INTERVIEW with RHYS DAVIES

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BREAKING THE SOUND BARRIER

'I think in art there is the factual truth and the emotional truth and a sound designer dances on a line between'. Rhys Davies (April, 2012)

In his introduction to the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition 2011, Christopher Le Brun RA said that he had placed photographs in the first gallery to drown out arguments about whether photography is Art. But what about 'sound' as Art? Will it ever be accepted as an art form? This was the focus of an interview with Rhys Davies, Senior Lecturer in Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Rosalind Ormiston: *You are from Wales, born in Swansea and your parents were both teachers. Your early interest in 'sound' came from your father. Could you expand on that?*

Rhys Davies: My father [John Davies] and his song-writing partner Billy basically had the only non-professional recording studio in Swansea in the 1970s. They bought a second hand a Revox A77 and an old Ferrograph from 1962, which used to be part of the standard operating kit for BBC radio studios. They first attempted to record demos on the Ferrograph in our front room but they weren't happy with the quality of the recordings so decided to try to build a dedicated studio environment. They converted our garage by constructing a separate control room and recording space that they lined with sound absorbent soft board and industrial-size egg boxes.

RO: *As a child did you go in to watch or listen to the recordings in the studio?*

RD: Oh yes – but my introduction to the creative process of recording an original demo was as a result of the construction of the studio itself. The studio had a separate control room and a recording booth, so it was difficult for my father to record alone

because he would have to start the Revox and then rush into the recording booth. He preferred to record his vocal late at night, so when I was about six or seven- it sounds terrible now- but he would get me up out of bed to help him. He taught me how to press the play and record buttons simultaneously, whilst he positioned himself to record his vocal in the recording booth. My interest in music began at that point and eventually I formed my own band before I left to go to university in 1984.

RO: So you didn't have a band whilst at university?

RD: Not really. I went to Lancaster University to study Theatre. My creative collaborator was Martyn Wilson, who now works with me at the Royal Holloway Media Arts Department as a practice lecturer in Transmedia. I 'acquired' the key to a studio theatre space called The Playroom and we would go in there every weekend and during holidays to make videos and record music and just have fun. In truth, my real training – the skills I value most highly today are those I developed in those ad-hoc sessions.

RO: *Did you record other things; did you expand beyond music?*

RD: Oh yes. I hadn't ever considered being a theatre sound designer. The reason I drifted into this area was because the Theatre Studies department at Lancaster University had just invested in a Tascam 34b multi-track recorder which was a newer version of the Teac 3440b my father had bought in 1979 and I was the only one in the department who already knew how to use it. I quickly became the department sound designer for every bloody show for the next three years. I never really had the chance to direct a play because I did sound for everything. Because I was never taught a 'sound for theatre' course, I developed my ideas, particularly with regard to the scenographic potential of sound. I went on to work professionally in theatre for the next ten or twelve years fighting my corner. Even today, sound isn't regarded as a creative discipline in the way lighting, set and costume has been for the past one hundred years. There are historical reasons for this, but that is part of a much longer conversation. For all its radical pretensions, theatre is one of the most conservative art forms there is. You can take theatre by the collar and shout 'Change or die!' – but it will have to have a long think about which option is more favourable. Maybe – just maybe it will choose change, but by then it will probably be too late.

RO: *Is sound design for theatre part of your current research?*

RD: For the book *Across the Great Divide: Modernism's Intermedialities from Futurism to Fluxus* (2013), I am writing a chapter entitled: 'From Victorian Melodrama to the Futurist Serate – the fall and rise of kinetic emulation as a scenographic evocation of the modern landscape', for Cambridge Scholars, that examines the relationship between the kinetic emulation of 18th century technology and the *intonarumori*, (noise-tuners) invented by Luigi Russolo in support of his 'The Art of Noises' Futurist manifesto of 1913. I believe theatre sound as a design discipline died because the technology employed to created scenographic aural constructs in theatre production could no longer do in 1900 what it could do in 1800, which was to evoke the sound of a contemporaneous world. It survived for as long as it did because late nineteenth century melodramas were almost inevitably set before the Industrial Revolution in rural agricultural locations. When Chekhov, Ibsen and the rest of those gloomy proto Nordic Noir writers arrived, scenographic sound had nowhere to go, right at the point when the template for classic theatre production was being defined. However, the Futurists used almost identical technology in order to attempt to emulate the scenography of a modern, industrialised city. Did they succeed? Probably not in practical terms, but they asked the question and they set the challenge and they realised scenographic aural constructs through other means.

RO: *What do you think Russolo was trying to achieve?*

RD: Russolo wanted to redesign the orchestra to incorporate new instruments that could create a textural evocation of the sound of the factories, the sound of the modern world. Sound was an important aspect to all the Futurist artists. They attempted to paint noise, they attempted to paint sound. Varese, Schaeffer, Cage, and Derbyshire owe a great debt to the Futurists. All modern dance music is created using Futurist concepts – the noise-sound, non-traditional acoustmatic instrumentation. Intense rhythmic based composition. It took the advent of digital technology to truly realise The Art of Noises manifesto. Also, the founder of Futurism, F.T. Marinetti, in his Words-in-Freedom work, created sound design typographically.

RO: *So, from the printed page you can hear the sound?*

RD: Yes. This is sound design once removed. Through the positioning of text, both in terms of font type, and font size, as well as the extensive use of onomatopoeia

Marinetti was able to foreground and background sounds. Like modern sound design, it is a poetic distillation that discards the inconsequential aspects of naturalism to present us with a condensed typographic evocation of location. It involves a reductive process through the identification and isolation of keynote soundmarks of an environment; what Murray Schaeffer called 'a reductive distillation'.

RO: *We have discussed your interest in the Futurists, could you expand on other projects?*

RD: My research as an academic and as a practitioner is different. As a practitioner, what interests me was creating an implicit sound design, accepted as real within a gallery space. I have worked with figurative artist Natalie Holland who wanted a sound design to support her exhibition about self-harm, piercings and tattoos. For it I wanted to create a sense of normality the sound of the city which these figurative characters inhabited; I created sounds of traffic, children playing, police sirens, thunder; it was meant to be an un-designed recording of an environment where all of these urban dwellers had created their self-image.

RO: *Turning to a later project, what sound was created for 'Empty Porn Sets', 2008?*

RD: It was the sound of the photographer shooting the scenes. Jo [photographer Jo Broughton] went in to observe this. Her photographs are of sets used for porn photos [after shooting has finished]. I didn't sit in; I said to Jo just record the whole thing. Listening back, it was very matter-of-fact, very professional. I took this and created an environment. In my mind's eye I was thinking about an arts studio, and basically what happens if this photo-shoot is in a building like that. In a sense, I constructed a building around this room. I had the sound of traffic, sirens, then down the hall a dance studio, waltzes, piano music, to emotionally underscore what was happening in the shoot. It was false sound; false memory, and yet it was highly choreographed.

RO: *What was the reaction to 'Empty Porn Sets' in reviews?*

RD: Good reviews but nobody mentioned the sound. No one ever does. The best sound design affects your subconscious and so bypasses the rational. Sound design is like a football referee - The most effective is never noticed, except perhaps be another referee.

RO: *Finally, can we turn to your current sound project with the Royal Academy in London.*

RD: We were contacted by the Royal Academy's 'Contemporary Circle' to create a sound archive for the 21st century. I work with Professor Jean Wainwright, who is an academic researcher and journalist, rather than a program maker. What we are interested in are highly influential Royal Academicians who have had a significant effect on subsequent generations of artists, whilst perhaps not being in the public eye. Jean's job is to research the artist and develop the question set. My job is to edit the material, removing ums and ahs before the transcription process and then produce a forty-five minute radio documentary for the Royal Academy Library to use as it wishes – a range of CDs or perhaps podcasts. My idea was to have a commenting artist- an artist a generation down who was taught by the artist interviewed, so, for example, we had the sculptor John Maine RA, commenting on his former tutor the artist and sculptor Brian Kneale, RA.

We are dealing with predominantly pop-art artists of the 1950s, 1960s. Many are of an advanced age, we lost twenty RAs last year alone and so rather than simply discard the great experience and wisdom of these artists, our aim is to interview them and create an archive for future Art Historians. We've completed one and now we're waiting to see whether the Royal Academy Library can find funding to complete the project in these financially difficult times.

RO: *Rhys, with your consummate commitment to have 'sound' recognised as an Art form, for this interview I thought it would be perfect to title it 'Breaking the Sound Barrier.'*
RD: I like it. And ironically, when one breaks the sound barrier there is no sound.
RO: *Thank you for talking to Cassone.*

Rosalind Ormiston
April 2012

Editor's Notes:

Rhys Davies: Selected Publications

Empty Porn Sets, Rhys Davies (Designer); Jo Broughton, (Photographer), Audio Visual collaboration with photographer Jo Broughton, The Fine Art Society Gallery, New Bond Street, London, 2008

'Explicit Commentaries & Implicit Designs: The evolving role of post production sound in mainstream documentary'
Journal of Media Practice
Volume 8
2007

'From Victorian Melodrama to the Futurist Serate – the fall and rise of kinetic emulation as a scenographic evocation of the modern landscape' in *Across the Great Divide: Modernism's Intermedialities from Futurism to Fluxus*. Townsend, C., Trott, A. & Davies, R. (eds.). Cambridge Scholars, 2013

For further publications link to:
http://pure.rhul.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/rhys-davies%28018776a6-aad1-4813-ae34-c7c47bfb5051%29.html

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