The Soundtrack
Volume 3 Number 1
© 2010 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/st.3.1.33_1

GUSTAVO COSTANTINI

Walter Murch interviewed by Gustavo Costantini

ABSTRACT

In this interview with the Oscar-winning editor and sound designer Walter Murch, composer, academic and critic Gustavo Costantini explores Murch's ways of working with sound and image and some of his conceptual theories on film-making.

KEYWORDS

sound
editing
Coppola
musique concrète
Chion
Apocalypse Now
The Conversation
Youth Without Youth
American Graffiti

In December 2008, Walter Murch was editing Francis Ford Coppola's *Tetro* in the San Telmo district of Buenos Aires. Following a masterclass at the University of Buenos Aires, he gave this interview to Gustavo Costantini.

Gustavo Costantini: Back in 1971 you were involved in the screenplay and the sound montage of George Lucas's *THX 1138*. The 'Sound Montage' credit was not usual at that time. Did you start from the very beginning thinking about and making these sound montages or was it something that came up after trying something more orthodox?

Walter Murch: It was a combination of both practical and what you might call philosophic choices. Philosophically, I am very fond of the word montage, which is what editing is called in the Romance languages. The root of that word is to build, to put something together, and is really the opposite of the English word editing, which is about separating or pulling something apart. Well, you have to build something before you take it apart, so primarily what we do – in both film and sound editing – is montage; we put things together.

Of course there is a later stage in which we do make selective removals, but montage also had an appeal to me because when I was a teenager I was fascinated with *musique concrète*, which was a school of music started in France in the late 1940s. The composers of *musique concrète* had the idea – early in the technology of tape recording – of taking natural sounds and organizing them so that they were making music not out of pure notes but out of natural sounds with all the accompanying texture and specific detail. And I thought: what is the soundtrack of a film but *musique concrète* that has some kind of relationship, a dynamic relationship, not always subservient, to the image? And the fact that montage is a French word, all of this came together.

The practical problem was that I was not in any union at that time and *THX* was being made for Warner Brothers. So I had to be careful what I called myself because if I simply said 'Sound Editing by Walter Murch' people would say 'Who is this?' But because it was vague, and particularly because the film was not a commercial success, nobody knew. And that actually continued to be true for me until the late 1980s when I joined the union. So I was flying kind of under the radar.

GC: You mentioned at the time that discovering *musique concrète* was influential for making these montages. What was the experience of hearing that type of music for the first time? And to what extent is *musique concrète* present in *THX 1138*?

WM: I vividly remember the first time I heard *musique concrète* because, on my own at the age of twelve, I had already started to record sounds on a little Revere tape recorder and to splice them together and to do very primitive multi-track work. And then one day, I think I was thirteen, I came home from school and turned on the radio and heard sounds that I thought I had made. There was a moment of real disorientation, and then I figured no, this must be something from the radio. And I connected up the recorder to the radio, and waited for half an hour to find out what this piece of music was and the announcer said that this was the first panorama of *musique concrète* by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry who were the founders of that school. I was dizzy. It was the first understanding I had that what I was doing as a teenager in New York grown-up adult people were also doing and they were doing it in France and they were making records of it and these records were being played on the classical music station in New York City! It was a very powerful sense of validation that my hobby was not so silly after all. I didn't know where that would lead, but it was a very exciting moment to feel a connection between what I was doing and people who were making this music in France.

In the late 1960s, when I did the soundtrack for *The Rain People*, Francis Ford Coppola's film, and then especially Lucas's *THX 1138*, I tried to infuse the sound of those films with that sensibility. Particularly *THX* because it described an imaginary world, and that is a very advantageous arena for sound. When you're creating a world that nobody is familiar with, where they have no preconceptions about what this world might sound like, you have greater freedom.

And I even went so far as to pay a secret, naive homage to Pierre Henry by including a sound from one of his records as a loop in one of the scenes. He had written a piece of music called *Music for a Door and a Sigh*. It was a woman sighing [sighs] like that, and then the sound of a particularly lovely door of a barn squeaking with a rusty hinge: sigh, squeak, sigh, squeak, and so on. I found a good juicy squeak and made a 35mm magnetic loop out of it and used

that as the background sounds for one of the scenes, just a mysterious repetitive squeaking. Well, the film came out and it was shown at Cannes, and it ran in a theatre in Paris. And about a month later Warner Brothers got a letter from Pierre Henry with a lawsuit claiming infringement because we had used one of his sounds in the film without asking his permission! Which was true! And I suddenly saw my infant career going down in flames because of this faux pas I had made. Fortunately it was settled, it did not get to a lawsuit, and the lawyers determined that I had somehow changed the nature of the sound enough. My apologies to Mr Henry: it was meant as a homage to him. But if you listen to the film today, in a certain scene, you can hear a repetitive squeaking sound and that's directly from one of the *musique concrètes*. Now that I think of it, it was probably one of the first lawsuits for sampling, because that's exactly what it was. It was 1970 when I did this, so it was long before digital technology, obviously, but that's what it was. I took a recording of something and I made a loop out of it and I played that in a different context, in another work. So I would be interested to know if that was, in fact, the first of those contests.

GC: I remember in *THX* a very interesting sound – a machine that sounds like a music box. What is it?

WM: That's what it is: it is a music box, a nineteenth century music box. It was a sound that I recorded for a student film a couple of years earlier. It's a good example of where mistaken communication can actually lead to something. I had thought that it would be interesting to put this sound over this machine that THX, the character, is strapped into. It's kind of like an MRI machine but many years ago. It's a big piece of medical equipment into which this man is strapped and it rotates and I thought, somehow, I don't know what the connection was, to have the sound of a music box. But one that's played very slowly. And I mentioned it to George and he thought, 'Well, yeah, that would be great'. So I went ahead and did it. And when I showed it to him he said, 'Well, I thought you were going to use the music box in the white limbo prison', and I said no, I meant this medical exam, which I thought was part of his whole prison experience. But George looked at it anyway and said, 'This is great'. So if he had known what it was in advance, maybe he would have said 'No', but because he thought it was one thing and I did something else, and then he saw the results, it actually wound up being in the finished film. Obviously most of the time you want to communicate effectively with your collaborators, but there are times when actually making a mistake of communication will lead to something that is better than anyone could deliberately have chosen to do.

GC: One thing I really admire in your approach is how you trust your perceptions. I hear you say things like, 'If it's good for me' or 'If I believe in that sound'. For example, the sound of the fan in the beginning of *Apocalypse Now* or this medical equipment sounding like a music box. How does that work, do you try to trust your intuition? Is there a method in that?

WM: Well, yes. I think the greatest thing that sound can contribute to a film is a metaphoric tension between the sound and the image. If you produce a sound that has no creative tension, which simply reproduces what we are looking at, it adds something, but it doesn't add very much because you are not soliciting the imagination of the viewer. The viewers are seeing something and what they're hearing is exactly what they might expect to hear given what they're

looking at. Whereas, if you can create a tension, which is to say: I don't know what the connection is between a big piece of medical equipment and a music box other than that they are machines that slowly rotate. But it felt to me that at that point in the film everything had been very harsh and mechanical and a little bit electronic, and that here in the middle of this medical exam, a piece of sweetness, actually a piece of music from the early twentieth century, would be very welcome. But it's also played at half speed, so that it has a calming effect. So, for a variety of reasons it seemed correct. And yet there's nothing obvious about that, and I leave it up to the audience to piece together in their own mind what connection they make between this piece of medical machinery, very modern, and a sound which we associate with the end of the nineteenth century, beginning of the twentieth century, very sweet and yet also manipulated because it's played at half speed. There's a tension between those two ideas. The visual idea and the sound idea don't immediately go together. And yet if you toss something at an audience like that they will frequently put something together in their own mind that is their own rationalization of what it is that they're seeing: unique to them – to each member of the audience. That's the greatest thing, I think, that film can do: that is, to provoke an image or a sensation that is not on the screen but is elicited from the mind of the audience. And the great and paradoxical thing is that this feeling is then re-projected onto the screen by the audience and they imagine that what they are feeling is coming from the screen – in fact it's coming from themselves.

GC: In *Apocalypse Now* I counted three different helicopter sounds. The first one is this strange noise that is, in fact, before any image, the 'shug, shug, shug' that we hear while the screen is black. Then it disappears behind the Doors song. Later, after the drum roll, we hear the second type of sound and this is the most interesting effect because it sounds partly like a fan and, at the same time, it sounds like a helicopter. It's always the same synthetic sound, but it is manipulated according to what is suggested.

WM: Well, it's true that certain objects generate a rich spectrum of sounds as they move through space. The helicopter is a good example; and the steam train is another good example. An automobile less so. The sound of a steam train in the distance, puffing smoke, you hear something, you hear the whistle, you hear an echo of a 'choo, choo, choo' [makes sound of train] kind of a sound, and then as it comes closer you hear the clanking of the metal. And then, up close, you hear mostly the hiss of the steam and the pounding of metal. And then, when it passes, you get this nice shift of frequency, the Doppler effect, and then it goes away and now you're hearing a completely different spectrum. Helicopters are like that, too. They have five or six different components in them. And what we did was to analyse the sound of the helicopters, the real sound, and then reproduce each of these five elements electronically, so that we could assemble a kind of Lego kit, a helicopter made up of nothing but electronic sounds – which sounded real when we fit them all together, but which we could then disassemble into its various components. So what you're hearing at the beginning is one of those components, an abstraction of just the blade – 'whop, whop, whop'. And then, when Willard's looking at the fan when he wakes up, it's another one of those sounds but faster. And then that merges, in fact, with the sound of a real helicopter, which is flying over and then disappears into the distance. It's the real sound that makes Willard get up out of bed and go and look out the window.

GC: And this third sound is like a calling from reality, to wake up from the dream?

WM: It's what happens to all of us when we are in the middle of a deep sleep and the alarm goes off, and somehow the sound of the alarm is incorporated into our dream, but in a completely different context. It's another sound. And then we wake up and we wonder where is that sound coming from, how can that be? And then 'zoooomp', it is revealed to be only the alarm and you shut it off and you're back in what we call reality. I tried to create something of that experience in the opening reel of the film.

GC: I want to know a little bit about the complex mix between the different songs in *American Graffiti*. It was really a tour de force to mix all these songs. And the difficult thing, the trickiest thing, is where they are coming from. Sometimes they come from the radio, sometimes from nothing. How did you work with those songs?

WM: It was an extension, a development of techniques I had used in *The Godfather* in the wedding scene, and also in *THX 1138*: taking recordings of sounds and playing them back through a speaker in a real space and recording that energized space on another recorder, something I called worldizing. So that I would now have two recordings: the original dry sound and then that same sound fully energizing an acoustic space. It is like having a very specific echo chamber.

This worldizing technique began to solve the problem of what you might call acoustic depth of field. In photography we control the depth of field of the image to make clear what the audience needs to look at. If I'm taking a portrait of you I will make sure that your face is in focus but that the background is out of focus. So as soon as somebody looks at the photograph their eye immediately, without any explanation, knows what it should be looking at: your face, because that's what's in focus. If the background were also in focus, there would be a confusion.

But in sound up to the 1970s there was little development of this concept of 'spatial selectivity', with one notable exception: Orson Welles, who had used it in *Touch of Evil, Citizen Kane* and many of his radio programmes. Welles' technique was slightly different in that he did not combine the original (focused) recording and the atmospheric (out of focus) recording – he just used the atmospheric recording itself.

So in *American Graffiti* the storytelling problem of the film was that George [Lucas] wanted the film to have music from the beginning to the end, which I think amounted to 42 songs. If we had used the established technique, which was to play the music low and add some high-pass filter and maybe a little bit of generic echo chamber, it would have been hard for people to listen to the dialogue because the music would have also been in focus, so to speak. Or we would have had to play the music at such a low level that it would beg the question of why we were including it in the first place. By throwing the music 'out of focus' we could still play it fairly loud and not have it interfere with the dialogue. We get to have our cake and eat it too! I remember a discussion with the picture editor, Verna Fields, who said, 'Walter, please convince George not to have all these songs in the film because it's going to ruin the story. People will get angry at the film; they'll say turn off that music so I can hear what people are saying. It's amusing for one or two songs, but not for

42 songs'. And I said, 'Well, Verna, I think we're developing a technique that will make this possible'. And she said, 'I don't know, I don't know …'.

In the end we went to various spaces for our worldizing, and we built spaces out of plywood, which simulated the interior of a car and the sound of a car radio – an AM car radio. It was a wonderful opportunity to investigate all of the possible permutations, long before, obviously, there was any digital means of doing so. That is now the common approach – you use a digital reverberation unit and simply choose from a pre-arranged menu what kind of space you want – bathroom, car interior, cathedral, bedroom – and you can then further manipulate the size of that space, what the walls are made of, etc. Back in 1972 we didn't have any of this so we had to do it in real space.

GC: You mentioned working with Verna Fields, who edited *Jaws*. At the time did you think about being a film editor?

WM: Yes, what I had mainly done at school was picture editing and sound mixing. There were very few people at school who were interested in sound, since it was seen as unglamorous and people assumed that you had to have a high technical engineering interest in amperes and ohms and all of these obscure terms. I didn't have an engineering background and I approached the work that I did in sound with this *musique concrète* approach. And I tried to compensate with what you might call an aggressive aesthetic approach for what I lacked in engineering. And, luckily, I was moving into working professionally just at the time that transistors and then integrated circuits were beginning to make themselves felt so that I could use equipment that was relatively inexpensive but that nonetheless was of professional quality. If I had been trying this ten years earlier I would have had to construct these pieces of equipment myself, or I would have had to know much more engineering than I do. So, it was partly luck, just how old I was and what the state of the technology was at that time. Now, of course, all of this is available to anyone who can operate a computer, and all of these very sophisticated things are happening without necessarily any 'under the hood' knowledge by the people who are using them. At the beginning of my career that was just beginning, enough so that I was able to get a hold on the work that I was doing without having an advanced engineering background.

GC: Yes, even I get a very different feeling when I turn the cut-off frequency of the filter on my synthesizer than when I do the same thing digitally by moving the mouse on a computer – that's awful. And the sound of an analogue filter still sounds warmer to me.

WM: Well, I don't necessarily agree about the warm part. Maybe I'm getting old, but it now all sounds very good to me, and getting better! The digital coldness was an artefact of a low sample rate and bit depth of the sound, which in the early 1980s was rather primitive. If the sample rate is not high enough, high frequencies will not be perfectly represented – they're chopped up into square waves, or sawtooth waves, and that's what hits the ears as being harsh.

GC: *The Conversation* is very interesting in that it's a film about sound but, in some ways, it has fewer sound ideas than *Apocalypse Now* or *The Godfather*.

Maybe when sound is the subject, or music is the subject, it narrows the way you can deal with it. What do you think about that?

WM: I think that's true. I remember when *Conversation* was released and people would come up to me and say 'Great sound in that film', and I would be flattered but a little perplexed because as you said the sound has a kind of minimalist approach. Why were they responding so favourably? Now I think the answer is partly that it's a film about sound. The main character is a man who records sound for a living, an unusual character for a film. And so people are being asked to enter into a world, and to listen to that world through the ears of the main character. And that's not their ordinary experience when they go to a movie. Usually sounds are just there, without this strong subjective element of 'being listened to'. And then if the sounds are interesting the audience's attention is rewarded because there is some extra meaning to be found, so they pay even more attention. A self-reinforcing spiral.

The other thing, I think – and strangely enough I didn't realize this until after I'd finished the film – is that about half way through the story, people stop talking. There are some shouts and we hear the conversation played over and over again, but 'normal' dialogue becomes minimal after the warehouse party. And I think when that happens in a film, it's the equivalent of looking at the night sky when there is no moon. Suddenly you notice the stars! But when the dialogue is present it's like a bright moon that hogs all the attention. When the moon isn't there, the stars come into their own. So for a good 45 or 50 minutes people are left to their own moon-less devices regarding the sound. There is not a lot of significant dialogue for them to focus on, and so they start to really listen to the sounds, because they want to extract meaning from what they're looking at and listening to. And because the main character (Gene Hackman) is a listener himself.

GC: One of the most impressive sequences of that second part is probably this sort of inversion of the *Psycho* shower scene. Harry's in the bathroom, he looks to the toilet, everything is clean and perfect and suddenly the blood emerges from the inside. Was Francis very aware of this reference?

WM: Yes, when he set out to make the film he said that he wanted it to be a combination of Alfred Hitchcock and Hermann Hesse, so a little bit of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and a little bit of *Steppenwolf*. You can see Steppenwolf in the character of Harry Caul, even in his name. The main character in Steppenwolf is Harry Haller and Gene Hackman's character's name was originally Harry Caller but then Francis shortened it to Call. And then when one of the secretaries was typing the script she made a mistake and typed it Caul and Francis liked that much better. That led to a whole visual motif of the transparent plastic, because a caul is the semi-transparent shroud that babies are sometimes born in. It's supposed to be a sign of greatness.

So Hitchcock was certainly present in Francis's mind when he was making the film, and a film-maker can't look at a shower without thinking about *Psycho*. When he was writing the screenplay he was having a problem trying to figure out where to hide the clue that there had been a murder in the bathroom and he asked me to think about what it might be. I came up with this idea of the blood having gotten stuck in the toilet. Even though the toilet was clean, the cloth, blood-soaked, was in the toilet, blocked. And also the idea that when you go into the room there is a tiny little sound of water gurgling.

And then you pass by the toilet, you hear it and then you forget it. Harry goes into the bathroom and looks in the bathtub with the shower and then he becomes aware of this sound. He then goes to the toilet just to make it stop doing that sound and that's when the blood comes up. So it's a wonderful and awful coming together of all of these story and sound elements.

GC: And are there religious overtones to the eavesdropping, like confessionals and things like this?

WM: Again, Francis was really interested in exploring eavesdropping in all of its contexts. Because he had had a Catholic upbringing he was very familiar with the confessional. And what is the confessional but a kind of eavesdropping into one's own moral state of being? The priest is the conduit of your soul to God and you want to confess. So, naturally there is a scene in the film where Harry goes to a confessional and tries but is unsuccessful at really confessing what it is that is bothering him.

GC: The phrase that Frederic Forrest says, I don't remember it exactly …

WM: 'He'd kill us if he had the chance'.

GC: It's heard several times but changes …

WM: Yes. There's a boy and a girl who, it seems, are having an affair, and they want to hide the affair from 'him', whoever 'he' is. And when the film opens you think this is what the story is going to be about. And we hear the line 'He'd kill us if he had the chance'. This line is originally obscured in the recording and Harry – using a miraculous device that I wish I had! – is able to remove the sound of drums and hear what's on the other side, which is this boy – played by Frederic Forrest – saying 'He'd kill us if he had the chance'. And that line gets repeated a number of times so we become fatefully familiar with it.

Then, at the very end, it turns out that it was actually the boy and the girl who were planning this crime against the man (played by Robert Duvall) who had commissioned the tape to be made. Here we were dealing with the turn of the story and how to get that across to people. It was difficult because the premise of the film was to tell the story completely from Harry Caul's point of view. So, there really was no opportunity as there would be in an ordinary film to step back and say, 'Well, here's what really happened'. We had to stay on the same track, so we had to make Harry realize what had happened so that we – the audience – would also realize it. We had tried several techniques, none of which was entirely successful. We screened the film before it was finished and people would be confused – Did he? Who? How did this happen? Why was the Robert Duvall character dead? So we were looking for anything that we could use to help audiences get the idea.

It was during the mix of the film that I remembered a wild-track tape that I had made almost a year earlier of Fred Forrest and Cindy Williams. It was a clean recording of that line and not from shooting but just me with a tape recorder like this, walking in front of them as they walked around a very quiet park. I did this to have a clean version of the sound, but one that did not seem like it was recorded in the studio – so that you really got the sense of them walking in space. I did three takes and on the third take Fred put the

emphasis on the line in a different place. I thought at the time, well, no, that's the wrong reading. Now, a year later in the mix, I thought, if we put that reading in it would imply that he would kill us if he had the chance, therefore we have to kill him. It's a place where we bend the rules a little bit because up until that point we had played the same sound every time and now it's a slightly different sound. To the extent that it works, it is justified, I think, because we're in Harry's head and he's now realizing something, and that's influencing how he hears the line. It's where the reality of the film becomes subjective. That's the story behind that particular shift of emphasis.

GC: In the films that you have worked on I have discovered a sort of overture or prelude within which you can find, like in an opera, a selection or summary of topics that will come up later in the film. And sometimes, also, a sort of epilogue. Is this something you intentionally aim for?

WM: I can certainly see that the beginning of *Apocalypse Now* is an overture, and to a certain extent the opening of *The Conversation* is like that. Francis's last film, *Youth Without Youth,* has a kind of an overture to it. In both those cases, *Apocalypse* and *Youth Without Youth,* those overtures were constructed after the fact – they were not in the screenplay of the film; they were put together as part of the editing process. It's a tool I enjoy. There is a little sound-overture also at the beginning of *The English Patient*. It's certainly not in every film that I've done.

GC: I like the beginning of *Youth Without Youth*. I remember a skull, a clock mechanism.

WM: It was kind of a filmic meditation on death and sex and time. And the elements of the clock and the skull and the face of the beautiful woman, all mixed together, both in sound and image, seemed to be what would have been in the head of the main character if he was having a nightmare. We meet the main character as he wakes up from a dream and decides to commit suicide. And I thought it might be interesting to see the thing that he's waking up from. So I proposed making a nightmare prelude so that we can get a sense of what's inside his head as he wakes up.

GC: You wrote the preface to Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision*. To what extent was this contact with Michel influential for you? Because your introduction is really a very interesting analysis, both of film sound and of the book.

WM: I really formed an attachment to some of the ideas that Michel expressed in the book and later on I got to know him personally. I'm particularly taken with the idea of the *acousmêtre,* which, in English, is the creature of sound, the acoustic being, who is present in the film but only as a voice. It's only later in the film, when you finally meet that person, and there is a coming together of expectation and actuality. A good example is the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz,* but, in my personal experience, the character Wolfman Jack in *American Graffiti* is exactly that. We hear his voice pervading this whole universe, a kind of mythic being to the teenagers, and then later on we actually meet the man himself. And it's a wonderful moment to meet in the cinematic flesh the person whom we have heard and implied wisdom to and now we discover who he really is. Also Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* – he's a voice that we hear from the

beginning of the film – then we read his words, we hear his words spoken by Willard as he goes up river; and then finally we meet Kurtz at the end.

But the *acousmêtre* is a very useful idea to remind us about the power of sound and how it can be used to help to organize the screenplay of a film. I think this is a hugely important concept for any film-maker to realize – that sound is not something that you can only sprinkle over a film at the end of the process, but it's a force that can be used from the beginning in the telling of the story. The more you can do that, the more powerful the effect will be on the audience.

GC: Do you see a connection between reason and meaning or sense in film?

WM: Yes, I think there are three things that are very tightly tied together: story, emotion and rhythm. Occasionally they can be separated, where you can have an emotional experience without really understanding exactly what happened, but you can't exist in that state for very long. It's like those experiments in weightlessness where you can fly a plane in the stratosphere and be freed from gravity for perhaps a few minutes but then you have to re-contact gravity again. Similarly with rhythm, I think, you can tell a story intelligently and with emotion and not do it rhythmically, to break the rhythm of it, if you have no alternative. But that's a dangerous place to be for very long because film, I think, is very close to music in how it works. In editing picture I am constructing images that have a flow back and forth that's very similar to visual music. And, of course, in the construction of a soundtrack we actually use real music, but we also use sounds and voices rhythmically, interrelating to each other and the music, but also relating to the musical rhythm of the images. So there is a very profound connection that can be broken occasionally if you have to. If you are forced by circumstances to tell a story moment without rhythm, you can do that, but I think the film has to very quickly re-establish its control in how it tells itself.

GC: I would like to return to *Apocalypse Now*, talking about these textures that we hear in the opening ten minutes. For example, sometimes we hear crickets, and then we hear a guy with a whistle that sounds like these crickets, and then later an electronic sound that has a similar timbre. Is there a continuity in terms of sound colour? Is this a conscious process? Particularly in *Apocalypse Now*, it sometimes seems like a large piece of *musique concrète*.

WM: Yes, there's a certain creative tension between what is deliberate on the part of film-makers and what happens accidentally, or rather what the film-makers allow to happen. Ultimately everything that is in a film is there because the film-maker said let it be. If everything in a film is done as a matter of conscious deliberation the danger is that it loses a kind of organic life, so we try as much as possible to have some blend of intention and spontaneity. In the construction of that particular section of *Apocalypse* it was very deliberate that we had begun in a dream, that we had emerged out of that dream into a waking state, and that now we were going back into an even darker version of that dream. How do you go back into a waking dream and also express the feelings of the main character who says, 'I'm in Saigon, I don't want to be here, I want to be back in the jungle'? That led to the idea of taking the sound of the city and finding analogues, sonic analogues, between the city sounds and the jungle sounds: motor

scooters become mosquitoes, and the birds become traffic police. This was all worked out and then as we were mixing, one by one, jungle equivalents of city sounds replaced the city sounds, until finally we were still looking at a man sitting in a hotel room, but what we were hearing was a kind of an abstract, and at times electronic, version of the jungle. The crickets were hyper-real in the sense that we recorded each of them separately in Richard Beggs's studio. We didn't want to simply record a field of crickets because that would be too real. So we recorded this one cricket, chirping very close, and then multiplied him on a 24-track recorder, tumbling the sound over and over into itself and then spreading that sound around the walls of the theatre, so that each of those chirps of the cricket has a hyper-reality to it. And yet there seem to be hundreds, maybe even thousands of them, which fill the room.

GC: You can find instances like that in David Lynch's films, this feeling between hyper-reality and something very abstract. I have been studying *Rear Window*, by Hitchcock, and have found similar detailed constructions. For example, Grace Kelly introduces herself and she says, 'My name is Lisa – I don't remember – Marie Freeman', then she turns on the lamp and every time she does this, you hear a car horn. It seems so intentional and, at the same time, so casual. That's tricky, isn't it? By now you must realize that I am a very analytical person, I dissect all your films. But, really, I am also a very intuitive person, because many things come to me by free association. But then I try to realize 'why?' – what do they mean? And I feel that's something that is very present in your work – something like this that's pure, sensitive and feeling, and then you think, 'What can I do with this?' Do you think there are syntactic rules in films? You say somewhere that every film is unique, but you seem to have some rules as well.

WM: The short answer would be yes, I think there are rules. But cinema is very new – it's only a hundred years old, whereas theatre and dance and poetry and painting are tens of thousands of years old. We film-makers are probably in a position very similar to the architects who built the gothic cathedrals by hand and horse. There are rules of constructing a vast building out of stone, but, back in the Middle Ages there were no books on engineering or stress or all of the understanding of mechanics that we have today. Back in 1200, people had to arrive at the correct solution through intuition and experience, and yet every cathedral is slightly different and the more unique the cathedral is, the more we respond to it because it's a particular vision that is being played out on a huge scale. I think that would be the analogy, that maybe someday, 500 years from now, we will study the engineering, the syntaxes, of storytelling and there will be a book that says this is the rule: steel under so much tension will break, story under so much tension will fragment. But, right now, we don't know exactly what that tension is, we just have to have an intuitive feel for it, like the stonemason had to have an intuitive feel for how much weight a certain kind of stone could support. But what was guiding that person other than a kind of intuitive, or if you want, divine inspiration for how this huge construction would be put together?

GC: In the editing process, it must be very difficult when you have to view or edit the same material over and over. But it is also necessary to maintain a sense of the emotional dimension of the film. How do you deal with this?

WM: Yes, one of the professional requirements of being a film editor is finding some way to cope with the repetitive nature of what we do and not let it deaden your responses to the work. I frequently get asked by people who don't know anything about the film business, when they discover I'm a film editor, they ask, 'Have you seen the film yet?' And I have to make an adjustment in my mind to know how to answer that question. Because, of course, I've seen it maybe thousands of times, if you added up all of the times I have looked at a scene in different versions. It kind of confuses even me to think about how often I have to look at this and yet keep myself in a state where I welcome seeing it again and try to think of new ways to make it better by refining some idea, or realizing that perhaps the audience have fully understood something by now. Or, maybe, I can pull a scene out completely or remove a line of dialogue that may be redundant.

So my technique, such as I have one, is to try not to resist the pull of subjectivity. In a sense it's as if I'm caught in a river that's flowing very fast, and the danger is that I might drown if I try to save myself from the river. And I've learned that the safest thing to do is to swim faster and in the direction of the current. So, rather than resist the pull of subjectivity – which is to say, how do you reconcile yourself to the fact that you can never get a real view of what you are doing? – I plunge even deeper into subjectivity. You just surrender yourself to these intuitions that seem to come out of nowhere and realize that these intuitions are life preservers that are being thrown to you, that will allow you to become so subjective, in a way, that it's like completing the circle: you become so subjective that you almost become objective. I know it's paradoxical, but I think that's the state of mind that you get into when working on a film for so long and seeing it so many times.

GC: That's why I gave you the Borges books, because they are very paradoxical.

WM: I actually enjoy reading Borges in Spanish because I know that there is much that I don't understand. But, in a sense, it gets back to what we were talking about earlier, that sometimes my misunderstandings of him are actually more in the spirit of what he's writing than if I really understood the social context out of which this poem came, at this time in his life, and the circumstances in Argentina at that time. If I don't know any of that, and even if I mistake some words for some other words, I can get at a truth in a different way. There was an English explorer in the nineteenth century who said, 'If you really want to understand a country you must be there for three days or three years'. Anything in between, you think you understand something but you really don't. Whereas in three days you can get a feeling that sometimes escapes even the people who are native to that country. And then, of course, if you stay for three years then you begin to understand it more as a native would.

GC: You've said that a film should speak on three levels. Can you expand on this idea?

WM: Well, it seems to me that when a film really connects, it is speaking to the audience on three levels simultaneously – the heart, the head, and what you might call the gut – and the better the film, the better those levels are integrated, reinforcing each other – a complex braiding of emotion, intellect and instinct.

We all can think of times in our lives where our emotions have carried us away and left our intellect and instincts trailing along behind. And other times when our instincts have taken over and let our emotions and intellect follow. And then times when our intellect takes charge and holds emotion and instinct in check. It is all confusing and contradictory and part of what it means to be human: most of the time we are out of kilter with ourselves and with the rest of the world. And we long not to be.

When a film is particularly well made I think you can sense that each of these things – the intellectual, the emotional and the instinctual – is being directly addressed, utilized and made more coherent by the story and style of the film. The audience is being nourished with something that they don't get, for the most part, out of life. Film is especially powerful – more so perhaps than other art forms – because it can communicate directly with those 'pre-linguistic' intelligences that lie within us. There is a one-to-one connection between certain powerful images and sounds, and our instinctual, emotional reactions to those images and sounds. The question – and the responsibility for the creators of the film – is how to harness that power for the good, because it can easily be misused.

So I believe this could be an ultimate goal for film-makers: to find a way to tell their story that simultaneously speaks on these three harmonic levels of existence, and integrates them artistically. To supply the coherence, through story, that ordinary life does not. Such films would fulfill an unique social – almost a religious – function, helping people to align within themselves and then to align with each other. And so helping them cope with, and maybe even make some sense of, the complexities and contradictions of life here on planet Earth.

GC: Thank you very, very much.

This interview was transmitted by WDR Köln in February 2010.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Costantini, G. (2010), 'Walter Murch interviewed by Gustavo Costantini', *The Soundtrack* 3: 1, pp. 33–46, doi: 10.1386/st.3.1.33_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Walter Murch has been a film editor and sound designer since 1969, nominated eight times by the Academy of Motion Pictures. Credited with coining the term 'sound designer', he collaborated on the early films of Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas – *THX 1138, The Godfather Parts I and II, The Conversation, American Graffiti*, and *Apocalypse Now*. He was also the film editor of Fred Zinnemann's *Julia*, Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient, The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Cold Mountain*. In 1998 he re-edited and remixed Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, guided by a long memo written by Welles after he had been fired from the film. He is the author of *In the Blink of an Eye*, a book about film editing, and collaborated with Michael Ondaatje on *The Conversations*.

Gustavo Costantini is an Argentinean sound designer, editor and musician. He teaches at the University of Buenos Aires, University of Cinema, and University of Tres de Febrero in Argentina, and is a visiting professor at the

National Film and Television School, London Film School, Surrey University of Creative Arts, and University of London Royal Holloway (UK), the European Film College (Denmark) and the International Film School (Köln). He received scholarships to study with the pioneer of electronic music, Francisco Kröpfl, in Argentina and with Atom Egoyan in Canada. As a researcher he is a disciple of Michel Chion. His writings are published in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and the United Kingdom.

Contact: University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
E-mail: gcostantini@hotmail.com