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VISTASOUND

MIKE LEGGETT

Mike Leggett's *Vistasound* is a forty-five minute long film made up of three segments of approximately fifteen minutes each. Each segment uses the same soundtrack, though the visual composition of each segment is entirely different. There is a 'buffer' between each segment (which also bookends the film) that consists of a hand pressing the buttons on a 'Sinclair' calculator to create a tonal cadenza.

The soundtrack is made up of spoken word dialogue, ambient noises, sounds that propel the narrative, and musical pieces. The soundtrack, through its repetition, is a loose foundation for the three segments of the film. Each segment of the film has the same soundtrack but a different visual representation of that soundtrack. This gives an anchor to the film but also serves as a means to explore the audience's perception and memory of the film they are watching.

The use of repetition is important in *Vistasound*, and may have been associated with Leggett's interest in the associations people tend to make when encountering visual and sound images. Leggett was exploring the interaction of the audience with the film, as he states 'the repeated use of an image for instance helps encourage that process of interrogation – what was the circumstance where I saw this image before? How is it different this time? Can I anticipate its return?'¹ This use of repetition is also important to the film theory of the time that Leggett was probably aware of. The semiotic theorist Bellour felt that repetition created Textural Volume, 'the process of repetition and variation whereby the filmic discourse advances thanks to differential increments which repeat codical elements so as to generate both continuity (and thus comprehension) and

discontinuity (and thus interest)'¹. Leggett creates this textural volume in *Vistasound* by contrasting the repetition of the soundtrack against a visual representation that sometimes fits, and other times is out of 'sync'. Thus the audience is able to read the film but is also left with a need to engage with the film to understand it more completely.

The first segment of the film is a shot down a country road in Devon. At the beginning of this segment seagulls can be heard squawking in the distance. The sound of seagulls does not fit the image of a country road, so immediately the viewer realizes something is awry. The scene continues with little other action occurring (horse riders trot by, a car passes, another more upbeat and syncopated version of 'Stairway of Love' appears and segues into 'O What a Beautiful Morning') and there is not much in the way of stimuli except for the dialogue. One thing that becomes apparent is that the soundtrack is prompting (or at least pre-empting) the visual presentation. For instance the sound of the car comes before we can see it, the music is the catalyst for the camera's only movement, and we can hear the horse and the speaker's reaction to them before they enter the frame. The soundtrack is setting up the viewer for what they are about to see.

The second segment begins with a shot over the port town of Ilfracombe, obviously taken from a high vantage point across the bay ^Λ. A postcard being held up in front of the camera lens obscures the shot. Later we discover that the postcard is a 'Vistasound' card, a type of postcard that can also be played as a record (like a flexi-disc), however when 'Stairway of Love' pipes up later in this segment the scene transforms into an interior with a band 'lip syncing' the tune. The segue into 'O What a Beautiful Morning' leads to footage of a cowboy walking in the countryside.

The third segment features the visual representation of the actors who have been providing the film's dialogue. They wander the streets of Bristol obsessively photographing almost everything they see. The 'unmasking' of the voices leads the viewer to believe the pieces of the puzzle are falling into place, however this is not necessarily the case.

The complexity of the audio/visual relationship in *Vistasound* led me to believe Leggett had some kind of 'master-plan' going into the project, however this is not so. As Leggett states 'this was not a film that was clearly conceptualized before I started work on it... It was one of those that clarified itself over several years. The first footage was shot in about 1976 very much in response to the central object, the Vistasound card, which Chris Garratt, a film-maker friend of mine in Devon, England, showed me. The connection between the image and image-of-sound on the card and the image and image-of-sound on the filmstrip was too good an opportunity to pass up!'¹

The first thing Leggett filmed was the sea-side scene in Ilfracombe (that would eventually appear in the second segment of the film), and over the next few years the rest of the footage was filmed. In 1979 Leggett shot the opening sequence on the farm where he lived in Devon as 'a continuous take with a careful choreography of players'¹.

At this point he had still not scripted the dialogue that would eventually be on the soundtrack. Leggett wrote the dialogue around 1980, and it was intended to 'play with the various elements and be delivered by actors who would appear in a variety of settings, which together, (the settings, props and actors), would inhabit a commentary about the activities of looking and hearing'¹. The final four hundred feet featuring the actors was

shot around Bristol, and in 1981 post-production work commenced. It was at this point the true structure of the film took form. According to Leggett 'the final stage in 1981 of post-production was quite complex... but challenging to do because there were countless temptations to make the soundtrack more and more dense with connotations able to affect the three layers of picture track. The dubbing session (with Aard Wirtz) was hilarious because of course, he had to mix according to my audio memory and judgment, and then we'd load up on of the other picture tracks to see if the balance was still true...'¹⁸. This description from Leggett not only illustrates the complexity of the formation of *Vistasound* but it also emphasizes the fact that the film grew in an almost organic way. Originally it was a play on the audio/visual quality of film compared with that of the Vistasound card but through Leggett's meditation on his subject it became an exploration of perception, memory, filmic representation, as well as the relation between sound and image in the film medium.

A part of the construction of *Vistasound* that would have been of great importance is the order of the segments in the film. The order of the three segments in *Vistasound* has a great effect on the cohesiveness of the film. It is no coincidence that the film begins with the most (seemingly) banal segment (the shot down the country road), continues with the Vistasound card segment in the middle, and places as a conclusion the segment featuring the actors in their visual representation. By constructing the film in this order Leggett slowly lifts the lid on what it is we are hearing (almost like the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' where the floating shape of the cloaked dancer takes on more form as she slowly sheds her clothing to reveal a more explicit shape). Suddenly the voices have faces, and more of the pieces come together. However, because of the inclusion of the actors in this

final segment it becomes more obvious when the soundtrack does not fully 'sync' with the visual representation. An example of this is the 'Horses! Get down!' scene where the sound of the horses trotting is visually represented by one of the actors walking past a billboard that is advertising horse racing. Instances of abstraction such as these in the final segment lead the viewer to realize that maybe the veils are not yet fully lifted from the film, and they may have to watch the first two segments again to piece it together fully. The first time I saw *Vistasound* I immediately watched it a second time. I felt a need to find out which parts of the film truly fit the sound and image. I also felt a need to find out which parts of the soundtrack originated from which segment (eg. did that car sound come from the part where the car travels down the country road or when the actors are driving around Bristol?). The urge to pick apart the film and return to it would not be as overwhelming if the first segment was placed last and the last first. By leading the viewer towards what s/he thinks is the 'climax' or 'revelation' in the last segment, then making the viewer question this revelation, Leggett opens the film up to repeated viewings and makes the viewer take a more active role in their perception of the film. It also 'evens out' the film so that the first segment is just as vital to our understanding as the final segment.

The buffer zones that bookend the film and separate the segments are also quite interesting. They involve a hand repeatedly pressing the buttons on a 'Sinclair' calculator, which makes a little tonal cadenza. The repetition of the tonal structure ties in with the repetition of the soundtrack, and the placement of this sequence between the segments reinforces the film's temporal rhythmic structure. The tonal cadenza itself is

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interesting because it is based on the song 'Stairway of Love' that appears in the film. According to Leggett, the calculator '... could make musical tones, each number on the keyboard being matched to a tone. The cadenza that emerges in the film starts by reducing the mushy tune Stairway of Love to its numerical (equivalent) values, saving it in the calculator's little memory, and then applying the square root calculation to the series of calculations made each time the button is pressed' ¹. By masking the song in this way Leggett is once again playing with the perception of the audience. What are we hearing? Where does it come from? This effect is a microcosm of the effect of the entire film.

Leggett's exploration of sound in film and its relation to our visual perception is a key subject of *Vistasound*. How do three very different visual segments all use the same soundtrack yet remain coherent? It could be argued that Leggett could have kept going with the experiment and made four or five or ten segments with the same soundtrack. Sound is often seen as less important than vision in cinema. By using sound as the film's base and giving it a permanence (and treating the visual representation as a secondary source) Leggett is 'up-ending' the relationship between sound and image and reminding the viewer that film is not just about the visual.

Leggett, ironically, originally worked in a purely visual medium. His first training was as a photographer, and photography plays a central role in *Vistasound*. Throughout the film the still image interrupts the filmic shot, and the actors are both depicted as being concerned with photography. There are also many instances in the film where a Polaroid shot is taken and held up to the camera. Leggett clearly has an interest in the static image ¹ and its representation of the 'real world'. When we look at a photograph we are

looking at a chemical representation of a particular space and time, a representation that could be seen as iconic 2. Leggett pushes this idea further by having one of the actors take a photograph of the other looking at photos.

Vistasound uses a unique structure to explore the relationships between sound and image, audience and film, memory and perception, and brings sound to the forefront of filmic structure in the process. It is an engaging film, and just as importantly, it is very entertaining in that it promotes an interaction between the audience and the film.

Word Count: 1992

FOOTNOTES

1. Raymond Ballour's theory cited in:
Stam, Robert; Burgoyne, Robert; Flitterman-Lewis' Sandy; *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*; pp. 55; London, Routledge, 1992
2. Wollen, Peter; *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*; pp. 123-124; Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1972

APPENDIX A

Please note that a great deal of the information I obtained for this paper was from e-mail correspondence with Mike Leggett. I have attached a copy of that correspondence and have labeled it Appendix A. Throughout the paper the letter A indicates information from Mike Leggett that can be found in Appendix A.

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1. Stam, Robert; Burgoyne, Robert; Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy; *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*; London, Routledge, 1992
2. Wollen, Peter; *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*; Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1972