## **Intimate Conversations in Cinema’s Elsewhere**

By Dario Llinares and Neil Fox

‘You might be asking why we’re doing this’ we proffered to a non-existent audience back in March 2015 on the first episode of *The Cinematologists* podcast. Our self-regarding answer at the time was:

‘Well, we like to talk about the films we love and we also really enjoy podcasting. We think it’s an important medium in terms of discussion and disseminating information. We think it’s going to be important in various academic disciplines and we’ve got a lot to say about films in various ways’.

Given the current number and variety of film related podcasts produced by broadcast media institutions, print and online magazines, cinema chains and film lovers, these sentiments are certainly not unique to us.

Listening back, our first utterances reflect something of the DIY, amateur sensibility and tone of independent podcasting’s early development. While the production value of *The Cinematologists* has risen over the years, the ethos of the show as a deep discussion of film, particularly in the tumult of the digital age, remains. Also apparent in those first, tentative recordings is a naïve curiosity; a questioning of the essence of what podcasting is and how in a formal and philosophical sense it aligns to cinema. This ‘self-reflexive’ tendency, a feature of many non-fiction podcasts, is indicative of amateur and professional practitioners reckoning with the possibilities of a burgeoning medium in an uncertain communications ecosystem. At heart our podcast is driven, then and now, by finding a kindred spirit not only in appreciating film but in loving the joust and parry of debate about cinema.

As academics, film education and research informed the way we discussed cinema before we even thought about podcasting. But, animated post-screening debates over dinner or drinks were just as vital to building our vocal métier. We were avid listeners to podcasts and we sensed that there was something significant, maybe even unique, happening in this audio forum. The voices of filmmakers, cinephiles and fans mixed critical analysis and unadulterated joyful reverie for films in every conceivable genre. We wanted to be in this space, one where perceived wisdoms were questioned, canons disrupted and critical disagreements worked through. For us, more than academia, more than film criticism, and certainly more than the gladiatorial arena of #FilmTwitter, film podcasting is where the significance and vitality of cinema culture has space to breathe.

Being asked to write about film podcasting for issue one of MUBI Notebook is encouraging of the meaningful symbiosis between, on the surface, two very different media. One old, one new. One audio-visual, one image-less. One socially and culturally ingrained, one still developing as an industry, a practice and cultural phenomena. The written word is still the primary apparatus for film criticism. But, for us, podcasting as an aural form plays a vital role of discovery, dialogue and appraisal of the cinematic landscape. As producers and consumers, podcasting has become not just a secondary platform that augments cinema’s primacy but the apparatus that shapes our cinephilia.

In this piece, which focuses on English language shows, we offer some context as to podcasting’s technological and cultural development, and examine how sound aesthetics, content structures, and thematic interests forge listening experiences in different types of film podcasts. We then go on to make the ambitious claim that podcasts have the potential, through their toolkit of speech, music, effects & silence, to trigger and guide imagination the listener and manifest what we call an ‘audio-cinematic’ experience. We conclude by looking toward a future when films and podcasts become potentially entwined in ever more creative ways.

**Podcasts and Podcasting**

Like many our entry into podcasting was on the back of a zeitgeist moment, latterly known as podcasting’s ‘golden age’.[[1]](#endnote-1) The period of mainstream cross-over in 2014 was the second, maybe even the third, coming of a medium christened by journalist Ben Hammersley in the Guardian in 2004[[2]](#endnote-2). Back then, the potential of an audio-revolution was part of myriad utopian speculations projected onto the internet. Podcasting’s nascence as a discrete medium derived from an intersection of technologies such as the online distribution mechanism of Really Simple Syndication (RSS), the iTunes interface which streamlined podcasting’s discoverability, and the iPhone with its embedded podcast player app facilitating mobile downloading and consumption while condemning the iPod to obsolescence. The true-crime podcast *Serial* then blasted podcasting into the cultural mainstream, spawning countless imitators and beginning the move towards an industrial formalisation which continues apace today.

The debate regarding the difference between radio and podcasting is fractious. One of the most popular film podcasts in the UK, Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo's Film Review which airs on BBC Radio 5 Live on Friday afternoons, is an example of remediated radio.[[3]](#endnote-3) Many film podcasts mirror the audio magazine show format, with structured core elements such as a box office top ten, new release reviews and star interviews. Podcasts however are unencumbered by broadcasting flow and enjoy a freedom from scheduling and time constraints, and the rigid segmentation of radio. In interview centred podcasts, this affords an informal, conversational, ever more intimate tone. *Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso* (2016- ) exemplifies this tone and is an exemplar of podcasting’s revitalisation of the long-form interview format, beyond the orchestrated banalities of the press junket.

**Elsewhere in the Elsewhere**

The popularity of film podcasts draws on the para-textual pleasures of discussing, sharing, arguing and opining about film. The aural texture of individual shows often reflect, spatially and temporally, specific contextual engagements with cinema. Be they pre-film anticipation, post-film analysis, pub arguments, mentoring sessions or university seminars.  In their diverse sonic manifestations, podcasts have become a significant space in the cinephilic ‘elsewhere’. Girish Shambu argues that a ‘deep engagement with cinema's richness’ online has expanded cinema's ‘elsewhere’ beyond the specific ‘there’ of film watching[[4]](#endnote-4). A cursory scroll through a podcast platform’s film-related offerings reveals a show for every taste, every genre, from a vast array of individuals, collectives and organisations. Podcasting is native to the era of atomised audiences whose niche interests may fall into varying sensibilities. Whether casual watcher, committed cinephile, obsessive fan, industry insider, established or aspiring filmmaker, historian or academic, such demographic bands may find resonances not just at the level of content but in the voices, styles of conversation, programme structures, and analytic framing.

Early influences on our podcasting sensibility were *Filmspotting* (2005- ) and *The Cinephiliacs* (2012 – 2021) whose balance of film knowledge, animated interplay and slick sonic presentation was, for us, a template for independent film podcasting. *The Greg Proops Film Club* (2014 - ), particularly in its pre-Covid incarnation, was a mixture of stand-up, irreverent film history lesson and post-screening Q&A. Indeed, recording live in the film theatre alerted us to how podcasting can situate the listener in the environment of the cinema. Podcasts have a reputation for self-indulgence but if there is one podcaster who harnesses the virtues of the cinematic deep-dive, it’s Blake Howard. In *One Heat Minute*, consecutive 60-second segments from Michael Mann’s 1995 crime drama are the jumping off point for each episode. The inherent serialised potential of podcasting is thus exploited to push analysis of a single film to its limits.

Podcasting is undoubtedly an essential space for new voices that challenge canonical thinking and do what Ashley Clark has described as ‘narrative correction’[[5]](#endnote-5). *Black Men Can't Jump [In Hollywood]* (2015– ) and *Projections* (2018- ) both provide necessary perspectives on race, in the case of former, and psychoanalytic readings with the latter. Both shows reclaim forgotten, ignored or ridiculed texts from myriad personal, political and ideological perspectives and create new ways of hearing and thinking about film. John Bleasdale interviews authors of film books on his *Writers on Film* podcast, resulting in a show that is part film criticism, part deconstruction of the writing process, and full of gleeful cinephilic digressions. It is layered and engaging. It could feel niche but is wonderfully diverse and accessible.

**An Audio-Cinematic Experience?**

A case could be made that film podcasts can go beyond simple paratexts, and the ‘there’ and ‘elsewhere’ dichotomy, providing a unique audio experience that is less subservient, more formally dialectical. Podcasts do have one key element missing of course: moving images. But some of the most vivid podcasts make up for a ‘lack’ of the visual by shaping sound to materialise forms of cinematic experience through activating a listener's auditory imagination. Michel Chion, who we interviewed on episode 136 of *The Cinematologists*, points to the use of the much-used cinematic device of ‘acousmêtre’, referring to sounds (often voices) heard without seeing their originating phenomena (or body, in the case of the voice)[[6]](#endnote-6). Podcasts, like radio and the telephone, are fundamentally acousmatic media. As with images, we use sounds as perceptual cues that are linked to a causal origin, orienting ourselves in relation to what we perceive as the objective world. Regarding film, Chion defines ‘visualised sound’ as when the image onscreen and corresponding sound are synchronised. Acousmatic media however, forces a listener to imagine a visual connection to the sound they are hearing.

Film podcasts can deploy acousmêtre in ways that conjure an imaginative relationship with filmic images to manifest a unique kind of cinematic experience. A presenter may be particularly effective in describing a scene from a film which provokes a listener’s cognitive reflection. The voice of a familiar actor, may also resonate with a listener’s memories of a film. Film trailers and clips are often woven into the sonic fabric of film podcasts, and aural aesthetics of podcasts are enhanced by editing and sound design choices thus creating symbolic associations and affective responses. Certain podcasts then seek to amplify an ‘audio-cinematic’ aura by sonically triggering a listener’s cinematic knowledge or emotional connection, heightening the potential euphonic pleasures that resonate through cinematically inflected voices and sounds.

All film podcasts could potentially create an audio-cinematic experience, but in innovative examples it is acutely realised. Written, produced and narrated by Karina Longworth, *You Must Remember This* (2014- ) is a podcast that grew from Longworth’s obsession with the ‘forgotten and/or hidden history of old Hollywood’. Longworth's voice-over narration offers a storytelling style that is playful and insightful, that recalls or imagines famous scenes, recreating moments of dialogue and referencing iconic images that interpolate cinematic memories. In an interview in 2015, Longworth outlined her show's sensibility:

‘I knew I wanted to be having this conversation about old movies in a cinematic way without using images. I knew I wanted to have it feel sort of like a cocktail party conversation where you might be telling anecdote and then you sort of do a voice...And then I had this idea that it has got to feel something like a dream, and it should feel like old radio but it shouldn't actually sound like old radio, it shouldn't have that affectation in the voice, but it can have an affectation where it is like a lullaby’[[7]](#endnote-7).

Longworth’s description here exemplifies how sound and voice can be used to furnish the imagination. It is the phenomenological experience of listening, its embodied materiality, that offers a grand scope into which listeners can be immersed. *Phantom Power* (2018- ), created and hosted by Sound Studies academic Mack Hagood, produced an episode on the sounds of silent cinema in which a sonic history of early cinema-going is augmented by sound cues that take listeners back into the Nickelodeons and the ballyhoo. Jason Bailey and Mike Hall’s recent *Fun City Cinema* (2020- ) series, accompanying Bailey’s book of the same name, is a layered and expansive filmic history with a flawlessly integrated mix of geographical, historical and social context, industrial history and cultural analysis. These are important works of film history and film criticism which are fundamentally both audio and cinematic. Our own foray into creating an audio-cinematic experience is best exemplified by our investigation into ‘the cinematic voice’ (ep98) in which the pre-recorded analysis of several film critics was interwoven with examples of how voice is deployed cinematically.

**Podcasting’s filmic future**

The possibilities of creating audio-cinematic experiences fascinate us at *The Cinematologists*; particularly variations of audio recording contexts, post-production creativity and structural designs that can shape all kinds of film/podcast interaction. Some might suggest that a form that has been around for a couple of decades can’t be nascent, yet there are some who argue that cinema is still a nascent form with so much to explore and become. The relationship between the mediums, when approached from that optimistic space, feels exhilarating. What does the future hold? It would be great to see podcasts more closely integrated with the film production process as it’s happening, providing in-depth insight into a film upon its release. The immediacy of podcasting means this is possible. The recent Fireflies Press book on Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Memoria* (2021) is a reminder of the ongoing practice of books that detail a film’s production process. If a film was ever crying out for an accompanying poetic, imaginative, audio-cinematic podcast portrait it is surely that one. *The Last Movie Ever Made* (2021) follows the making of the Netflix-backed Adam McKay satire *Don’t Look Up* (2021), marrying high audio production values, A-list Hollywood insiderism and an aspiration towards reaffirming the social significance of cinema. Indeed, we may have already reached the point where an accompanying podcast has more to offer than the film text itself.

At a time when media giants are hoovering up as much of the podcast landscape as they can, like the galactic vacuum cleaner in Mel Brooks’s *Spaceballs* (1987), another sign of commercialisation is podcast adaptation. *Homecoming* (2016) and *Dirty John* (2017) are podcasts that were used as a proof of concept for TV shows. Cinema will surely follow this trend. For us though what is most exciting is what will be found in the unique spaces between podcasting and film. With *The Cinematologists* we want to explore representations of the cinematic in an audio form in ways that feel unique for listeners, an experience that writing or simply talking about a film or filmmaker, couldn’t. Film museums and festivals are spaces where the auditory can unlock audio-visual and cultural aspects of cinema in unexpected and invigorating ways and we want to make and champion audio texts that feel as valid, and maybe as definitive, as written criticism has been in the past. While the future is, of course, unknown, there seems to be no let-up in the expanding number of explorers in aural landscapes of the cinematic elsewhere. We are excited to be among them and invite you to join us.

1. Berry, R. 2015. A Golden Age of Podcasting? Evaluating *Serial* in the Context of Podcast Histories. *Journal of Radio and Audio Media,* Vol. 22,2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hammersley, B. Audible Revolution. The Guardian, 12 Feb, 2004 https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/feb/12/broadcasting.digitalmedia [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It was recently announced that the Kermode and Mayo’s Film reviews would end on BBC radio after 21 years on April 1, 2022, and move to a Sony platform as a podcast, under the name Kermode and Mayo’s Take. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Shambu. G. 2014. The New Cinephilia. Indiana University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Film Comment Podcast May 1, 2019 (09: 05) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Chion. M. 1999. The Voice in Cinema. Columbia University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Longform Podcast interview Oct 7, 2015 (20:13–21:20) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)