Thwack! hearing the motion in animation

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FROM THE GUEST EDITOR
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Special Issue: Thwack! Hearing the Motion in Animation

Sound plays a crucial role in screen animation, assisting and extending other expressive components of media. Sound and music operate with motion, storytelling and space, enabling animation to leap out of the screen and into the viewer’s imagination. Analyzing why and how this occurs requires critical tools, some of which are proposed by the articles in this special issue of Animation Journal, devoted to sound in animation. The sonic analyses included here demonstrate the value of experiencing animation with our ears as well as our eyes. This issue does not devalue the visual, but rather shows how these audiovisual productions rely on a shared engagement of sight and sound.

Since its launch in 1992, Animation Journal has been groundbreaking in its devotion to new areas of animation history and theory. This issue focuses on sound and music for animation in film and television—a topic that has been relatively under-researched. Numerous studies of Disney and Warner Bros. productions have been supplemented by some recent research—especially in relation to US cartoon music—and yet there remains a dearth of scholarship concerning animation music and sound. Much of the research that does exist is dispersed, reflecting the multi- and inter-disciplinary nature of animation sound studies that bridges film and television, screen music, media industries, animation, contemporary music and new technology studies.

Most usefully, this Animation Journal issue recognizes the convergence of two increasingly popular study areas—screen animation and screen music. Submissions from authors in various countries and continents have been targeted, highlighting the widespread engagement with animation sound and music. UK-based authors Steve Allen and Paul Wells write about US short form films. Philip Hayward in Australia discusses a British television series. Henry Johnson and Dan Bendrups in New Zealand study music in feature films from, respectively, Japan and Chile.

Articles in this issue analyze sound in productions related to independent and mainstream production contexts, various animation techniques, and a range of historical periods. Allen analyzes Tex Avery’s use of sound for his MGM drawn cartoons of the 1940s and 1950s. Hayward investigates sound in “The Clangers,” a series employing knitted models that was screened as ten-minute episodes on British TV in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Wells provides
an account of more recent sound design, that of Gary Rydstrom and his aural architecture for John Lasseter’s computer generated animation shorts released in the 1980s. Johnson’s essay explores the film music for Nitaboh, released in 2004 but representing—in drawn anime style—an historical figure from the late 19th Century. Bendrups discusses the 2002 release Ogú y Mampato en Rapanui, an animated film based on popular Chilean comics originally published in the 1970s. In various ways each article addresses the components of sound for animation, which include music (composed original or re-arranged, instrumental or songs), sound effects, dialogue, and sound design. The emphasis on sound to create an aural environment for the characters and activities in animation is highlighted in the title for this issue. Music is just one means of aural communication in animation, and the word ‘thwack’ onomatopoeically suggests overt sonic accompaniment for on-screen activities.

The order of articles follows a narrative around sound and its place in animation film and TV productions. Allen argues for a critical return to Tex Avery’s cartoons with ears wide open, and explores the creative relationship with composer Scott Bradley in light of Avery’s sonically rich animation texts. His visual elements make sense in ‘cartoon terms’ when working in conjunction with their audio companions. Allen provides examples of integrated audiovisual features that provide narrative and comedic effect, such as overlapping aural components, sound working within and beyond the diegesis, and silence as a narrative determinant. Ultimately, Allen demonstrates that the essentialist focus on visual elements in analyses of Avery’s cartoons bypasses what could be seen as an auteurial approach to sound working with image and enabling impact and effect.

Paul Wells discusses sound designer Gary Rydstrom, describing how he contributed to the aesthetic characteristics and impact of Lasseter’s shorts at Pixar. Examining Rydstrom’s background and training in sound, Wells notes that an early mentor was sound innovator Ben Burtt, who influenced Rydstrom in the creation of soundscapes derived from familiar sounds and based on a personal library of recordings. Following this model, in Rydstrom’s sound designs, musical motifs operate sonically and sounds feature musically to support emotional affect and continuity. Wells’s study examines Rydstrom’s skills in four Pixar shorts, from Luxo Jr. (1986) to Knick Knack (1989), the final short released before moving into features.

Philip Hayward’s investigation of sound in “The Clangers” series also notes the sonic universe created not only by scored musical motifs, but a musical approach to sound, especially
dialogue. These elements are specifically choreographed by writer Oliver Postgate and animator Peter Firmin to ‘make strange’ the characters and settings. The episodes use sonic elements to render the science fiction environment for the homely creatures that engage in quaint and curious activities to the accompaniment of wry voice-over observations. The creatures’ whistled communications direct attention to their actions, which are frequently in response to sound devices or events. Hayward’s analysis demonstrates how the creature communications, voice-over narration and spare musical score by bassoonist/composer Vernon Elliott are all critical components of the animation series.

Henry Johnson’s study focuses on Nitaboh, an animated film designed for younger viewers as cultural education. The film is loosely based on the life of a blind shamisen (3-stringed lute) performer who lived in the period 1857-1928, and it features several significant scenes of musical performance. Additional music is not representative of the central protagonist’s time period, and comprises Western-styled orchestral, popular, and synthesized background musical cues. These support a broader aim of the film to employ contemporary and entertaining modes for the representation of ‘authentic’ musical history to younger viewers familiar with anime. Johnson questions the extent to which the film’s music represents or invents perceived Japanese musical tradition and aids a nation-building project. Nitaboh’s music track also operates within conventions of animation film music, and Johnson’s essay alludes to such generic tropes.

Dan Bendrups also discusses how sound in feature films can exploit musics of the past and present to attract audiences of different age groups and situated in different locations. Ogú y Mampato en Rapanui is based on characters from an illustrated adventure series popular with young Chileans in the 1970s, but addresses today’s youth through popular music and contemporary artists. The first animated feature to be produced in Chile, the film builds on previous exotic representations of Chile’s Polynesian territory, Easter Island (Rapanui), while also rendering aspects of its cultural life with varying degrees of authenticity. Bendrups explores the bricolage of musical elements employed for the soundtrack, including texturally-enhanced traditional chants and the prominent use of music by contemporary indigenous Rapanui artist ‘Mito’ Manutomatoma. While the film has been lauded for its ‘nation-building’ contribution, Bendrups argues that it also significantly promotes music and musicians from the island.

This handful of articles offers ways forward for further development of animation sound and music studies. Each article, while focusing on specific texts, positions the work within broader frameworks for analysis. The contributions arise from scholars.
positioned in various disciplinary fields, from musicology and popular music studies to animation theory and production. As such, they highlight how animation sound requires cross-fertilization of skills for innovative and integrated analysis. While sound may not be easily represented on the page, the essays provide various approaches to conveying its operation within audiovisual texts. Cumulatively, then, the contributions offer insights into production, aesthetic and theoretical techniques and methods. Most vitally, however, these essays and this issue emphasize the shared sensual engagement of eye and ear in animation.

Thanks to the anonymous referees for reviewing articles for this issue, to interested scholars whose work was not able to be included in this issue, and to Maureen Furniss for the opportunity to edit this issue and for constant guidance throughout the project.

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**FROM THE EDITOR**

Maureen Furniss

I would like to extend my thanks to the guest editor of this issue, Rebecca Coyle. The high quality of this special issue on animation and sound is the result of her great experience in the field combined with her professionalism. The contributors she selected to be published here were wonderful to work with as well. I learned a great deal from their essays, and I am proud to have the opportunity to publish their research. Thanks to the creators of "The Clangers" for allowing us to use images from their series—and again, to Rebecca and all the authors for their contribution to *Animation Journal*, and for making my job so easy this year. If you find these essays interesting, look for Rebecca Coyle's other work, which she has referenced in her bio statement above.