Edinburgh 50th Anniversary Screen Event

THE SOUND OF SPACE—SONIC IMAGE BEYOND THE SCREEN

This special symposium was designed to explore sound spatialisation and its relation to the sonic image both on and off screen.   It was hosted by Screen, the University of Edinburgh Music Department, Sound Design MSc and the Soundings Festival.

The *Screen* 50th Anniversary Event in Edinburgh was held on Friday February 6 and was consequently a victim of the atrocious weather conditions. Three of the booked speakers didn't get to Edinburgh and the fourth needed an hour long early morning walk through the snow to a railway station after taxi drivers refused to risk their vehicles! The structure of the event had to be changed, though the topic, surround sound, remained the same and the event attracted an audience of over 70 (a lucky percentage of whom got a free *Screen* pen).

As a precursor to this event, *Screen* had supported an earlier Edinburgh visit, on January 21, from Michel Chion, who presented an *audition musicale* (a performance of one of his own works) and a lecture (on a scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*), both of which drew attention to the complexity of the ways in which narrative meaning is constructed from the relationship of what we hear (sound, music, speech, volume) and what we see (or imagine ourselves seeing). The February 6 event, followed up some of the questions raised by Chion, but focused more specifically on how sound design can be used to situate spectators in a sonic space that may or may not coincide with their position as spectators of what is happening on a stage or screen.

To open the programme, Martin Parker (director of the Edinburgh Sound Design MSc) showed a scene from Tarkovsky' *Mirror* in which the sound (primarily speech) was recorded in mono. We saw this first as originally intended, the sound played back in mono, and then using a 5.1 surround sound system. This immediately focused discussion on spectatorial space and the concept (or ideology) of 'immersion'. In this case there was a clear and disturbing disjunction between the experience of *looking at* what was happening on the film, out there as it were, and a sound system designed to put the viewer *in* the filmic space.

Parker was followed by a group of his students who are presently working on a surround sound mix for a theatrical production of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. This will involve animated film as well as live actors and musicians and the sound system will be used to give audience members an unfolding sense of being on a boat. Discussion focused on technical rather than aesthetic matters, on how computers now make live sound choices possible—the sound mixers will be able to respond to audience response.

Marc Langsman from Dolby Labs followed this up in his discussion and display of the latest use of surround sound in video games, in which interactivity demands an immersive experience quite different from that of film viewing but with its own need for 'realism'. A sound system has to be devised in which the sounds heard by the

gamers are always immediately appropriate to the action they are shaping and to the ever changing in-game perspective.

Finally, Michael Edwards from Edinburgh's Music Department talked as a computer-using composer about the problems involved in making/recording music to be heard in surround sound. The subsequent discussion of listening conditions, of the placement of speakers, the design of the reception area, etc, soon came back to the problems of cinema sound and, more particularly, of 'home cinema' systems and the use of the living room as the listening place, The question became whether the 'correct' listening conditions for surround sound are ever really met. Interestingly (given the technical interests of much of the audience) the conclusion (which returned us to the Tarkovsky discussion) seemed to be that the human imagination has an ability to adjust what's seen to what's heard in ways that continues to be more important than the ongoing technical attempts by producers of sounds for screens to reproduce 'what you would hear if you were there'.

The evening concluded with a programme of music diffused across a 20 channel sound system curated by Robert Dow from Edinburgh University and Pete Stollery from Aberdeen University, which was also the first concert of the Soundings Festival.