

Audio assault: Cinema, stage echo a volume-obsessed culture by turning up the decibels

by James Hebert

Televisions that come with no speakers. Headphones that obliterate noise. Movie houses that admonish audiences not to make a sound during the film.

Looking at these artifacts of our culture, you might think we live in some golden age of silence - if it weren't for a few small details:

The TVs are speakerless so they can be hooked up to a room-busting, boomtastic sound system. The headphones quash noise so that the wearers' eardrums will be throttled solely by their own chosen music. And the cinema warnings ensure that no cell-phone ring or candy-wrapper crinkle will intrude on the roof-rattling audio of the movie - not to mention the "coming soon" trailers.

VOLUME CONTROL - Cinema and stage echo our volume-obsessed culture by turning up the decibels. CNS Photo Illustration by Michael Franklin. We may pay lip service to the virtues of quiet, but all the while our ears seem to crave higher doses of decibels. With the advent of immersive cinema surround-sound, powerful home theater systems and the all-conquering iPod, life now unfolds to a near-nonstop soundtrack, pumped up to maximum volume.

Movies are probably the top example of the triumph of the loud, and of our lingering ambivalence toward it. Randy Thom, an Oscar-winning sound editor and designer whose work can be heard now in the dragon fantasy "Eragon," says the first thing he hears when someone learns about his work is often a complaint: Movies are too loud.

But, Thom says, "I think it's a phenomenon that's bigger than the motion-picture industry. I think we live in a loud culture. Bars are loud; pop-music concerts are ridiculously loud, I think.

"Clubs are loud. Plays on Broadway - many are ridiculously loud. Phone ring tones are too loud. It's a culturewide thing. And the movie business hasn't escaped that, and is a big part of it."

Beyond the entertainment realm, the baseline volume of life has steadily increased, in tandem with population and progress.

The Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that 25 million Americans lived with noise levels that could cause health problems - in a study done nearly 10 years ago (the most recent available). Thom tells of

hearing recently from a woman who lives in Hong Kong and wears earplugs everywhere she goes to drown out the urban din, which Thom compares to something from the futuristic movie "Blade Runner."

"I think the whole world is becoming more and more like Hong Kong is already," he says.

But in the arts, and particularly in film, something else is driving the decibels up: the increased emphasis on breathless pacing and nonstop visual stimulation in some films - corollaries to pumping up the volume on the soundtrack.

That, in turn, puts pressure on sound designers to follow suit, since a sequence like, say, a chase scene, comes across pretty strangely if the sound doesn't keep up with the sights.

The problem is not so much with absolute loudness, but with an absence of quieter parts - a lack of dynamic range, or variation between high- and low-volume levels.

"One of the things sound people in movies are almost always trying to do is encourage directors and writers to incorporate dynamics," Thom says. "And it really has to start with the writing.

"If you have a sequence in a film that's 20 minutes long, that's more or less nonstop cars crashing and glass breaking and gunshots and explosions and fire, there's no way to play that quietly in terms of the aesthetics of modern filmmaking. Without it seeming like a dream sequence.

"It's the average loudness over a long period of time that really gets to you. (But) I'm not a loudness Luddite - as opposed to some people I meet who say, 'Nothing should ever be loud.' Well, it's drama. You're telling a story. And of course things should be loud occasionally."

COMING DISTRACTIONS

On that score, Thom won't get any disagreement from Casey Tuer, a 13-year-old movie fan who was coming out of a showing of the Mel Gibson film "Apocalypto" at a San Diego cinema on a recent weekday.

"It's perfect how it is," Casey said to a question about the loudness of the movie, which includes plenty of action and violence. "This one had great sound."

His dad, Doug, who took Casey and two friends to "Apocalypto," said he thought the sound suited the pace and feel of the film.

"Your adrenaline is going the whole movie," he said. "And they had the music to go with it, to make your adrenaline go. Mel Gibson did it right."

While Doug Tuer says the audio environment of most movies today seems "right on" to him compared with when he was a kid - "I'm old school, but I think it's an improvement" - what does get to him sometimes is the volume of the trailers.

That annoyance is shared by Barbara Farmer, another moviegoer who had just seen "Dreamgirls" at the same theater.

"Those are really loud," Farmer says of the movie previews. "Sometimes you can't even understand what they're saying, it's so loud."

The idea that trailers might outdo movies in volume levels is not just a subjective judgment.

Les Blomberg is the director of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, a Vermont-based advocacy group he founded 10 years ago to fight the encroachment of noise in all kinds of environments.

One of Blomberg's current projects involves testing cinema sound levels. For about a year, he has been taking a sound meter into movie theaters in New York City, settling into (ideally) the center seat in the 10th row, and measuring the decibel levels for both movies and trailers.

He has tested 20 to 25 movies and some 100 trailers so far. The results:

"The trailers tend to be twice as loud as the movies, in my research so far," he says.

That doesn't mean the previews top out at an eardrum-busting double the movie's loudest sounds. Blomberg

is measuring not peaks, but averages (something called LEQ, in audio parlance).

So again, it comes down to a question of dynamics: The trailers are twice as loud on average because there's simply no letup in the sonic assault.

Blomberg believes that beyond being annoying and sometimes painful, the heightened level of sound, in both trailers and movies, can be a sign of creative laziness.

"I think in many of the movies what they're trying to take advantage of is the physiology of noise," he says. "Especially the action movies - they're adrenaline roller-coaster rides. The physiology of our bodies is that high levels of sound increase our adrenaline rush.

"It's a way they can further manipulate the audience. It's also a crutch, because if they can't (excite moviegoers) in other ways, they can always do it the easy way. When I go to a movie, I like to be manipulated in more subtle, less hammer-over-the-head ways."

Thom points out that at least when it comes to trailers, the movie business has responded to complaints by signing onto a system conceived by Dolby, probably the biggest name in audio.

It consists of a standard for average loudness that the trailer is not allowed to exceed, so "it sort of enforces dynamic range," he explains. "You can make the first 30 seconds pretty loud, but then the last 30 seconds have to be quieter."

But Blomberg counters that the standard is still too lenient.

"That's one thing I'm hoping to change (with this research)," he says. "It's ridiculously high."

ALL OVER THE MAP

The issue of loudness - and the more specific problem of the diminished respect for dynamics - goes beyond movies into other forms as well.

The cranking up of average volume (and the loss of highs and lows) on music CDs has sparked debate in the recording business for about a decade.

Aaron Rumley, a stage manager and the production manager for North Coast Repertory Theatre in Solana Beach, Calif., says he agrees that the ubiquity of iPods and similar devices is perpetuating a sense that sound should be front and center everywhere.

And when it comes to the louder examples of theatrical productions, "the younger generation designing these shows grew up on iPods and Walkmans," Rumley says. "They're used to having that sound right on top of them. And so that's what they deliver."

The heightened reliance on amplification has also changed performance styles, observes Diane Willcox, general manager of Broadway San Diego, which brings some of the biggest touring musicals to the city.

"Sometimes (audiences) feel as if the microphones on some performers are better than those on others, because they can't understand the performer," she notes.

"And oftentimes it's the performer. Performers are no longer trained as well or as much in how to enunciate and how to project, because we've had amplification for so many years now."

In general, Willcox adds, "I think people really are cognizant now of the quality of sound and the nature of sound, because we all have in our homes this equipment that's amazing."

To Blomberg, such technology forces us to tread a fine line between enjoyment and annoyance, or worse. And he suspects we'll be wrangling for a long time with the question of how much sound to add to an already noisy planet.

"The last century was the loudest century in the history of the world," Blomberg says. "We were not, as a species, able to make a very big racket until we started burning fossil fuels - and now, more recently, moving electrons.

"In this century, we've got a choice. We have the technology (to make things quieter). But it also could be the noisiest century yet. And we have the technology for that, too."

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