this passion may be both an antidote to the many negative aspects of creative work and a motivating factor to work against the 'negative' aspects of the Australian entertainment industry (van den Eynde, Fisher and Sonn 2).

Despite—or perhaps because—of such optimism, it is important to observe the ways in which the realities of professional sound work challenge assumptions about creative work. Exploring accounts of sound practitioners' lived experience means that the bodies—and embodiments—of professional sound work may be understood in both critical and professional discussions. As David Wright has found, empirical research into professional sound work raises question marks over the long-term sustainability of a creative career within the current context (483). Thus, researchers need to consider challenging aspects of professional sound work which may 'trouble the optimistic conception' (316) of creative work. A key finding of emerging research is how working in the creative industries can have significant physical, emotional, psychological and social implications for those involved, and there remain significant global implications across professional, social, political and industrial contexts. For example, it has been found that some can experienced a 'professional-personal bleed through', where working on difficult and/or distressing content at times leads to a disconcerting verisimilitude for that practitioner where memories of the work and negative feelings are triggered and re-lived in non-work-related situations, or as one practitioner explained:

> If you're working on a dark film, it takes you to a dark place mentally. You will walk out of the studio feeling very heavy yourself. My wife says she can tell when I'm in a heavy film, compared to when I'm working on a Disney film. She notices that I am quiet and a bit more reserved. And the music that I want to listen to at home is a bit more aggressive. (Walker 274)

Another practitioner also revealed:

> I would always make excuses when I would come home and I'm just in a terrible state with my wife… [I]f you're cutting a violent sequence and a lot of sword fighting and a lot of heavy hard effects—punching and stabbing and all of that sort of stuff—I find that you get all those bursts of adrenaline in your system and shock and stress from those loud sequences. And I find I would get home and I would just be really wound up from those sequences. And I would make that excuse… I've been putting in the sounds of people punching each other in the face all day, so I'm a little bit disturbed at the moment. (Walker, 273)

While it is important here not to suggest a direct link between distressing narrative content and compromised wellbeing it is nonetheless pertinent to acknowledge that effects and impacts of sound work are clearly noticed and felt by practitioners. These impacts may be caused or compounded by industry conditions that make it difficult for a practitioner to take time away from a project (Walker 275).

Another reason for such an erasure of bodies in discussions of creative sound production arguably speaks to the temporary and project-based structure of work characteristic of the creative industries. As Doris Ruth Eikhof and Chris Warhurst have identified, the project-based model endemic to the industry means that '…work is undertaken by project teams or 'motley crews'… brought together for specific projects' that are then disbanded after the project completion (498). Consequently, practitioners exist in a 'highly individualized and precarious' labour market (Lee 483). These industry conditions have the potential to significantly impact how practitioners narrate—or silence—their embodied experiences. Indeed, sociologists have critiqued contemporary labour market structures for the way in which they disempower the working populace. Pierre Bourdieu argues that such employee insecurity has a direct impact on those affected, as well as an indirect impact on all others. For Bourdieu, the fear of unemployment that this insecurity arouses is 'methodically exploited' by the labour structures and strategies of capitalist markets (84).

Such industrial structures are evidently not conducive to organised or unionised activity, nor do they facilitate open forums to discuss unsatisfactory or difficult aspects of production sound work. In Australia, trade union membership declined from around 2.5 million in 1976 to 1.5 million in 2016, and it was found that young workers, or casual/part time workers are considerably less likely to be union members (Gilfillan and McGann 1). Significantly, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the Australian union for the creative industries that

represents sound professionals, experienced a 31.4 percent drop in membership between 2003 and 2017 (Gilfillan and McGann 5). In their survey of the creative industries worldwide, Bennett and Hennekam also found that despite the presence of trade unions, '[s]ome participants were simply too occupied with their daily struggles to think about their rights' (80). Further, while tax-deductible, union membership can still be considered expensive, and especially for freelance and contract-based work, this potentially adds to the financial precariousness against which they already struggle.

Further, new research findings about the creative industries specifically reveal aspects that may significantly predispose practitioners towards mental and physical health issues. As van den Eynde, Fisher and Sonn identify, negative impacts of irregular work patterns are particularly visible in social relationships, with their research finding that 58 percent of participants 'had problems finding time for their families, 63 percent had difficulties maintaining a social life, and 45 percent reported difficulties keeping contact with their friends in the industry' (79). The authors concluded from these findings that there was a strong possibility of social isolation for these creative workers, which meant significant 'risk factors for negative mental health outcomes, with consequential impacts on accessing social networks and support' (van den Eynde, Fisher & Sonn 79). More recently, while the full extent of financial and health outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic remains to be analysed in full, there can be no doubt that the complex issues outlined above can only be severely compounded by the impacts of COVID-19. Roberta Comunian and Bridget Conor point out that problematic conditions and precarity often only become evident at 'moments of crisis' (273). Indeed, the issues outlined above are evidently compounded by COVID-19. According to Amy Visser et al., music practitioners are at increased risk of psychological distress, substance use problems, and suicide (2). Recent research conducted by Paul Crosby and Jordi McKenzie demonstrates how Australian musicians were severely negatively impacted by COVID-19 measures in financial and personal ways, and that these professionals had only 'limited confidence' that their livelihoods would return to that of pre-COVID (174). Their research also addresses policy issues that have failed to give Australian creative workers support during crisis.

Individual Versus Industrial: Questions and Implications for the Future

For the film sound practitioners, there is a conspicuous lack of either industry or scholarly resources around health issues, with open discussions only now beginning to publicly emerge. The scant material that touches upon strategies for general health and wellbeing can be located in informal sources such as online peer-conducted interviews and articles (see Isaza, 'Andrew Lackey Special: Surviving the Crunch'; Meyer; Marshall; Mongeau). At an industry level, open discussions are only just emerging. The Association of Sound Designers in the

United Kingdom hosted their very first Mental Health Awareness session on 31 May 2019 (Association of Sound Designers). In the anonymous online survey of sound professionals conducted by this researcher, 75 percent of the 80 industry professionals who responded indicated their belief that there is not enough awareness, support or open discussion around mental illness in the industry, 17 percent were unsure, and 8 percent felt that there was enough. Further, 62 percent wanted to know more about maintaining physical and mental wellness in their profession, 17 percent were unsure and 22 percent responded that they did not want to know more.

Yet evident in industry dialogue are the core assumptions and expectations about maintaining practitioner health. The scholars of healthism have already critiqued the politics of health as it is framed in social and cultural discourses (Crawford; Lupton; Greenhalgh and Wessely; Brown; Cairney, McGannon and Atkinson). These scholars have revealed the move to individualise health, where, as Nike Ayo points out, individuals 'should work and live to maximize their own health' (100). Such a perspective is problematic in that it displaces the burden of health care from the shoulders of the state and onto the consciousness of individual citizens' (Ayo 100). Indeed, the overall lack of formal and informal literature concerning coping strategies and awareness of physical and mental health issues in the film sound community is indicative of broader assumptions and expectations regarding work in creative industries.

The creative industries are characterised by temporary, intermittent and precarious work that features 'long hours and bulimic patterns of working' (Gill and Pratt 14). It has also been found that work in these industries collapses or erases boundaries between work and play, offers poor remuneration and engenders 'profound insecurity and anxiety' regarding receiving future work, earning a sufficient living as well as 'keeping up' with changes, be they structural or technological (14). Current research into the creative industries reveals the extent to which it is characterised by self- employed or and multiple-employed workers who report little to no protection for either their current work situation or their future needs (Bennett and Hennekam 80). As a result, practitioners are found to undertake multiple jobs with irregular work hours, extended shifts, workdays and working weeks, and significantly, these factors'… are all likely to negatively impact health and safety, including psychological well-being' (80).

As Louise Ingersoll points out, in an Australian context there is little published on the employment systems, structures and institutions operating within the film industry. As a result, the role of trade unions and professional associations in the bargaining processes around wage setting and negotiations of work conditions are under-explored, and consequently, informed awareness of labour mobility and employment opportunity are also lacking (50). Ingersoll makes the compelling

argument that creative workers such as those who work in the film industry 'should have a voice' and that there should be 'an open and transparent analysis of employment in this context' (50).

This discussion has asked that we ensure our understanding of professional sound work as an embodied working practice within the culture industry. In doing so, industry contexts become important to consider because of the ways in which they shape, influence and impact lived experience and corporeal realities. Such a move may mitigate any tendency to fetishise the creative work life or to sanction what Ross describes as the 'cultural discount' (5) of creative labour, whereby personal gratification, rather than monetary rewards, is seen as compensation for labour—or indeed, as I add here—precarity. It also challenges existing industrial frameworks and assumptions that impact on the lived experience of these practitioners, rendering these bodies as visible and audible. Practitioner voices and accounts of their experiences matter, and scholars, audiences, industry players and policy makers have a responsibility to listen.

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