Sara Pinheiro

"Beyond Pristine Sound":

An Interview with Paul Davies

Paul Davies is a film sound designer based in the UK. His artistic journey started in Cardiff, where he ran a small music studio in the mid-1980s dedicated to experimental and electronic music. This led him to the local filmmaking scene as a sound recordist and motivated him to enrol in the UK's National Film and Television School in 1988. After graduation, he worked as a location sound recordist, editor, and re-recording mixer until he joined Videosonics (1995, London). In this studio, he first worked with Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher*, 1999) in a collaboration that has lasted till today. With her, he has designed his most known works (*Morvern Callar*, 2001; *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, 2011; *You Were Never Really Here*, 2017).[1]

However, Paul Davies' sound work is extensive and diverse. His soundtracks include films like *Love Is the Devil* (John Maybury, 1997), *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008) and *The American* (Anton Corbijn, 2010).[2] He was nominated for two BAFTA TV Awards for Best Sound (*Touching Evil*, 1998 and *Shameless*, 2004) and he also received the Australian Film Institute nomination for Best Sound for *The Proposition.*

Paul Davies and I first met at the London School of Sound in 2019. His lecture articulated a detailed insight into his practical choices combined with their aesthetic implications. He described how his surroundings influence the sounds that make it into the film, how he deals with decision making and, more importantly, his interest in the blurred line between sound design and music composition. As he also composes electronic ambient/experimental music, sometimes this ends up blending with the official soundtracks though he has no intention of claiming any particular distinction here.[3] Examples of this can be heard in *The American* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. On a road that is conventionally one-way, his work shows the benefits of going back and forth between the different stages of sound production and post-production, advocating for a plastic collaboration with the director and the editor.

Since then, we have been developing a conversation about sound in general, even if our common interests always land in film sound. We share the belief that film sound could be informed by the culture and practices of *concrete music*, and we share the awareness that the film's interests are above our own wishes to explore different sounds and techniques. This year

1   For an interview specifically about this collaboration see: Peter Albrechtsen. Paul Davies Special: The Lynne Ramsay Collaboration – Exclusive Interview. *Designing Sound* [on-line], 2011, September 16. https://designingsound.org/2011/09/16/paul-davies-special-the-lynne-ramsay-collaboration-exclusive-interview/ (accessed May 31, 2022).
2   For another interview about *Hunger*, see: Peter Albrechtsen. Paul Davies Special: Sound Design of Hunger – Exclusive Interview. *Designing Sound* [on-line], 2011, September 28. https://designingsound.org/2011/09/28/paul-davies-special-sound-design-of-hunger-exclusive-interview/ (accessed May 31, 2022).
3   For a refreshing approach to this subject see Danijela Kulezić-Wilson. *Sound Design Is the New Score: Theory, Aesthetics, and Erotics of the Integrated Soundtrack.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Alternatively see Sara Pinheiro. The Audiovisual *Musique Concrète*: Towards the Integrated Soundtrack. *Iluminace*, 2021, n. 4, 69–74.

Paul Davies will be releasing *The Origin,* a prehistoric horror film directed by a debut feature director Andrew Cumming, and he is currently sound designing the Netflix series *Guillermo Del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities.*

I would like to ask you about your creative process. How do you develop the relationship with the films and their directors?

Lynne Ramsay and I first started working together more than 20 years ago, since *Ratcatcher.* We have done four features and two shorts. It's very different working for a director with whom you have worked on several projects. In that case, there are certain benefits: there is a common language, a dialogue that is established and built up which is obviously trusted. So that's a very different process when I talk to Lynne about future projects or scripts or source materials.

Even if we didn't have the chance to do as much sound in pre-production on *You Were Never Really Here* as we planned to, I was able to go away in the meantime and think about an approach to the film because we've been speaking for some time about it, and I read the source material and the scripts too. I think there were a couple of key things which coalesced into my thinking during the time of the shooting, or perhaps the early part when Joe Bini and Lynne were editing in LA, and we were working remotely. I find reading a script and not doing anything else is valuable;

You Were Never Really Here. Photo Film Europe

having our initial conversation means that we can be thinking about it in the back of our minds.

In my last two films with Lynne [*We Need to Talk About Kevin,* and *You Were Never Really Here*], I was able to read the script before the shooting started. It's very different from coming fresh to a film that has already been shot. But *Kevin* and *YWNRH* were different processes. In *YWNRH* we had limited time in pre–production, but we did discuss the ideas thoroughly. I did some sounds for the film beforehand and during the shoot. I was involved for a much longer period, I was there for more than 20 weeks, working alongside the picture editing. It was not like *Kevin.* There was much more exchange, which was very fruitful because we found sounds that are important to the film.

In *YWNRH,* I was able to work much more alongside the picture cuts as well, which helped that exchange between the picture and images. This interplay and cooperation are what I'm most satisfied with because there is unity. The soundtrack is unified because the sound and the music are not doing the same thing but are working towards the same goal. Sound and music are not just illustrations to the image, which is very often the case. This sort of unity is a wholeness with the image, I think, rather than just an illustration.

Was there anything specific that inspired you while working on You Were Never Really Here*?*

I think I was inspired by an art installation I saw at Tate Modern, which was a multi-screen installation with multi-channel monophonic sound, but it wasn't immersive sound [Charles Atlas, *Joints 4tet Ensemble 1971–2010*]. There were four soundtracks playing in a linear monophonic array. And that gave me the inspiration for having this idea of the city soundscape – that's when, for example, Joe [Joaquin Phoenix] steps into the city for the first time. There is a different sound source coming from each loud-speaker. But because the sounds are of the same family – city traffic – we don't perceive it as a different sound; we perceive it as one sound, but with something wrong about it. As viewers or listeners, we think something is not right, but we can't identify what it is. There's this sense of discomfort. I felt the sound was almost pulling away from the screen, I wanted to tear it, rip it apart, to reflect the sense of dislocation the lead character feels… He feels a sense of alienation. The only place he feels at home is in his mother's house, which is why the mother's house is designed as silent, with no sound from the outside. There is this dynamic contrast, which might be my criticism of some contemporary Hollywood filmmaking, as there can sometimes be a lack of dynamics in those films.

Do your surroundings have a direct influence on your practice?

They do, yes. Watching *Dunkirk* [Christopher Nolan, 2017] was one of the other points of inspiration during the period of *YWNRH*. I think Lynne had already shot the film and before we would start post-producing it, I watched *Dunkirk* on six channels. Then I read they mixed it in IMAX as a native format, and the other sound formats were derived from that, so I went to the IMAX cinema at BFI. And I watched it again about a week later, at the South Bank in London.

What interested me is its experiential nature—everything is meant as an immersive experience, not just sound, but all the perspective comes from the point of view of the characters. And I said to Lynne: "Christopher Nolan is doing something really interesting here. I think this sort of direction is where we should be pushing our film." In Christopher Nolan's film, there is a lot of interesting stuff going on in the sound, if I have any criticism, it would be that there's a lack of dynamics—everything in the mix is at full peak. But we have the whole range of dynamics available to us of course, and that is important to me.[4] However, I wish he'd go for silence sometimes.

But having said that, I don't want to directly criticize Chris because I think he's doing some interesting things, he's a filmmaker with the ambition to do something radical with mainstream cinema. Whether it works all the time, that's a different thing. But I felt there was something interesting going

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4   Peak is the maximum value reached by the sound pressure levels. If the sound hits the threshold, it peaks (note by Sara Pinheiro).

on and especially so after reading Nolan's ideas about cinema as a unique experience. One of the rules I was taught in film school was that everything needed to be, in those days, mono-compatible, or that you can't place different sounds in surrounds, it's not going to be the same when you mix down to stereo, it's not going to be compatible.

So, in that sense, Christopher Nolan's idea of cinematic art is a radical idea. He's shooting on 70mm IMAX film and mixes the sound in IMAX because this experience needs to be different from the experience of watching the film on your tablet. And that's great. Lots of films conventionally say "well, this needs to be translatable". And he wasn't afraid of having a film, a cinema experience that is unique. He wasn't worried that this was not necessarily translatable into other formats.

> *What is impressive in* YWNRH *is exactly that the spatialization is not lost in the stereo mix. How did you deal with it?*

There were various versions made of the film. There is a 7.1, a 5.1 and a Dolby stereo mix.[5] There is also the television stereo mix, which has reduced dynamic range to comply with broadcast/streaming standards. But that is the skill of Andrew Stirk, the re-recording mixer for *YWNRH*.[6] He gets to translate and preserve the dynamics and preserve that sense of dislocation within the stereo fold down, as we call it. So that's a skill of the mixer, but also because I'm not just relying on one trick within that scene in the city. There are multiple layers of different frequencies as well, and that sort of screeching metal of the rails and other different sounds. So that still comes across in the stereo version.

It's quite carefully balanced in frequency dynamics because dynamic range is more than a question of volume. I often think about film as being a bit like a symphony in terms of the balance of that dynamic range. When we get into a classical symphony in terms of the use of the different frequency ranges, the instruments need to be balanced dynamically as well as spatially. There are frequency dynamics and volume dynamics. I'm sure there are other dynamics we can think of too.

But it is important that there is a wall of sound as well within that city sound, but it is carefully choreographed. It's no good adding lots of different traffic sounds together because they are just going to cancel themselves out. You need to have different frequency ranges, different qualities.

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5   The Dolby Laboratories is the American company responsible for the projection licenses in film theatres across the world. The projections can have a stereophonic or a surround layout. For the surround format, there are different multichannel possibilities: the 5.1 or 7.1 formats mean there will be six or eight discrete channels around the audience, while the most recent Atmos format is an immersive layout having both horizontal and vertical sound placements.

6   A re-recording mixer takes the task of re-mixing the content of the film into different formats and protocols, from multichannel to stereo, from Dolby to TV Broadcast systems, etc.

I'm always looking for something specific in every film. Lynne says we need to find a sound and I want a sound that would be a signature sound for the film. Like the sprinklers in *Kevin*. What we're looking for is not a gimmick, but something that unifies the film because this is what this film does: it gives a unified experience. But like the train sound in *YWNRH*, you don't notice it as a signature sound at first. There was a certain harmonic sound in the trains which was recorded on location, but then I stretched it. Also at the very beginning, there is the "train montage", which is also an audio montage, and of course resolves itself again, in a way on the train journey. The trains become important. We were thinking in those terms.

In all films I've worked on, I think the ones I'm most satisfied with are the ones where I feel there was some sort of unity about the sound approach. Although there is a tendency to think about specific moments in a film, which we sound-designed to be exciting, rather than thinking the best films are the ones that seem to have a conceptual and holistic approach.

> *Yes, the sprinklers in Kevin are a signature sound. I heard it later in* Florida Project *[Sean Baker, 2017] and I immediately thought of* Kevin.

These are just from a common sound effects library. Lynne was editing the director's cut and she asked me to provide sound design for the first 20 minutes of the film. She asked if I could add some sprinkler sound to the scene when Tilda comes home. She said: "We need the sprinklers, can you just put sprinklers in so I can show that to the producers?" I quickly took two library sounds, with two different sorts of sound speeds, I cut them together to make a rhythm, and it sounded good. There was no point in sending someone to record the sprinklers specifically because the library ones just worked. It's one of those moments of serendipity.

For a long time, for many cuts, though, the film opened in a different way—with a digital alarm clock beeping as if counting down, as if Kevin was a ticking bomb, counting time. It was only four weeks or so before we started mixing, that Lynne changed it. We had the window's curtain blowing and then we put the sound of the sprinklers into the opening of the film… it worked so well. Now it seems like it was written in the script, but it wasn't. This shows that film keeps evolving even during post-production.

> *A great moment with a simple thing like the editing of two library sounds, nothing fancy…*

I think the danger is that we talk about technology so much that "sound" or "music" becomes a technological thing, some sort of engineering, instead of something pertaining to the ideas. I think we need to re-inject in some way some of the ideas that came from the punk scene and the *new wave* of the 1970s.

The fetishization of technology demands every sound be pristine. In music, we are used to the idea of lo-fi, and we need a sort of re-injection of the spirit of the seventies in cinema, I think. I'm not saying everything should become lo-fi, but I think we need, as you say, to use our ears and sentience, and then we will know we are using *this sound* for a reason. I will use any material if it suits my needs. We don't have to fetishize the technology or recording "quality".

Some things are justified to record using the highest quality equipment – recording the silence of the Gobi Desert needs pristine sound for example. But some things are also fine to record on a cell phone. One of the last films I designed [*Surge*, Aneil Karia, 2020] is shot on the streets of East London. It is about a guy who suddenly has a notion that his sense of liberation will be in robbing banks, and it is shot on the streets in a very documentary way.

I went to the streets of East London with a concealed Zoom portable recorder, recording conversations. And that was perfect. It was not about standing there on the streets of East London with expensive recording equipment. We were using an inexpensive hidden recorder and microphones, recording the unique feeling of those streets. It's a feeling of a certain area of the city of East London, so you grab it on a handheld recorder because a boom microphone would immediately change the environment. If people are aware of you, they stop talking.

> *Somehow it is hard to define what is right or wrong. Do you think it is challenging to articulate a language for sound in film?*

There is a known language to discuss visuals, and there is a language to discuss sound as well, as you know. It mainly comes from a certain form of music, and that is *musique concrète*. Perhaps we need to analyse film sound from that perspective. We need to look at the aesthetics of sound. The language exists outside the field of film sound theory, practitioners use it. I know there are lots of academics working in the field, but we practitioners... we don't necessarily talk about aesthetics. I think DOPs are quite competent in talking about the influence of lighting and painting and other visual arts in films. Whereas as sound designers, we don't seem to have the language to express that.

I think part of it is whether it is the way sound people see themselves. There are many people who consider themselves technicians, who believe that sound is a technical craft. And that's why there is an emphasis on technology rather than the overall aesthetics and concepts. I think there are lots of sound designers who operate in this way without necessarily articulating their ideas. Eddy Joseph has written a lot about sound, and he gives workshops as well. He has worked on many high-profile films including James Bond and Harry Potter.

So, there have been a few people who thought about articulating sound ideas, but I think most people are doing interesting work without necessarily articulating it.

> *Perhaps that is why there are so many misconceived ideas about sound, in particular considering post-production?*

I noticed this when I started teaching in film schools—the idea is like putting sound into the washing machine and taking it out pristine, without any noise. But this approach clearly does not consider going into filming and saying, "where are we going with the concepts?" These concepts aren't just aesthetic but ideological choices. It is a French *new wave* notion of direct sound, which includes all sound and its imperfections. Imagine there is a dialogue scene with two characters, and we let the sound of the environment in there, to give character to the scene, with the background sounds, some construction or whatever. We are used to pristine sound, where everything is washed clean. But we can also choose a sound that's direct and real. There's a lot of very good production sound (recorded by Drew Kunin) in YWNRH of New York streets, and Andrew Stirk, the re-recording mixer, said when he heard it "we want to use this real sound in a raw way". So, it feels like you are in New York, we are not hiding that. It's the dirty sound of that city.

These are the choices… maybe the sound design starts with the production sound [sound on the set].

> *In* YWNRH *there is a scene with a towel, a very simple action without dialogue. Many directors would argue it is not necessary to record the sound on set because it's just "cleaning the face with a towel". How do you feel about that? Do you request all production sound possible?*

Yes, we have to record it on location. Even if we end up reconstructing it, we have to record it. If you remember the Tomatina scene in *Kevin*… The bulk of the film was shot in America, New York. And then that early scene, the tomato festival, was shot later in Spain by a 16mm second camera unit in an almost documentary style. The line producers said: "We don't need location sound for this, as we just need the visuals, and we can do the sound in post". And I had to insist we have to record it to be able to reproduce it. And we did. There's a lot of sound design happening on top of that. And there is music as well as all sorts of things happening, but we needed the anchor of the production sound. Even if we were going to throw it away, it would still be a reference for me. And I think I used production sound in that scene in the Turkish bath sequence too. This is why it feels real.

I was fortunate enough when I was at film school that we were also trained in location sound, production sound. It was hammered into us to just record, as you never know what you'll need… I'd be handling small objects

The Turkish Bath Scene, *YWNRH*. Photo Film Europe

in a macro shot, but I was recording the sound, saying to myself "maybe there is a sound there, maybe when we get in the days of shooting on film, we just get camera noise, but there is still noise as well, but maybe there is something happening there, something interesting."

> *Being on set is also how the relationship with the story starts to take shape and where many of the ideas can emerge. In that sense, there is a whole approach to sound that doesn't change over the years…*

I would argue that perhaps it hasn't changed, but there has been an evolution of the experience. I think that technology has enabled us to do more things. I'm thinking about my approach in my early films, like *Love Is the Devil* [John Maybury, 1998] or *Ratcatcher*. It was different, because of technological restrictions. There were fewer tracks, it was a more selective process. Even if *Love Is the Devil* has more designed sounds in terms of electronics and samplers than *Ratcatcher* which was more naturalistic, they are more selective soundtracks because of the restrictions and the track count of the machines we were working with twenty or more years ago.

The difference between the track counts in both films is enormous. But for example, in a film like *Hunger*, in which we could have a high track count, it had a very small one in the end. So again, it's a selective process that comes from the film. I think I'm more likely to be thinking conceptually. *Saint Maud* [Rose Glass, 2019], which is a horror film, also has a different approach; it has a more artificial, stylized, electronic sound. I don't shy

away from things that have an artificial touch, from using certain genre tropes. My thinking has broadened out to embrace the film as a whole, rather than moment-to-moment. When I started, I tended to think more in terms of scene-to-scene or a particular sound effect for a scene. I wouldn't necessarily think about how it would all join up together.

Technology has given us many new options, but that is not necessarily a good thing. It is important to remember the initial spirit of just going for it and preserve that as well. There is much to be said for working very quickly and making decisions very quickly. That's something of a big lesson that I learned coming out of film school, taking my first job, and having to do a lot of sound editing, which puts sound towards a function within the post-production studio system. I learned to work very quickly, and I learned the benefits of that. Very often in retrospect, I see that a decision was a correct decision because it was instinctive.

When I eventually moved on from all this sort of routine, television work, I suddenly had the urge to go back to the sort of jobs I did when graduating, creative jobs. But now I've got all this ability to work very quickly, and the director benefits from that also. John Maybury is very much from a punk generation, so we had a punk aesthetic, and it was just like "go for it". Actually, the first two directors I worked with, John Maybury and Julian Temple, had that punk energy. Julian had a punk aesthetic as well; he made all *The Sex Pistols* music videos after all.

Those first two directors I worked with are important to me because that was actually a very early period in my career. I am grateful for them. Lynne has that attitude as well. And we find that very often ideas emerge and come along, even during the post-production. It doesn't stop at the end of the sound design phase but continues all the way through the mix.

> *Are there any sounds that you always try to use, but always end up not using, or any sound that you really want to use, and you haven't had the chance yet?*

Yes, but it is more of an aesthetic approach rather than a specific sound effect. In terms of that approach, I would like to work on a bigger budget film but use the selective sound aesthetics of filmmakers like Bresson or Tarkovsky. Rather than choosing the contemporary sound design approach of a "sound for everything", I would like to strip back the soundtrack, focus on the essential and draw the audience into the film that way.

On the other end of the scale, I am waiting to fully utilize Dolby Atmos. We wanted to mix *YWNRH* for Atmos, but because of schedule conflicts, we missed out on the studio we were originally going to use. In the future, I would like to work with spatialization on a conceptual level, using spatialization in an expressive way. Those are my ambitions. However, I cannot

impose these ideas on projects that will not be right for this approach. I think that in the future, those projects will arise, but I cannot say when. The thing I have accomplished in my career is that the films that stand out to people, from my body of work, are those with interesting sound design. With some of them, I was aware at the time that they would be important, sound-wise, but with others, I was just doing the work.

For example, it's only in retrospect that *The Proposition* has become something of a classic, at the time we weren't conscious of that. We were trying to do something interesting, and I was trying to get the quietness and stillness from the director's instructions. The film is set in the middle of the Outback in Australia, which is extraordinarily hot, and you don't hear any animal sounds. So, what do you do? We tried to create the atmosphere for the film just with subtle winds and flies.

I think when I come to work on a film now, I know if it's going to be an opportunity for sound design. I'm aware that these films are rare, but that doesn't make me dismiss or underestimate the importance of sound for all the other films I work on.

> *The process always seems somehow random, although it is not. But it is hard to say where ideas come from, isn't it?*

That's what I'm reading about now because I'm not quite sure either. I was recently reading a book about creativity and I think this quote may even come from Steve Jobs, and the book said that designers had a deep knowledge, but a narrow focus. The danger for sound designers is that the knowledge of technology, which is deep in its own terms, becomes the focus, and we don't look outside the technology and take a wider holistic view.

Inspiration can come from anywhere, really. Ideas can come from accidents as well. I don't think ideas come from the mystical or the muses. There's some frame of reference and starting points. My starting points can be from all sorts of things.

I had a frame of reference beforehand, which included art installations and ideas of multichannel media. These were not new ideas to me. I remember going to tape concerts in the early 1980s before surround sound became fashionable. But at the same time in that period, I was aware that I was searching for a source of inspiration. So, for me, it is a combination of circumstances and awareness.