

Submerged Queer Spaces: Audio Poiesis and Documentary Film

Jack Curtis Dubowsky

Virginia Center for the Creative Arts

Introduction

Within popular and scholarly investigations of film sound, it has been a common approach to privilege big budget, award-winning, commercially successful, heteronormative narrative films, as well as the work of sound designers who specialise in these films. What sound scholar would not be curious about the latest technological advances or imaginative solutions employed by the latest (and loudest) space opera? 1

It is also distinctly advantageous to explore from a practitioner perspective some of the auditory possibilities, approaches, and choices within experimental documentary film, as well as some of the concomitant meanings and connotations thereby created or implied. Such films are challenged by budgetary constraints, but also by the implications of creating ersatz sound environments over archival footage, creating sonic impressions or fantasias to accompany visual histories. 2

My documentary feature, *Submerged Queer Spaces* (2012), examines San Francisco queer history through an approach of urban archaeology. In using 'queer' as a generalised umbrella term, I employ an expanded definition, described in my book *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness*, that extends beyond sexuality, gender, BDSM, fetish communities, and can thereby also 'include any perceived innate Otherness to which larger society responds by bullying or oppression; this potentially includes introversion, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disabilities, as well as other possibilities.'¹ Nevertheless, for the purposes of the documentary, aided through the archives of the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, the architectural spaces documented were those that had held particular importance to the city's 'LGBT' community. 3

I took an unusual approach to the audio track, relying heavily upon original music, avoiding sound effects and site-specific ambiences, and employing voice-overs of interview subjects over images of architecture, minimising on-camera interviews. By unmooring myself from expectations to create 'realistic' or 'authentic' sound, I was free to allow the audio track to achieve other ends. This, in addition to the predominance of architectural photography and exaggerated camera movement, radicalised the documentary and put it in a more experimental generic space. 4

This article is written predominantly from the viewpoint of a practitioner with a humble understanding of issues confronting musicology and the academic study of music and sound for film. Furthermore, although I have worked on major motion pictures and network 5

television, this article comes from a place of D.I.Y. independent film wherein I had great freedom to make the film I wanted to make, rather than to answer to a studio. This perspective and its associated biases are hopefully informative, and the scholarly reader may wish to justly apply any caveats they feel are appropriate.

Audio poiesis

Poiesis is the making, which stands in contrast to praxis or practice; in making, the desired end is a specific product, whereas in praxis or doing, the desired end is the process itself.² This Aristotelian division of activity predates sound recording or filmmaking, yet provides a challenging framework to consider. The concept of recording stands in a liminal space between poiesis and praxis. Philosopher and journalist Evan Eisenberg argues, 'Only live recordings record an event; studio recordings, which are the great majority, record nothing. Pieced together from bits of actual events, they construct an ideal event.'³ This idealised construction is the poiesis; it is a product that is 'locked', 'bounced', 'mixed', or 'frozen' into an idealised state, upon which it may then be copied and distributed. However, the construction of this recorded product can involve 'sound art' or 'sound design', a rigorous practice undertaken by dedicated artists, craftspeople, and professionals.

Within audiovisual cinema, by creating an audio track, filmmakers fill a space in the audiovisual realm; the very presence of the audio track demands its own fulfilment. Even emptiness tends to be filled with 'room tone' or 'ambience' tracks. Complete silence might indicate a problem with the technology, a possibility that an electrical connection has been lost. But even were this not the case, absolute silence, even for a few moments, seems anathema to the cinematic experience, excepting the avant-garde or experimental.

In documentary film, particular issues arise in considering the creation of the audio track. Documentary film has long struggled with its own identity, transcending the categorisation of 'non-fiction' but eyeing the demands of direct cinema, concerned with how the mere introduction of a camera may influence and corrupt events and the faithful documentation of some perceptible reality. Media historian Erik Barnouw, writing in his pioneering survey of the documentary first published in 1974, noted this dilemma: 'Direct cinema found its truth in events available to the camera. *Cinéma vérité* was committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface.'⁴ Propaganda films and later television documentaries didn't even care, and many of them employed a falsified audio track; consider nature films with incorrect animal roars from a sound library, and slick productions that put in multichannel ambiences and SFX in the same rich manner a narrative film does.

If the documentary filmmaker can resist such vulgar temptations, there are approaches that adhere to other aesthetics, approaches that do not try to create a paradoxically artificial illusion of 'realistic' or 'authentic' sound. Michel Chion argues that one must recognise the practicalities of the tri-partite division of labour (dialogue / sound effects / music) within the post-production sound environment, yet still appreciate that all sound can potentially be analysed or appreciated without such boundaries or classifications.⁵ In this case, perhaps production sound can be heard as 'music', or 'music' can be an 'ambience', or dialogue might be a 'sound effect'. If a documentary filmmaker works without an extensive sound crew, and all audio is stored on hard drives attached to a single editing system which can

also edit the sound, divisions of labour become even more blurred. The praxis becomes attenuated, simplified, and the poiesis becomes the important result, created under time pressure from film festival screening deadlines.

LGBT historic preservation

Submerged Queer Spaces, and its approach of urban archaeology, are part of a growing interest in historic preservation in opposition to unbridled urban growth and culturally destructive architectural renovation. Historic preservation has become a prominent issue in the LGBT community, sparking numerous efforts to document and preserve spaces of specific importance. In San Francisco, the city's Historic Preservation Fund Committee awarded a grant for the study and development of an LGBT Historic Context Statement; the resultant guidelines will be reviewed by the city's Planning Department, and considered for adoption by the city's Historic Preservation Commission. In Los Angeles, SurveyLA has launched an effort to map LGBT history. SurveyLA is partially funded by a \$2.5 million grant from the J. Paul Getty Trust; the project is managed by the Department of City Planning Office of Historic Resources. Survey results can be used by property owners and others who want to take steps toward obtaining historic landmark designations. 10

In 2014, the United States National Park Service announced the 'Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Heritage Initiative', a study to identify places and events associated with the story of LGBT Americans. Its goals are to encourage national parks, national heritage areas, and other affiliated areas to interpret LGBT stories associated with them; to identify, document, and nominate LGBT-associated sites as national historic landmarks; and to increase the number of listings of LGBT-associated properties in the National Register of Historic Places. 11

Nostalgia, and a desire to visually preserve these sites and properties, is readily apparent. *Submerged Queer Spaces* endeavoured to document such places visually. But there is another, nuanced history behind these spaces that is far more challenging to document, reliant upon the memories of interview subjects and other accounts. All the bygone restaurants, bars, cafés, theatres, and cruising alleys had unique sound-prints; these now exist only in memory. Although there is archival photographic evidence of queer spaces, there was no movement to record or preserve sonic environments. It is widely accepted that heteronormative bourgeois gentrification kills queer *physical* spaces, but widely overlooked that there is a corollary impact upon queer *auditory* spaces. 12

Preservation of LGBT spaces is facilitated by their physical, corporeal form; they are concrete things, able to be built, observed, and photographed. Interview subjects can *recall* sounds or memories that imply sounds, but the sounds themselves are gone. The shared collectivity of these environments cannot be fully recreated, lacking the authentic auditory component. An 'historic landmark' plaque may be hung upon a building, but the sound waves that once defined that auditory space have long dissipated, sampled only in the vagaries of memory. In this way, communal pasts are subject to distortions, whitewashing, and exaggeration. 13

As a documentary filmmaker, it is easy to become reliant upon the primacy of the visual; the creation of an artificial soundtrack to sonically follow or imitate the visual image through sound design and postproduction has long been a strong temptation. *Submerged Queer* 14

Spaces eschews this type of sound design in favour of music that is ambient, textural, and clearly *not* a diegesis of the depicted environs. This audio track lets go of pretensions to authenticating or onscreen archival images.

Perhaps, given the ubiquity of recording devices today, such as mobile phones, more sound will be preserved so future generations will be better able to *hear* – not just see – our world. This would represent a marked shift from the decaying Polaroids, fading negatives, and yellowing newspaper clippings of the past, the archival media to which we had access at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Historical Society archive. Today’s simultaneous and *automatic* encoding of audio along with video information, as by consumer video cameras and mobile phones for example, facilitates the preservation and documentation of audio environments, provided that data is not lost. However, as media formats change and data storage systems decay, audio recordings are still under threat of degradation and loss.⁶ This has been seen in the issue of video game preservation, where many of the earliest games cannot be played without working archival systems, and it is a risk even for contemporary recording practices. 15

With the rapid turnover in computer programs, languages, and media, digital preservation has become a thorny issue. Media once preserved and archived needs to be preserved and archived yet again, in the latest accessible format and technology. Audio cannot be easily printed in the way that written text can be printed on paper, providing a lasting document. Audio preservation, excepting musical notation, relies upon working equipment of some sort to reproduce audio waveforms as audible vibrations in air. This dependency complicates audio preservation. Some information is not preserved at all, even in a recording, for instance, how *loud* a space was; we might have a recording of a disco, and can identify the music, but not know for certain how loudly the music was being played, in the absence of an objective sound pressure level measurement. 16

Sound as cultural space

Drew Daniel, in his critical essay ‘All Sound Is Queer’, argues that sound ‘can let us hear what is not yet locatable on the available maps of identity’, and that sound is ‘shared and shareable, and thus makes possible a certain kind of collectivity’.⁷ Hence, if queers participate in a collective environment like a nightclub or cruising alley, the associated and familiar sounds become part of the collective subcultural experience. The loss of sonic environments represents an irreparable loss of histories and communities as well. As preservation of lost, dissipated sound relies upon the link between audition and memory, the result is often a fantasia of times past, a dislocation of time and recognition. It is at this point that the memory becomes less shared, and more individual. At the moment of shared audition, the experience may be relatively uniform across the collective; as time passes, the subjectivities of individual memory come into play. Communications scholar Jeff Smith, in commentary on the work of David McRaney,⁸ notes that if ‘our faulty reconstruction of memories makes us the unreliable narrators of our own lives, then it would seem that the very notion of collective or cultural memory becomes a very messy concept, insofar as each individual’s reconstruction of memory is likely to be wrong in ways that may be vastly different from other participants in the original experience.’⁹ Nevertheless, as Drew Daniel argues, shared sound makes *possible* a collectivity that, even if imperfect, is still part of subcultural identity.¹⁰ Its truths and fictions become part of the myth and mystique of 17

subcultural histories.

Aural recollections may be communal, even in collective agreement, but nevertheless incorporate fantasias of environs like legendary nightclubs and notorious bathhouses. Such places became important and iconic to various subcultures, so that anyone wishing to emphasize membership in a subculture would emphasize their attendance and participation at these locales, often echoing existing reports of 'what it was like', reinforcing a collective memory. 18

Fiona Buckland's *Impossible Dance*, Kai Fikentscher's *You Better Work!*, and Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* have foregrounded the use of sound in creating queer communities. While these works focus on nightclubs, any submerged queer environment was culturally once a kind of 'club' space, restricted or special to those connected to a cultural underworld. Sound is a defining element in the creation of space; a gay church or restaurant has a different sound-print than a straight church or restaurant, even if subtly so. The impact of sound prints on LGBT culture and historiography has not been adequately studied or documented. 19

San Francisco is home to Ringold Alley, running the length of one city block behind buildings between 8th and 9th streets in the South of Market (SOMA) district, long home to homosexual men and the leather community. The area was gentrified in the 2000s by the tech industry, start up firms, and real estate developers who erected posh urban lofts and condominium towers where warehouses once stood. The leather community held on, as did many music venues and nightclubs, creating dissonances between existing nightlife cultures and new arrivals. 20

During the filming of *Submerged Queer Spaces*, Ringold Alley visually appeared similar to how it did years ago, albeit in daylight without its population of sexual denizens. It's captured at a moment in time before more recent developments; the sprawling parking lot on the south side of the alley is now a large construction site. As the camera travels hand-held down the alley, voice-overs by interview subjects Guy Clark and Nick Jarrett describe what the alley used to be like, the sexual energy, the air of adventure, the community and sociological aspects. The alley was particularly popular at night after the gay leather bars in the nearby vicinity closed. Bars in California close at 2 am, leaving plenty of time for nocturnal activity, and the alley was in close proximity to a number of iconic San Francisco leather bars like the Dead End, Fe-Be's, the No Name, the Bolt, the Brig, and the Ramrod. 21

Ringold Alley as a cultural space doubtless had its own unique and powerful sound print. One can surmise or imagine the hard heels of black engineer boots scraping on the cement pavement, the crinkling black leather motorcycle jackets, the rustling of bushes, and a multitude of grunts and groans, a male chorus with sexual and musical implications. These sounds have vocal and therefore musical properties, as a form of expression, release, and sexual catharsis, much as Susan McClary has argued that music is representative of coitus, being based upon harmonic tension and release: 'Tonality itself – with its process of instilling expectations and subsequently withholding promised fulfilment until climax – is the principal musical means during the period from 1600 to 1900 for arousing and channelling desire'.¹¹ 22

To create such a magical audio realm in post-production would yield results potentially 23

horrific, cheesy, and comedic, a blatant falsehood that would be unnecessary and diminish the sociological importance of the space within a documentary film. The actual sounds of Ringold Alley during their prime period and at the height of activity, as far as is known, were never recorded. The erasure of sound in this way contributes to the whitewashing of queer history and historiography, where the importance of sexual congress is downplayed or obfuscated. Many important queer locales were places where sex could be found or consummated; as LGBT history is documented, there is a risk that it becomes sanitised for mainstream public consumption.

Interestingly, William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980) made a concerted attempt to document authentic representations of New York City's gay leather bar environment, including speed-fueled dancing and dark, furtive cruising; these scenes are valued today in retrospect, even if they raised the ire of an activist gay liberation community which wanted more 'positive' images at the time. *Cruising* benefits from slick, Hollywood studio sound techniques, even if they are artificial creations, but director Friedkin had largely intended to capture the ambiance of these environments faithfully. The one flawed, ridiculous scene that mars the film's realism – an incongruously near-naked African American wearing nothing but a black cowboy hat, gold necklace, and a jock strap 'bitch slaps' Al Pacino during interrogation – takes place in a police station, *not* in any of the 'gay' environs. 24

Sound as cultural space, as noted by Drew Daniels, allows us to uniquely position ourselves on 'maps of identity', an analogy that emphasises how sound itself creates and reinforces cultural affinities and identifications. The sound print of queer spaces is more difficult to accurately preserve than physical space and architectural details, being ephemeral, and subject to the caprices of memory. 25

Submerged Queer Spaces

As San Francisco grew and gentrified, communities changed, shifted, and were displaced; bars, restaurants, parks, alleys, bathhouses, and other gathering spots of the queer community were remodelled, repurposed, rebuilt, or destroyed. These physical locations were not merely architectural or cultural spaces, but auditory environments as well. *Submerged Queer Spaces* uses an 'archaeological' approach contrasting historical, archival photographs with contemporary cinematography; 'lower thirds'¹² described the historical venue, and a match cut with dissolve shows what the space or building has become. By focusing visually upon architecture rather than people or 'characters', the documentary aspect is exaggerated, furthermore placing the film into an experimental space that, with a lengthy running time of 100 minutes, requires a certain nostalgic hypnosis of the audience. 26

Archival photographs used, from the Henri Leleu Papers courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco, were all stills, mostly shot in a large, square 2x2 negative format, and, naturally, lacked any sound component. Furthermore, these photographs were made as architectural documentation, were all exteriors, and didn't show any people. It seemed natural to match this approach, and do our contemporary shoot to match these exteriors, and likewise not to include people, unless they were interview subjects. 27

We began our contemporary location shoots to carefully match the placement of the camera 28

in the archival photograph; this was to facilitate the 'match cut' and dissolve we would affect in editing. The match cut is never perfect, as even though we can match the *distance* and *angle* very closely, the difference in the lenses used creates a distortion in the perspectives and proportions within the frame. Further adjustments, like zooming and centering, were made in post-production.

It was understood during filming that we would not be recording sound, nor using the reference sound recorded by the camera's built in microphone. This disregard for sound on location enabled me to shout direction at my cinematographer, Wilfred Galila, during filming, pointing out architectural elements I wanted to make sure we had coverage of. Having our dialogue captured by the camera during filming also allowed us a record, synchronised to the motion picture, of what we were 'going for' or thinking when we were shooting. In editing, this commentary could provide clarification of our intentions at the time. Otherwise, no one would ever hear this audio. This audio exemplifies sound that is part of the praxis of the film, without having a part in the poiesis of the finished audio track. 29

We made no attempt to recreate lost audio atmospheres from the historical archival images, nor use production audio from our contemporary shoots. I saw sound effects (SFX) as gratuitous or unnecessary, and prioritized voice-over dialogue, its accompanying room tone, and music, which was frequently the *only* element of the audio track. There are three reasons behind this decision: it would have been *contrived* to fake the lost sounds; I wanted to further the film's *experimental aesthetic* and its appeal to that market; lastly, the production audio was filled with director comments and instructions to the DP (cameraperson) Wilfred Galila as we filmed, a common practice in the shooting of 'silent' films and films shot MOS. The film, like many documentaries and independent films, was mixed in stereo, rather than a more complicated theatrical 'surround' format. 30

The music I used was all my own, from albums recorded by my signature Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble (JCDE). All music is instrumental and involves large degrees of structured improvisation. The music was not created specifically for the film, but the long abstract journeying tracks work well with visual media. By eschewing lyrics and favouring textural approaches, the music creates ambiances and temporal structures that serve to fill the aural spaces of the film's audio track. 31

A distinct feature of this music is the asynchronous rhythms in many of the tracks. I use a vintage analog synthesiser, a 1983 Roland Jupiter-6. The Jupiter-6, a two-oscillator, six-voice synthesiser,¹³ was one of the first MIDI-equipped synthesisers,¹⁴ a newer and slightly less expensive relative of Roland's flagship Jupiter-8. The Jupiter-6 includes an onboard arpeggiator with a variety of settings and speed control. The JCDE albums have a live drummer and percussionist, Fred Morgan. The technique we developed was not the expected approach of synchronising the drums and arpeggiator. Instead, I set the arpeggiator going, then we *ignored* it as far as tempo; we set our own tempo independent of the arpeggiator gurgling or pulsing in the background. As a result, the arpeggiator could become background ambience, a sonic blur, or a sensation of disorientation and vertigo, a rhythmic dissonance between steady but independent tempos. Steve Reich pioneered the use of this effect in his 'phase' music, but unlike Reich, we are unconcerned with how precisely 'phasing' takes place, rather than attempting to control or to highlight it. The difference in tempos in our music is indeterminate and itself irregular, like unstable 32

heterodyning frequencies that yield unexpected results.

The asynchronous rhythms of the music, furthermore, are like the asynchronous rhythms of the city itself. The pace of traffic, the flow of pedestrians, the erection of new buildings are all independent rhythms that surround the city denizen. As we see the archival images morph into present day renovations or even new buildings altogether, the music's asynchronous rhythms suggest the unpredictable pace of gentrification: people are surprised, but not surprised, when a favourite bar suddenly closes, becoming office space or a condominium project. Some spaces changed little from the archival photographs; some were completely razed and replaced. The cycles of creation and destruction are likewise asynchronous. 33

The dilemma of urban explosion was also investigated in the American film *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982) directed by Godfrey Reggio, with an original score by iconic New York 'minimalist' composer Philip Glass, and almost no diegetic sound. This film inhabits a generic space liminally situated between experimental, art, and documentary film. Says Glass, 34

The film is a reflection on nature, technology and contemporary life, and it uses only images and music, no spoken dialogue, story line or even actors. The result was remarkable, and it was achieved without the use of the abstractness that such an approach might imply.¹⁵

Koyaanisqatsi therefore provides a precedent for *Submerged Queer Spaces* in eschewing actors and in its reliance upon music to drive the film and to fill the audio track. It may be noted that the film was released when the newly launched MTV Music Television cable network had spurred interest in music videos in the United States. While the film is structurally and generically not strictly a music video, its format resonated with an audience to whom the music video was still an exciting novelty in 1982.

Koyaanisqatsi was also filmed partly in San Francisco. Glass recalls, 'In the fifth reel, we would see 'The Grid', the hyperactive life in our big cities – in this case New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The oversimplified interpretation of the film is that technology run amok is the perpetrator and the natural world is the victim'.¹⁶ In *Submerged Queer Spaces*, the implied perpetrator is the encroaching tech industry and greedy landlords who profiteer from accelerated gentrification. But *Submerged Queer Spaces* is not scored to indicate a 'perpetrator' or villain in any way. The music, with all its asynchronicity, is largely a texture. In both films, the music serves to regulate the pace of the film, and to hypnotise the audience, seducing their attentions without a dramatic narrative or story line. Glass says, 'There are two ways that I could have composed the music: to *comment* on the image, or to make the music *identical* with the image. I chose the latter'.¹⁷ Glass's differentiation between commentary and a musical-visual 'identity' emphasises support for the film; what would such 'commentary' even be? The idea of commentary upon the image exteriorises the music; instead, music is assuredly an integral part of the film. But music can never be a complete tautology of the moving image; its identity must be allegorical. Glass has indicated a symbiotic relationship between his music and Godfrey Reggio's moving image: 35

There were countless revisions of both music and film. On occasion, Godfrey would even shoot new material to go with the music I had written. [...] The close match between film and music in *Koyaanisqatsi*, which so many people have commented on, was achieved through this kind of intense, protracted collaboration.¹⁸

By shooting new footage to accompany Glass's music, Reggio adds fluidity to the production process. Normally, a film is made in four steps: development, pre-production, production, and post-production. These are sometimes blurred in documentary and in animation films for example, but in 1982, defying this linear process was still somewhat unusual. *Koyaanisqatsi's* symbiotic growth of music and image was an intentional part of the working relationship between composer and director. Says Glass,

My overall strategy was to set aside as much as possible the 'normal' role of the composer in the traditional filmmaking process, where the music is considered part of post-production and one of the very last ingredients to be added before the work is completed.¹⁹

In a similar fashion, *Submerged Queer Spaces* enjoyed a symbiotic growth of music and image. The film was initially developed as a multimedia, musical project by my ensemble, and only after being road tested in front of a live audience was it encouraged for further development as a stand-alone feature film.²⁰

Proof of concept and live performance

The Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble had been doing various performances of live scores to silent and experimental films in San Francisco; these included work by Jean Genet (*Un chant d'amour* [1950]) and local filmmakers such as Samara Halperin, a professor at Mills College in Oakland. It seemed intriguing to develop some of my own footage into a coherent presentation that could be used as a framework for structured improvisation to be presented in front of a live audience. This presentation was essentially a rough cut of our earliest *Submerged Queer Spaces* footage, organised by neighbourhood, a structure that would be retained in the final film. 36

The project was a recipient of a small grant, a 'Creating Queer Community Commission' from San Francisco's Queer Cultural Center, funded through the San Francisco Foundation, and supported by the San Francisco Arts Commission and Grants for the Arts. JCDE presented *Submerged Queer Spaces: Music and Architectural Remains* at the African American Arts and Culture Complex in San Francisco as part of the National Queer Arts Festival on 11 June, 2010. The program ran 87 minutes long, shorter than the final 100 minute documentary film version. 37

The show was billed as a 'Live concert and cinematic presentation exploring redeveloped spaces that were once gathering spots of San Francisco's queer community'. The National Queer Arts Festival website elaborated, 38

San Francisco has been a leader in real estate speculation, Internet sex, social networking, and the dot com gold rush. A byproduct of long-term and rapid change has been the loss of lower-income, hippy, and queer counterculture. Bars, baths,

restaurants, cafes, bookstores and other queer spaces have been submerged and lost, leaving behind faded signs or custom fittings – i.e. the stained glass sign of the Rainbow Cattle Company and the etched glass of the Elephant Walk.²¹

Submerged Queer Spaces: Music and Architectural Remains therefore served as a proof of concept for *Submerged Queer Spaces* the film, and an important part of its development. Reaction to the live performance was favourable. The music created during the 2010 performance was recorded.

To expand the project, we shot more footage of additional sites; we tightened individual segments, added more archival photographs, more ‘lower thirds’ or subtitles with additional information, and added eight interview subjects: Guy Clark, Gerald Fabien, Jim Fouratt, Doug Hilsinger, Nick Jarrett, JD Taylor, Jim Van Buskirk, and Jae Whitaker. These subjects had been to ‘submerged’ sites in the film and told anecdotes and recollections about what those spaces had been like. The film was finished in time to have its world premiere 16 June 2012 at Frameline36, the San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival. 39

With this development history, it can be seen that, like *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Submerged Queer Spaces* also explored a symbiotic growth of music and image, and this is largely embodied in the length and pace of both films. This symbiosis of experimental filmmaking and abstract music defied homonormative expectations of conventional LGBT cinema and typical marketing strategies for the LGBT film festival circuit. Certain film colleagues did suggest to me the possibility of giving the film more ‘story’, and the benefits to marketing the film if we included some ‘cute boys’. I was never sure if this was a joke or not, but I decided to keep the film rooted in an experimental documentary generic space, and to keep it a solid 100 minutes. I wanted an unabridged piece of documentary work. I figured if audience members were going to walk out, they would do so within the first ten minutes anyway. The film demands an audience’s investment and cutting it short would have only eliminated sites. At the premiere Q&A, a common question from intrepid souls who had sat through the whole thing was, ‘why didn’t you include...’ to which I could respond either, ‘We didn’t have any archival photographs of that space’, or ‘I think the film is long enough!’ 40

During post-production, I gave my collaborator, cinematographer and picture editor Wilfred Galila, a library of music: three JCDE albums and the unreleased live recordings the ensemble had made during the 2010 live performance. Feeling myself too close to both the film and the music, I encouraged Galila to place the music. I knew that the music generally would resonate with the footage we had shot, and create its own cinematic and musical unity for the film.²² Recalls Galila, 41

When you listen to a piece of music, the sounds you hear that make up the sonic experience conforms to a certain feeling that then, like the smell of coffee that flood you with memories of drowsy mornings in your long gone childhood, triggers a recollection of information associated with the stimulus, in this case, music. It was through the use of feeling that determined where a certain type of music went in the film. I placed music next to images where it felt that it told the story. Images that make up the flood of memories from a not so distant past buried by its future.²³

The majority of the music placed came from the three JCDE studio albums; the live

recordings were of lesser sound quality and the performances were, for the most part, quite ragged.²⁴ Given that the live performance relied on spontaneity and structured improvisation, this was to be expected. Even if these live recordings were largely discarded, they did serve as an important proof of concept and part of the film's unique development process. Like *Koyaanisqatsi*, there was a symbiotic growth and experimentation praxis period that informed the final poiesis of the audio track. Even if the final result in both films is largely reliant upon music, a fairly uncomplicated sound mix, the approach to arriving at the final audio poiesis stretched back quite far to the development of the film. The effect of this music upon the spectator, similar to the musical effect in *Koyaanisqatsi*, is to impart a greater weight to the visual imagery. If we are reducing the visual palette to mainly architectural exteriors, then the music adds an explicit emphasis to these images, in conjunction with the artistic, dynamic, hand-held cinematography. If music is traditionally used to underscore moments of emotion in cinema (which has been argued by notables from Aaron Copland to Claudia Gorbman to a point where this can be taken for granted), then the music further facilitates the audience in attaching emotion and 'story' to the architectural facades. While the film communicates *overall* a shift in queer community and architecture through the process of gentrification and real estate speculation, each *passing moment* is given its own 'push' through the implementation of the music. In the sense that we attached such emotions and 'story' to inanimate architecture, we in a sense 'queered' traditional documentary narrative structures.

Cinematography and play

We incorporated play into our work as well. I had concocted an impression of German 42
documentarian Werner Herzog inspired particularly by his impressive 3D opus, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). ('The cave is so *small* that someone from the crew must *always* be in the shot. That person will be me. Because I am Werner. This is my film.')²⁵ While this was exemplary of the kind of on-camera director appearance that I personally wished to avoid, finding its 'personalizing' approach to be vain and overused, Galila convinced me we should record an on-camera 'Werner' for *Submerged Queer Spaces*. (Why not? The film was shot on digital video, so it wasn't as if we were wasting expensive film stock.)

My on-camera appearance was performed completely off-the-cuff, without rehearsal, shot 43
overlooking Dolores Park. All I had to do was stifle the 'Werner' accent. In my head, I am imagining what Herzog might have said about *Submerged Queer Spaces*. But I had to use my own natural voice.

Galila, in editing the film, used bits of this footage in two spots, at 00:00:38 and 00:58:18. 44
While it was the type of thing I thought I would never acquiesce to, the footage serves a function of helping to structure the film and to provide temporary relief from a barrage of architectural photography and interview subject voice overs. Much of this architectural photography is shot in a bold style, with a spinning camera, causing the onscreen image to rotate dynamically. This radical, handheld camera movement involved cinematographer Galila holding the camera without looking through the lens or viewfinder, so that he could spin the camera in his hands. Some of these shots include looking up at buildings from the ground itself, so that the perspective becomes greatly exaggerated, harsh rhombic angles jutting into blue skies. Other shots include close-ups of building details, but shot at angles so that no architectural lines are parallel with the overall frame. Galila describes some of the

intentions behind the dramatic cinematography:

The use of a handheld camera was a stable choice to achieve the effect of instability in the audience's perception of the film: that of walking around and through these spaces as well as the uncertainty of permanence shown through remnants of these spaces that serve as a reminder of the past fading in a fast changing city. It also allowed me to move through, around, and closer to details within these spaces that are oftentimes overlooked by literally walking around with a camera in hand approximating a human being's point of view, that includes twisting and turning, in order to see and investigate the remains of what were then notorious areas of exploits and self-expression.²⁶

The spinning camera can furthermore be seen to relate to the asynchronous rhythms of the music; the 'unstable' camerawork is reflected in the instability of the heterodyning musical rhythms, affecting, as Philip Glass described, a way in which the music is 'identical' with the image. In this way, a unified poiesis between image and music is affected, suggesting not only the 'twisting and turning' of the inquisitive human eye, but also the twists and turns that queer spaces undergo as communities shift and gentrification takes its toll upon architecture, sound, and social space.

Koyaanisqatsi made extensive use of slow motion and time lapse photography; our spinning camera may be considered a kind of analogous visual effect, more suited to our purposes, and a visual match for the spinning asynchronous music we used. The stylistic unity or correlations between visual image and music gives strength to the audiovisual poiesis of the finished, end product. A filmmaker generally strives to have sound and image work together, unless trying to outline a commentary, contrast, or irony. *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Submerged Queer Spaces* both work towards creating unities within the genres of experimental documentary film. Additionally, we were working within a low budget, queer context, and this further informed our production decisions. The handheld camera technique is less expensive than various rigs, steadicams, dollies, and cranes that could have been rented. There are a wide variety of factors that inform filmmaking decisions, and *Submerged Queer Spaces* was made within budgetary constraints and an experimental aesthetic. 45

Conclusion

This article endeavours to examine audio poiesis in documentary film using my own film *Submerged Queer Spaces* as a central example. Being a 'practitioner' affords me access to a privileged (or unprivileged) station within academic discourse on audio poiesis. Having spent roughly three years working on the film, I have a certain amount of blood, sweat, and tears invested in it. This film may be representative of documentary or experimental filmmaking to some extent; it has some idiosyncrasies and praxis in common with other experimental docs like *Koyaanisqatsi*. It has far less in common with commercial television documentaries, such as those produced by Ken Burns, which have a more popular appeal and a more typical sound design. That said, a slick television documentary was never the kind of film we intended to make. 46

In *Submerged Queer Spaces*, little of the final music was composed specifically for the film, coming instead mostly from three JCDE albums. Those tracks that were used which had been 47

recorded at the 2010 *Submerged Queer Spaces: Music and Architectural Remains* live performance were placed freely in the final film, without concern with how they aligned in the original performance. Both the 2010 performance and the final film are organised by neighbourhood, but music from the live recordings was placed without regard to what neighbourhood or site it originally accompanied. As noted by editor and cinematographer Wilfred Galila, it was a sense of ‘feeling’ that governed where this music was best placed in the final film. This is an organic approach that is reminiscent of the symbiosis between image and music in the development of *Koyaanisqatsi*. Especially in documentary filmmaking, there can be a protracted, back and forth dialectic between narrative, story, music and visuals. During the filming of *Submerged Queer Spaces*, the famous Eagle Tavern closed; we rushed to get footage and an interview with Doug Hilsinger, bartender and music booker of the Eagle. This turned out to be an important structural moment of the film, placed towards the end, just before a reflective coda that reviews archival images of historic spaces visited in the film. This kind of ‘chasing the story’ is common in documentary film; with the closing of the Eagle Tavern, we knew we had an ‘ending’ for the film. In a similar fashion, experiments with music during development and production, including the 2010 live performance itself, were also chasing or testing an approach for the audio track.

I accept that there is something egomaniacal about using my own music, but this has been done before by other directors. John Carpenter scored *Halloween* (1978) and *The Fog* (1980); Charlie Chaplin scored *Modern Times* (1936) and *Limelight* (1952); Clint Eastwood scored *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *J. Edgar* (2011); Satyajit Ray scored numerous films including *Charulata* (1964) and *The Stranger* (1991). Carpenter’s music rode a wave of synthesiser scores that includes Jerry Goldsmith’s score for *Gremlins* (1984) and Vangelis’ score for *Chariots of Fire* (1981); synthesisers and a home recording studio facilitated Carpenter’s venture into film music. Charlie Chaplin’s music influenced Nino Rota, who in turn influenced Danny Elfman, with fun, circuslike textures and gestures. Scoring one’s own film is a legitimate option if one has the skill and resources to do so. A director who scores his or her own film arguably may have a more unified poiesis of image and audio, as the score is not filtered through another person. 48

There is also something very expedient about using my own music; I easily give myself permission, and no music supervisor is required to research or negotiate the clearances. For me, *Submerged Queer Spaces* is largely a product of self-expression as a multimedia artist; I never harboured an expectation that it would be a box office hit or recoup its costs. I largely conceived the audio and video portions of the film together, as one project, one production, a unified poiesis of sound and image. The historical research component of the film, a database of site information, addresses, and histories, can fit on paper, dryly separate from the film, but it is the film that brings the information to life, through both music and image. There are no recreations in the film, only archival images and spoken voices, recounting their stories and recollections, and the spinning, contemporary images showing us what has become of the submerged spaces. 49

My efforts to ‘queer’ the audio track, by avoiding a PBS, POV, BBC, or HBO type of conventional audio bed of sounds used to falsely replicate or suggest sonic environments, are also influenced by budgetary concerns and self-aggrandisement. By having music of my own composition and audio interviews of eight documentary subjects as voice-overs, I am rejecting familiar documentary sound design conventions but also saving money and 50

promoting my own creative work. The project, like *Koyaanisqatsi*, was always designed with a multimedia marriage of avant-garde music and cinema in mind; complaints about the film were not about the audio track, rather that the film was too long, omitted certain favourite sites, was too centric to San Francisco for foreign audiences, or didn't have 'cute boys'.²⁷ The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, 'The title makes the film sound academic, but Dubowsky has made an accessible film that should be a treat for longtime San Francisco natives'.²⁸ The most favourably received aspect of the film was the subject interviews, especially Gerald Fabien, a nonagenarian who had frequented gay bars in San Francisco before the United States entered the Second World War; his voice, stories, and frankness were especially riveting.²⁹

Submerged Queer Spaces is an idiosyncratic film, not necessarily representative of other documentaries or other experimental films. It tackles important issues of historical and architectural preservation in the queer community. It is a fairly personal film, and it grew out of a unique development stage that included a live performance. The film rejects a falsified audio track and superficial attempts to recreate lost sounds, dissipated cultural sound prints from spaces that have become submerged, repurposed, or gentrified. It is a mix of recollections and music that spins asynchronously like Wilfred Galila's spinning handheld camerawork. Sound is collective social space, and *Submerged Queer Spaces* creates its own unique sonic environment, rather than adopting or imitating an artificial tapestry of what was. In this way, spectators may imagine their *own* impressions or recollections of the sounds of these submerged spaces, whilst hearing the abstract textures of the film's audio track. In this way, the audience is given freedom to remember or imagine or experience these lost sonic spaces, rather than have a false recreation spoon-fed to them. The film's audio track is an abstract textural space supporting interview subject recollection, an invitation to the audience to float freely or to ponder their own memories, or imagine the possibilities of what these spaces sounded like. 51

Submerged Queers Spaces may be rented or acquired through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. <https://www.cfmdc.org/film/3991>

The film may be watched on demand at <https://vucavu.com/en/canadian-filmmakers-distribution-centre/2012/submerged-queer-spaces>

Notes

¹ Jack Curtis Dubowsky, *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 177.

² Vincent M. Colapietro, *Glossary of Semiotics* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 160.

³ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 109.

⁴ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Revised Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 255.

⁵ Michel Chion, *Le Son: traité d'acoulogie*, 2e édition (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 65.

⁶ Consider, for example, new Apple computers and devices that refuse to play early video formats such as .avi and .wmv.

⁷ Drew Daniel, 'All Sound Is Queer', *The Wire*, 333 (November 2011), 43-46: 44.

⁸ David McRaney, *You Are Not So Smart* (New York: Gotham Books, 2011).

⁹ Jeff Smith, 'Response to Popular Music and Memory Panel' (Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, 2012).

¹⁰ These concepts are further developed in the ‘affiliating identifications’ work of Anahid Kassabian, and in my own work on ‘cachet’; see Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3, as well as Jack Curtis Dubowsky, *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 50-79.

¹¹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 12.

¹² ‘Lower thirds’ are onscreen text blocks that appear only in the lower third of the frame. These are standard practice in documentary filmmaking, often identifying interview subjects, for example.

¹³ Sometimes referred to as the JP-6, the synth also has an LFO (low frequency oscillator).

¹⁴ The ‘Musical Instrument Digital Interface’ protocol allows information to be exchanged between different pieces of equipment, allowing synths to be linked, or sequencers to control synthesisers. With the Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble, we do not use any of the MIDI functions.

¹⁵ Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 203.

¹⁶ Philip Glass, *Words Without Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 327.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 329. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass*, 203.

¹⁹ Philip Glass, *Words Without Music*, 328.

²⁰ *Submerged Queer Spaces: Music and Architectural Remains* was performed by the Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble on 11 June, 2010, at the African American Art & Culture Complex in San Francisco, California, as part of the National Queer Arts Festival. See <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/QFest10/Submerg.html> (25.8.2018).

²¹ NQAF 2010, ‘Submerged Queer Spaces: Music and Architectural Remains’, *Queerculturalcenter.org*, 11 June 2010, <http://queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/QFest10/Submerg.html> (28.9.2018).

²² This concept of music providing unity for a film has been discussed by Aaron Copland, Claudia Gorbman, and many other scholars and practitioners.

²³ Wilfred Galila, email correspondence with author, 25 January 2016.

²⁴ These albums are *Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble I* (2008), *Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble II* (2010), and *Jack Curtis Dubowsky Ensemble III* (2011). The live recordings were made using camera recorders and portable two-track recorders, yielding audio that could not be remixed or rebalanced.

²⁵ Herzog’s philosophical monologue about the ‘mutant albino crocodiles’ at the close of his film is also particularly memorable (and ripe for parody).

²⁶ Wilfred Galila, email correspondence with author, 21 January 2016.

²⁷ A more ‘television’ style approach would have included period re-enactments of the spaces, carefully cast with attractive young actors, as one might imagine. The ‘cute boys’ criticism sounds horribly glib, sexist, homonormative, and ageist, but it reveals quite a bit about audience expectations, especially on the LGBT film festival circuit in the United States. The film did take care to represent women, transfolk, and people of colour, and their spaces. Jae Whitaker is well known as Janis Joplin’s girlfriend, and discusses how landlords would not rent to people of colour. Guy Clark discusses racism in the Castro district of San Francisco; he also appears in the documentary *That Man: Peter Berlin*, dir. Jim Tushinski, US, 2005.

²⁸ Ryan Lattanzio, ‘Frameline 36 review: “Submerged Queer Spaces”’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday 10 June 2012, P–23.

²⁹ At the time, Fabien would have been a teen, possibly underage. Fabien passed away before he could see the completed film.

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