

<https://doi.org/10.58193/ilu.1814>

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Storytelling Beyond Dialogue and Preschool Animation

Rethinking Audiovisual Narrative in the TV Series **The Sound Collector**

Abstract

Sound plays an important role in filmmaking, enhancing the narrative power of the image and engaging audiences in various ways. Significantly, when we say we watch a film, we are truly “audio-viewing” it — a key point concerning the nature of audiovisual storytelling. In animation, sound representation used to receive limited attention. This perspective, however, is shifting, as demonstrated by the growing awareness in film scholarship and how-to manuals regarding sound design. Within this evolving framework, *The Sound Collector* (2023) stands out as a preschool television series that places sound at the center of its storytelling, integrating auditory exploration and themes of disability with a calm, reflective tone. This article examines the creative process behind the making of the show, to which I contributed as a scriptwriter, drawing on both my personal experience and conversations with its creators and producers. It explores how the series relates to the existing tradition of preschool animation and its strategies — in characterization, worldbuilding, narrative structure, and scripting conventions — to foster engagement through sound, even in the absence of dialogue. In particular, the series blends stop-motion animation with live-action footage, giving space to the portrayal of small moments of everyday life, in contrast to the faster pace and gag-driven style common in much children’s animation. By analyzing the interplay of sound, visuals, and narration, this paper argues that *The Sound Collector* questions some conventional assumptions about children’s television and illustrates an approach to inclusive storytelling that can engage a wide audience.

Keywords

children’s animation, audiovisual storytelling, sound design, scriptwriting, disability

The relationship of sound to the moving image is evident in the history of cinema since the very beginning, when silent films were accompanied by live music. The introduction of film scores marked a technological revolution, quickly evolving beyond the promise of mirroring reality.¹⁾ A powerful soundtrack aestheticizes the image, reinforcing its expressive potential. Sound design also includes diegetic and non-diegetic effects, both of which shape audience perception. For example, off-screen sounds in horror films evoke fear, while music in video games stimulates interactivity.²⁾ Dialogue, too, carries substantial narrative weight, often equaling the importance of visuals.

In the context of filmmaking, animation has always maintained a close connection with music. Avant-garde artist Walter Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921) and Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies* (1929–1939) exemplify early experiments in synchronizing movement with sound, which was what most fascinated the viewers of the time.³⁾ As a storytelling tool, sound helps shape meaning, rhythm, and emotion.⁴⁾ For a long time, cartoon music received scarce academic attention, and its creators remained largely unknown to the general public.⁵⁾ Today, this has changed, thanks to more detailed credits and royalties, making music one of animation's most lucrative industries, while the relationship between animation and music has also been addressed by various film scholars.⁶⁾

The importance of sound emerges in preschool animation, which is typically aimed at children aged 2–5 and seeks to convey educational values.⁷⁾ TV shows such as *Blue's Clues* (1996–2007) or *Dora the Explorer* (2000–ongoing) use tunes and sounds to guide the audience's attention.⁸⁾ Nursery rhymes, a staple of children's preschool education, are matched with simple animation on platforms like CoComelon, the top-rated YouTube channel in 2020 with over 1 billion weekly views.⁹⁾ Preschool theme songs can even become popular hits: *Bob the Builder's* "Can We Fix It?" topped the UK Christmas charts in 2000, selling over a million copies.¹⁰⁾

This work focuses on *The Sound Collector* (2023), a preschool animated series I contributed to as a scriptwriter, which places sound at the center of its storytelling through a

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- 1) Kathryn Kalinak, ed., *Sound: Dialogue, Music, and Effects* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 6.
 - 2) Karen Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 2.
 - 3) Leonard Maltin, "Foreword," in *The Cartoon Music Book*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002), x.
 - 4) Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 97.
 - 5) Goldmark – Taylor, eds., *The Cartoon Music Book*, xiv.
 - 6) Marco Pellitteri, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Music and Sound in Japanese Animation* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), lxxvii.
 - 7) Jean Ann Wright, *Animation: Writing and Development: From Script Development to Pitch* (Burlington and Oxford: Focal Press, 2005), 289.
 - 8) Jennifer Fleegeer, "The Sound of Slime-ness: Telling Children's Stories on the Nickelodeon Network," in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, eds. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 605.
 - 9) Anna Potter and Jeanette Steemers, "Children and the media industries: An overlooked but very special 'television' audience," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 252.
 - 10) Ami Sedghi, "UK's Million-Selling Singles: The Full List," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2012, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/nov/04/uk-million-selling-singles-full-list>.

young protagonist with hearing loss. The article situates it within the framework of preschool animation, highlighting both its continuities and changes with tradition whilst addressing the theme of disability. In particular, the absence of dialogue posed specific challenges for the creative team, which will be discussed here drawing on my perspective as a writer for the series. By combining textual analysis with personal experience, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how stories, visuals, and sound design interface within the animated narrative.

Overview of the Series

The Sound Collector (from now: *TSC*), animated at the studios of MacKinnon & Saunders in Greater Manchester, debuted in the United Kingdom in 2023. Consisting of 60 five-minute episodes, the show was co-produced with Turin-based company Enanimation and was released in Italy in the same period. Animation typically relies on co-production to mitigate high production costs and secure diverse funding sources, and this was particularly relevant for *TSC*, which combines stop-motion, using puppets made out of clay, with live-action. While MacKinnon & Saunders handled the stop-motion aspects of the show, the live-action sequences were filmed in North Devon and Cornwall by a specialized crew experienced in both stop-frame and wildlife documentaries. These were then integrated through compositing and visual effects by Enanimation, who was also responsible for the storyboards.

Commissioned by the British commercial network ITV and the Italian State broadcaster RAI, the series also received funding from the now-defunct Young Audience Content Fund of the British Film Institute. The creators of the show were Tom and Erica Angell, who also served as producers through their studio, Eagle Vs Bat. Head writer Dave Ingham, who wrote for numerous preschool series such as *Charlie & Lola* (2005–2006) and *Shaun the Sheep* (2007–2020), joined early in the development process in spring 2021. Ingham played an important role in shaping the series, contributing significantly to its bible — the reference document outlining the narrative premise, characters, settings, story arcs, and episode structure — and by liaising with the creative team. This comprised both British and Italian directors and screenwriters, including myself.

At the heart of *TSC* is the story of the Sound Collector, a curious little being who is fascinated by sounds, despite the fact that he is very hard of hearing. The idea originated from a simple walk taken by Tom and Erica Angell with their children and dog.¹¹⁾ They soon realized that, while the dog was fully engaged with its surroundings, the kids seemed a bit disconnected. This sparked a creative inquiry: how could young viewers be encouraged to explore their environment more actively, starting with the world of sound? Drawing on Erica's expertise in animation and Tom's background as a composer, the series set out to answer this question.

11) Tom Angell and Eric Angell, zoom call with author, September 5, 2024.



Fig. 1: The Sound Collector and his friend Mole (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

Vintage Aesthetics and Pastoral Setting

TSC has many points in common with the tradition of preschool television and children's literature, especially in the way its characters are portrayed. The protagonist is an eight-inch-tall boy who, as stated in the series bible, belongs to the realm of "pixies and fairies" and "has an affinity with everything in the natural world."¹²⁾ This brings him closer to "green souls" such as Heidi or Calpurnia Tate, archetypal characters who share an intuitive connection with nature,¹³⁾ but also to the little people abounding in children's books since the Victorian age. The fact that he is part of a broader world of fellow Collectors — two characters named Seed Collector and Hebe the Bumblebee make occasional appearances throughout the series — reinforces the idea of a fairytale-like story.

The Sound Collector lives in a cottage by the river with Mole — always hungry, clumsy, and adorable. The presence of an animal sidekick in animation is a well-established trope, often used to lighten the tone of a narrative. Indeed, Mole provides companionship and comic relief with her funny behavior (a recurring gag sees her facing her nemesis, an unseen fly), whilst mirroring the often-messy, affectionate nature of real-life pets.¹⁴⁾ Just as Paddington the Bear, Mole allows the protagonist to take on a parental role, showing care

12) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible* (2022), 7.

13) Eleonora Fornasari and Ilenia Provenzi, *Le amiche formidabili* (Milan: DeAgostini, 2020), 207.

14) She was actually modeled on the creators' dog; Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with author.

and concern.¹⁵⁾ As nonhuman beings, both Mole and the Sound Collector are stripped of social obligations, making it easier for them to embark on adventure: they do not attend school, have no parents, and yet function as a family.

TSC takes place in rural Britain, which plays a prominent role in the series, almost working as a character in its own right. Common locations include forests, streams and lakes, meadows, villages, beaches, and so on, primarily filmed in the South-West of England, where Tom and Erica Angells are based. The goal was to represent “the UK countryside in all its glory across all four seasons.”¹⁶⁾ This is evident in the title sequences, where a series of drone shots shows an old watermill and the Sound Collector’s miniature cottage surrounded by nature — lush and green in spring and summer, with red and brown foliage in autumn, or bare trees in winter.



Fig. 2: Seasonal shots from the title sequences (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

The pastoral setting is a common feature in British children’s fiction. Already in the Edwardian era, a period of intense urbanization, natural settings and fantasy became strongly linked, along with the idyllic representation of childhood as a golden age of bliss and fun.¹⁷⁾ In television, puppet animated programs are also traditionally set in idealized communities of “middle England” since the birth of the medium and up to the 1990s and beyond.¹⁸⁾ For instance, Aardman Animation’s popular franchise *Wallace and Gromit* rec-

15) I elaborate here on observations made by Maria Nikolajeva on supporting characters in children’s literature; Maria Nikolajeva, *The Rhetoric of Character in Children’s Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 126–127.

16) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 9.

17) Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, eds., *Childhood in Edwardian Fiction: Worlds Enough and Time* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

18) David Buckingham, “Television,” in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004), 709.

creates a stylized world of British coziness, which, as Sargeant notes, seems nostalgic of “a less complicated, and less diverse, Britain than the one that exists today.”¹⁹⁾

TSC has a British feel, and this is part of the charm of this series. The importance of the location was evident from the creators’ effort to ensure accuracy. According to the head writer, “all action was described full for the storyboard artists,” who, being Italian, might not have been familiar with British landscapes,²⁰⁾ while Tom and Erica Angell filmed real-life locations to provide the necessary visual references. At the same time, the focus is less on British identity and more on experiencing the little moments of everyday life, such as inventing a new game when it is rainy outside (Episode 46, “Mole’s Magic Carpet”), looking at the sycamore leaves spinning through the air (Episode 41, “Wind Farm”), or waking up early to listen to morning sounds (Episode 5, “Snorgesbord”).

There is another point of divergence, concerning the role of technology. In the usual pastoral setting, technology is often featured as an antagonist or as a source of comedy (Sargeant gives the example of *Wallace and Gromit*’s eccentric gadgets, such as a home-made rocket to fly to the moon). Here, instead, technology is benign, harmless, and useful. It enables the protagonist to overcome his disability (more on this later) and record sounds. Moreover, all devices serve just one purpose and are reliable in their functionality. These devices being analog (magnetic tape recorders, vinyl records), they contribute to the retro aesthetic which correlates with a feeling of safety and nostalgia. Although it is made clear that the Sound Collector belongs to his little house by the river, connecting with the beauty of nature, there are also urban episodes, with traffic sounds, street musicians, and workers fixing the road (Episode 51, “Sound of the Town”).

The third major character in *TSC* is the narrator. This choice draws on an established tradition in British children’s TV, using different animation techniques. Examples are: *Andy Pandy* (1950, marionettes, remade in 2002 with stop-motion puppets), *Bill and Ben — The Flowerpot Men* (1952–1953, marionettes, remade in 2002), *Pogles’ Wood* (1965–1968, stop motion), *Bagpuss* (1974, stop motion), *The Clangers* (1969–1974, stop motion, remade in 2015–2020), *Paddington* (1976–1980, stop motion), *Tales Of The Riverbank* (1960–1964, live action animals), *Mary, Mungo and Midge* (1969, cut outs that moved in real time), and *The Herbs* (1969, stop motion).

TSC is set aside from this tradition by the voice actor, who is female, which is rare, and the narrative style. In fact, the narrator is not omniscient but quite passive in terms of story progression. Rather than assisting the protagonist, it gives voice to the audience. It is worth noticing that the voice actor, Keira Knightley, had kids of the target audience’s age at the time of recording. She allowed her acting to include her own experience, keeping a genuine tone.

19) Alexander Sargeant, “Wallace and Gromit and the British Fantasy Tradition,” in *Aardman Animations: Beyond Stop Motion*, ed. Annabelle Honess Roe (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

20) Dave Ingham, email with the author, September 4, 2024.

Disability Representation: Sound and Deafness

In *TSC*, technology has a further positive connotation as it helps the protagonist overcome his hearing impairment. The Sound Collector hears sounds by pointing his microphone, which are then amplified in his headphones: this process necessarily alters the sound design of the show and how auditory experiences are presented to the audience, too. They hear sounds the way the protagonist does, and this contributes to experiencing his disability.

There are precedents of shows where certain narrative or stylistic choices help the viewers relate to a protagonist who has a disability. As posited in cultivation theory, media have a strong influence on children's lives and their perception of the world.²¹⁾ Therefore, values such as inclusivity are advocated to encourage positive behavior. Media portrayal of disabled characters can help reduce stigma and challenge negative social attitudes, which are the roots of ableism.²²⁾ This is particularly relevant in children's media, where despite good intentions, the representation of disability could fall into a stereotypical pity-based characterization, reinforcing the idea of disabled individuals as clinical problems rather than highlighting their different abilities.²³⁾

In the British landscape, there are recent shows treating disability. Examples include: *Pablo* (2017–2020, autism), *Melody* (2013–2015, visual impairment), *Mixmups* (2023, visual impairment and wheelchair), and *Magic Hands* (2013, hearing impairments). These series engage audiences employing different strategies: for instance, sounds and animation styles appropriate for visually impaired children or the use of sign language. On the one hand, their characters work as identification for people with disability. On the other hand, people without any impairment can feel a different viewpoint and empathize with the experience of disability, which is an important aspect of "crip animation."²⁴⁾ Moreover, some of these series, such as *Mixmups* and *Pablo*, were created by a disability-led team, which adds to their authenticity.

In the case of *TSC*, disability is represented tactfully, simply showing how, at the beginning of each episode, the Sound Collector puts on his hearing aids. This also allows the viewer to share his experience: when the aids are switched on, the auditory landscape comes to life. What makes the representation more relevant is that deaf portrayals are still not very common in the media, although the World Health Organization estimates that around 466 million people worldwide have hearing loss.²⁵⁾ Eagle Vs Bat were aware that

21) Abigail Walsh and Leaper Campbel, "A Content Analysis of Gender Representations in Preschool Children's Television," *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 3 (2020), 331–355.

22) Lingling Zhang and Beth Haller, "Parasocial Contact Effects and a Disabled Actor in *Speechless*," in *Disability Representation in Film, TV, and Print Media*, ed. Michael S. Jeffress (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 15.

23) Jesse Holcomb and Kate Latham-Mintus, "Disney and Disability: Media Representations of Disability in Disney and Pixar Animated Films," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2022), 176; Madeleine DeWelles, "The Communication of Disability through Children's Media: Potential, Problems, and Potential Problems," in *Disability Representation in Film, TV, and Print Media*, ed. Jeffress, 162–179.

24) Slava Greenberg, *Animated Film and Disability: Crippling Spectatorship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023).

25) "Una serie inclusiva e tecnicamente rivoluzionaria: è 'Il Cercasuoni,'" *RAI*, November 23, 2023, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/assets/template/us-articolo.html?ssiPath=/artico->

hearing difficulties are often associated with elderly people, and that stop-motion puppets can “feel slow and ploddy” in their movements, reinforcing this perception. For this reason, they were “very fussy” about the Sound Collector’s rigging.²⁶⁾ To maintain a sense of youthful energy, they insisted that the character was dressed as a real kid, with baggy jeans and sneakers, and that his movements remained quick and natural.

Mole also has a disability, that is, visual impairment, compensated by its exceptional sense of smell; the underlying idea is that a disability can be paired with a different, heightened ability. However, the show does not shy away from just portraying the drawbacks of a disability: so, the Sound Collector is at times frustrated with his handicap, making him a more relatable character. For example, in Episode 31 (“Harp Strings”), he angrily takes out his aids when multiple people enter the room and start making noises, making it harder for him to hear the sound of a harp.

In fact, the show’s aim was to narrate the story of a character who loves sounds (despite his disability), and who manages to appreciate the world via its sounds. The Sound Collector uses his hearing aids as tools for exploration rather than letting them define him, and there is no confusion between personality and disability: he just happens to be deaf, but his hearing impairment is not his main feature. This seems especially valuable at a time when disability can be included in media as a token gesture, and not always considered in depth.²⁷⁾

The creators of *TSC* chose not to use sign language in their show, as it changes from country to country.²⁸⁾ Nonetheless, the series benefited from consultations with the British Society of Audiologists (BSA) and from exceptional ambassadors like Welsh deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. For example, Dr. Ted Killan from BSA was involved by “viewing edits of show episodes and providing feedback on the sound balance and language used in the scripts.”²⁹⁾ Glennie also contributed to the creation of subtitles for non-hearing audiences, offering crucial insights. She helped the creative team understand that describing sounds to someone who has never heard them requires alternative sensory references. Rather than saying “It sounds like bells,” she would use tactile descriptions like “scratchy” or “soft like cotton wool.”³⁰⁾

Innovations in Narrative Structure

The success of *TSC* with a broad audience can also be attributed to its simple yet innovative narrative structure. Frequently, preschool animation features short and simple stories;

li/2023/11/Una-serie-inclusiva-e-tecnicamente-rivoluzionaria-e-Il-Cercasuoni-70579471-2760-4be5-8969-70974a0f63b9-ssi.html.

26) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

27) Aileen Blackborough, “Bringing Disability into the Media Spotlight,” *aideenblackborough*, November 17, 2014, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://aideenblackborough.com/2015/11/17/bringing-disability-into-the-media-spotlight/>.

28) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

29) “TV Collaboration for audiology expert,” *University of Leeds*, March 14, 2023, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://medicinehealth.leeds.ac.uk/faculty-/news/article/605/tv-collaboration-for-audiology-expert>.

30) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

this is instrumental to engage a young audience and enable them to decode the plot, understand emotions, and internalize cultural values.³¹⁾ Key elements of this simplicity are a short format (3–11 min), repetitions, and a problem/solution plot scheme. Just as in fairytales, the protagonist achieves their goal by overcoming a series of small obstacles (usually three): this narrative device confers rhythm to storytelling and makes the story more engaging.³²⁾ Repetitions help children better process the story (for instance, establishing cause/effect relations), and are cost-effective from a production perspective. Evidence is that children will watch the same episode again, hence their enjoyment is not affected by a repeated scene.³³⁾

TSC shares some of the features described above, like brevity and simplicity. Scripts averaged eight pages — each page traditionally equating to 1.5 minutes of film in animation — with a limit of fifty dialogue lines. The number of scenes ranged from nine to twelve, with limited cuts and transitions to assist children's comprehension. Another point in common is the use of recurring scenes (morning routines, shared meals, evening gatherings). An example is the teaser of each episode, which shows the Sound Collector and Mole waking up, accompanied by extra-diegetic music and the Narrator repeating the same introductory lines ("Around and along... in the middle of somewhere... lives a little Sound Collector. Ah yes, and his best friend, Mole"). These repetitions, together with the seasonal transition of the episodes, create a cyclical structure.

What is missing is a rigid problem/solution scheme as the plot driver. Already, the Australian show *Bluey* (2018) — the most-streamed TV series across America in 2024³⁴⁾ — has shown that the series can be more flexible in story construction, without negatively impacting engagement. In *TSC*, a typical episode will show the protagonist waking up and setting out to explore new sounds; Mole has its own subplot, which can be independent from the Sound Collector. However, within this model, there is a high degree of variation. Mole might join the Sound Collector or meet him at the end of the episode; some episodes are set indoors, while others in various locations, either during the day or at night; the Sound Collector might hitch a ride on a horse or car; he might hear a peculiar sound and follow it.

A further marker of distinction is the lack of fantastic or surreal settings. Traditionally, British children's TV features magical worlds, nonsense, and absurd humor, as in the popular live-action show *Teletubbies* (1997–2001).³⁵⁾ This is often connected with the problem/solution scheme, when present, with the protagonist entering a fantasy dimension to remedy the initial issue (a process screenwriters may describe, following Christo-

31) Valerio Fuenzalida, "Quality Criteria in Narrative and Script Writing for Children's Television (Ages 0–6)," *Communication Research Trends* 36, no. 2 (2017), 10.

32) Maria Chiara Oltolini, "Scrivere bambini, scrivere per bambini," in *Storia delle Serie Tv*, Vol. 1, eds. Armando Fumagalli, Cassandra Albani, and Paolo Braga (Roma: Dino Audino Editore, 2021), 207.

33) Tali Te'Eni-Harari, Keren Eyal, and Matan Aharoni, "It's Complicated: Plot and Formal Feature Complexity in Early Childhood Television Content," *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 4 (2020), 579–583.

34) Jimmy Briggs, "Bluey Celebrates 'Incredible' Achievement as the Aussie Kid's Series Continues to Take the US by Storm," *Daily Mail Australia*, September 10, 2024, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/TVshowbiz/article-13833345/Bluey-celebrates-incredible-achievement.html>.

35) Buckingham, "Television," 709.

pher Vogler's "*Hero's Journey*," the passage from the Ordinary to the Special World).³⁶⁾ Regardless of fantastic elements, there is an expectation of plausible human features. For example, in *Peppa Pig* (2004–2020), a family of pigs must be recognizable with the same dynamics and behavior as a human family, and this was pivotal to the worldwide popularity of the show.³⁷⁾

In *TSC*, there are, of course, fantastic elements, like the fairy-like protagonist or the (slightly) anthropomorphized animal sidekick, and magic is not fully obliterated. On one occasion, the Sound Collector hears fairies laughing in the forest (Episode 11, "Magical Sounds"). Nonetheless, the exploration takes place within the "ordinary" world. Natural landscape and built environment are portrayed in a true-to-life way (in fact, those are live elements within stop motion animation). Unlike the tiny people of the British classic *The Borrowers* (Norton, 1952), who repurpose human objects to fit their size, the Sound Collector's house is scaled to his own dimensions, creating a lifelike feel. Even his technology is plausible.

The 3D look of stop-motion puppets, which seems to particularly appeal to preschoolers,³⁸⁾ was pivotal to the creation of a convincing world, even for adult viewers. MacKinnon & Saunders, who worked as model builders for famous children's series such as *Bob the Builder* (1999–2011) or *Postman Pat* (1981–2017), are known for their meticulous attention to detail. The Sound Collector's miniature instruments include a tiny Melotron, and there are hidden references to iconic bands like The Beatles. Paul McCartney's



Fig. 3: The Sound Collector's home recording studio. Note the amp branded "EVB" (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

36) Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 83.

37) Francesco Mangiapane, "Peppa Pig and Friends: Semiotic Remarks Over Meaning-Making of Some Cartoons Targeted to the Early-Childhood in the Italian Television," *International Journal for the Semiotics of the Law* 31, no. 3 (2018), 454.

38) Jeannette Steemers, *Creating Preschool Television: A Story of Commerce, Creativity and Curriculum* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 137.

bass guitar is visible among the props, and there is a picture of the Sound Collector and Mole walking on Abbey Road, echoing the famous album cover from 1969.

This fits within the mission to involve the public in believing that a sense of wonder can be part of everyone's experience, and not just fiction. In fact, in preschool animation, a relevant theme is that of curiosity and exploration. Protagonists seek adventures, and viewers are empowered to do as well: acknowledging their own agency is important for their psychological development.³⁹⁾

Often, the problem/solution scheme offers a convenient platform for the adventure, and a fantastic setting contributes to it with a variety of possibilities. *TSC* uses a faithful portrayal of its environment to showcase how adventure can be sought for the sake of exploration, and found even in the most familiar spaces. For example, the Sound Collector looks in awe at the flocks of starlings creating displays in the sky (Episode 35, "Murmurations"), and marvels at the tinkling sounds of a mechanic working in a garage (Episode 54, "The Sound of Silence"). These simple but engaging narrations encourage viewers to value nature and rediscover their surroundings.

Scriptwriting Patterns

As is typical in animation, the scriptwriting process for *TSC* consisted of three phases: synopsis, outline, and script. When the screenwriters were appointed, synopses (a paragraph-long version of the story narrated in one episode) had already been decided. Since the live-action elements of each episode needed to be shot throughout the year, the series had to be planned out from the start, leaving no room for a writers' room experience.⁴⁰⁾ So, for us writers, the most demanding phase was the outline: a two-page document with a numbered list of scenes, suggested lines for the Narrator, and notes on sound. From there, the work moved on to the script.

In my experience, there were aspects of this process that departed from standard practice. As a rule of thumb, screenwriters have little communication with other departments and often remain unaware of the animation aspects until the episodes are aired. In this case, however, we had extensive access to set photos, puppet designs, and behind-the-scenes footage, which allowed us to immerse ourselves in the world of the series. In particular, the photos of *maquettes* (scale models of unfinished sets, with character size proportions and prop placements) were essential for accurately visualizing scenes. This was crucial because 3D characters are less malleable and have more limited movement compared to 2D animation, while physical sets "may have certain limits that permit only a certain number of characters and scenery."⁴¹⁾ Access to these images made it possible to imagine narrative beats in which the characters interacted with their surroundings in a believable way.

39) Fuenzalida, "Quality Criteria in Narrative and Script Writing for Children's Television (Ages 0–6)," 11.

40) Ingham, email with the author, June 23, 2022.

41) Chris Pallant and Paul Wells, "Everybody Chips in Ten Cents, and Somehow It Seems to Add up to a Dollar": Exploring the Visual Toolbox of Animation Story Design," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, eds. Claus Tieber, Paolo Russo, and Rosamund Davies (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 278.

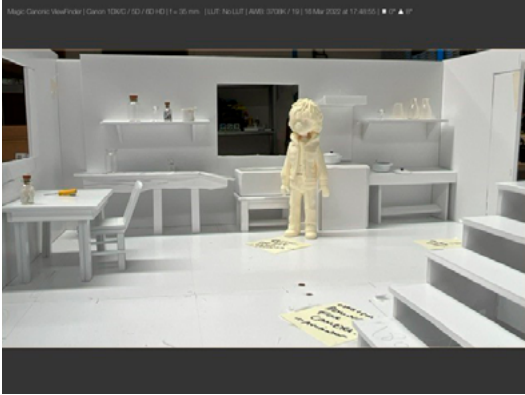


Fig. 4: Maquette of the Sound Collector's house (© Eagle Vs Bat / Enanimation)

Secondly, revisions were minimal and generally concerned practical issues rather than narrative overhauls. In the episodes I wrote — chosen not as exemplary cases but because I have access to all stages of their development — typical changes involved:

- altering a location; for example, in Episode 25 (“The Piano”), where the Sound Collector plays the piano by walking across the keys, the setting was changed three times: from a private house to a little church, and finally a rehearsal studio, suiting the jazz music created by the protagonist;
- adapting to the live-action footage; for example, a draft originally set in summer, such as Episode 48 (“Buzzy Business”), ended up being set in autumn due to the variable weather conditions of filming in Britain; or the wallabies which the Sound Collector sees at a wildlife park in Episode 42 (“Meerkat Mayhem”) were changed to lemurs due to live-action constraints;
- reusing scenes for cost-efficiency; for instance, in the aforementioned Episode 48, the planned original ending was replaced with a recurring scene in which the Sound Collector gives Mole a bath, which has the additional advantage of providing a cuddly close to the episode;
- trimming or merging of adjacent scenes (via camera movements); this was often the case with episodes set in external locations, such as Episode 23 (“Horse Power”): here the Sound Collector meets and rides a horse, his interaction possibilities being limited to animation constraints. So, a camera note in the broadcast script explains how the recording of the horse’s galloping actually takes place (“We cut from the Sound Collector to a low shot of the hooves on different surfaces”);
- adjustments to the Narrator’s lines to ensure they sounded more natural, concise, and empathetic; according to Ingham, this was crucial to keep her voice “in the moment” and avoid over-writing.⁴²⁾ Some revisions were also made during recording and with Knightley’s help, as certain lines felt out of character when spoken aloud.⁴³⁾

42) Ingham, email with the author, 2024.

43) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with author.

A third innovative aspect is that, although education content is central in preschool series, the head writer and the production studios integrated it without an overtly didactic approach. For instance, in Episode 22 (“Rewilding”), the Sound Collector and Mole visit a forest where trees had been cut. The synopsis included a note from Ingham emphasizing that, while the episode had an “environmental connection,” it should avoid becoming a broader statement, as the intention was to present a scenario that parents could later contextualize for children.⁴⁴⁾

The final point to note is that, despite the changes, the writers’ original ideas were preserved, including quiet moments of everyday life. This is unusual in animation, where there is typically little room for beats that do not move the action forward — a point that will be further developed in the next paragraph. Examples are the Sound Collector diving into a pile of leaves (Episode 45, “Buzzy Business”), blowing a grass whistle (Episode 25), or pluming in the frosty air (Episode 50, “Nice on the Ice”). Visual cues to describe the characters’ behaviors were usually kept as well. For instance, when the Sound Collector and Mole do some ice-skating on a frozen puddle (Episode 50), the allusion to “Ponchielli’s Dance of the Hours in *Fantasia*” was accepted alongside Ingham’s initial comparison with the British ice-skaters Torvill and Dean.⁴⁵⁾

The Role of Sound Between Writing and Animation

The relationship between sound and narration is a defining feature of *TSC*. In the show, characters do not speak; instead, the invisible Narrator does, while interactions between the characters are conveyed through physical reactions and non-verbal sounds. This placed specific demands on us writers. First, the absence of dialogue required telling stories in a very clear and visual way, emphasizing sound over dialogue. Second, the sound design, overseen by Tom Angell, needed to be carefully reproduced and meticulously scripted. This was conducive to increasing the cinematic quality of the show, which, as Tom put it, should not have been “repetitive and dull” just because it was intended for little children.⁴⁶⁾ Third, sound served as a narrative device. For example, the Sound Collector’s tapes might mismatch sounds comically or make viewers reflect on how sound interacts with visuals.

As the series’ screenwriters, we were asked to pay close attention to these aspects, as they were central to the writing of the episodes. Regarding the absence of dialogue, the broadcasters trusted the creators’ decision despite being initially against it, especially for Mole’s character.⁴⁷⁾ Such concerns are understandable, given the appeal of talking animals, typical of fables, in animation. The silent interactions between the Sound Collector and Mole led to the central role of the Narrator, who actively helps viewers find the characters and clarifies unfolding events.

44) Ingham, email with the author, April 22, 2022.

45) Ingham, email with the author, June 2, 2022.

46) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

47) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

The need for precise sound writing in scripts introduces an interesting topic in the field of children’s preschool animation. Unlike most TV series for a young audience, where scripted sounds are often limited to musical montages or magical sequences, *TSC* demanded detailed notation of each sound. While the writing conventions we used were standard in animation (with sounds usually written in uppercase and either marked with angle brackets or preceded by SFX, i.e., Sound Effects),⁴⁸⁾ what was remarkable to me was the abundance of sounds and the level of detail in their description.

Sound could be employed for various purposes, such as:

- shaping mood; examples are the Sound Collector producing calming music when Mole is in an excitable mood (Episode 5, “How to Calm a Mole”), or when she is frightened by thunder (Episode 6, “Stormy Day”);
- assigning original sounds to non-musical elements, such as “a spider spinning a web, or the moon, or clouds, or fish underwater”—a technique called “soundtracking” in the series bible;⁴⁹⁾ for example, in Episode 10, the Sound Collector plays a piano music when he sees a beautiful, but obviously silent, bluebell wood;
- creating music from sampled sounds; for example, at the end of Episode 35, the Sound Collector records a donkey bray and then replays it in different keys, with Mole popping up and down from her molehill in time to his “music”;
- making music with natural objects; for example, in Episode 60 (“Ice Music”), the Sound Collector sees some icicles and plays on them like a xylophone;

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SFX: LOUD MASSIVE SOUND OF THE WORLD

He trains the microphone onto the waterwheel as it turns with
water cascading from its buckets. (Live non-interactive
footage.)

SFX: CASCADE OF WATER AND CREAK OF WHEEL

He records the noise of a tractor rolling along the lane. (Live
non-interactive footage.)

SFX: CRUNCH OF TYRES AND BURBLE OF ENGINE

01:01
10                                NARRATOR (V.O.)                                10
                                Off to harvest in the fields...

SFX: BOUNCING AND SQUEAKING O/S

01:06
11                                NARRATOR (V.O.)                                11
                                Huh?

A squeaky ball flies into shot - He catches it.
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Fig. 5: Sound notation examples in Episode 48

48) Live-action segments are an exception, as they were simply indicated as “live non-interactive footage” to acknowledge the unpredictability of what the crew might actually have filmed (e.g., a singing bird might have varied depending on the available footage).

49) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 2.

- experiencing sound through both hearing and vibrations; in Episode 31, when the Sound Collector is unable to hear the harp sounds through the babble, he places his hand on the sound box, feeling the vibrations of its strings;
- using sounds to sense approaching characters; in Episode 3 (“Night Noises”), whilst camping in his moonlit garden, the Sound Collector senses a “louder growing rumbling noise,” signaling Mole digging a tunnel to reach him;
- blending diegetic and non-diegetic music, usually to connect different scenes or storylines when Mole and the Sound Collector are apart.

Sound accuracy was also a priority in the animation of *TSC*. In the animation industry, voices are recorded before the animation begins so that the animators can render the characters’ mouth shapes to accurately match the words, while the music and sound effects are added in post-production, after the animation is completed. However, for *TSC* sound was planned and created from scripts onwards, favoring sound design over music.⁵⁰⁾ Sound was then integrated during the animatic stage, a sort of animated storyboard which gives the sense of “timing and rhythm” of the episode before it is fully animated.⁵¹⁾

Tom Angell was passionate about sending the message that sound matters, although this impacted production time and costs.⁵²⁾ Since diegetic and extra-diegetic music had to be recorded beforehand, and stop-motion requires every prop to be built before even one minute of animation can be completed, it took twenty months in total to produce all episodes — a long time compared to other preschool series, which can be completed in six-to-eight months. Animators were also guided for musical performances. For example, Tom Angell recorded himself playing the cello to provide animators of Episode 9 (“Cello Cello”) with precise finger placements.

Another aspect of sound design worth mentioning is the rhythm of storytelling. It is often the case that entertainment preschool programs — as opposed to strictly educational ones — feature fast-paced action to keep children engaged in viewing and attract a slightly older audience.⁵³⁾ The speed is implemented through narrative complexity, packed gags, quick cut-scenes, and camera movements, as well as through an abundance of visual and auditory stimuli (bright colors, sound effects). Contrary to this trend, *TSC* keeps a more relaxed pace. There are visual comedy and slapstick elements, particularly through Mole’s impish behavior, but they are isolated, without the urge to show many one after another.

Eagle Vs Bat and Ingham instructed us screenwriters to approach episodes as more akin to a mindfulness experience, a practice increasingly integrated into school curricula to help children manage stress.⁵⁴⁾ In conversations I had with the team, they compared the activity of writing (and watching) the series to ASMR videos, which have gained popularity on YouTube. Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is a neurological phe-

50) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 5.

51) Paul Wells, *Basics Animation 01: Scriptwriting* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 110.

52) Tom and Erica Angell, zoom call with the author.

53) Te’eni-Harari, Eyal, and Aharoni, “It’s Complicated: Plot and Formal Feature Complexity in Early Childhood Television Content,” 583.

54) Eagle Vs Bat, *The Sound Collector Bible*, 4.

nomenon typically associated with “tingles” on the skin as well as sensations of relaxation and well-being.⁵⁵⁾

Like ASMR, the series emphasizes sensory awareness — visually, through the beauty of the images, and audibly, through subtle, intimate soundscapes. This is reinforced by the already recalled narrative beats in which the characters explore the world and its little things. According to Ingham, “The design and music married with sound design and the use of ‘quiet’ was unique and something I believed was really needed for kids’ attention and focus on a marketplace where the preschool genre really can be heavy-handed where sound is concerned.”⁵⁶⁾

Concluding Remarks

TSC situates itself within the British tradition of children’s fiction, featuring traditional elements such as fairytale-like characters and a pastoral setting, as well as structural simplicity and an inclusive message. In spite of the rural location, the contemporary world was not obliterated, and there was a positive framing of technology, conveying a sense of modern nostalgia. While it offered a credible portrayal of disability, *TSC* was not a show about deafness but rather about a character enamored of sounds. The precise reconstruction of real-life locations, aided by the 3D quality of stop-motion animation, conveyed the idea that wonderful things can happen in everyday life.

As a writer for the show, I encountered a greater diversity in narrative construction, moving beyond a problem-solution pattern. Unlike in many productions, where episodes may be heavily rewritten by the head writer, the concept of *TSC* was clearly defined from the start. As writer Gaia Agostinelli puts it:

There was plenty of reference materials, the style and guidelines were clear, and screenwriters were given the right amount of creative freedom (within well-defined boundaries). As a result, the process ran smoothly, with no major setbacks or re-writes. Editing of the outlines was always minimal and never substantial — I believe this is only possible when the creators have a clear vision of the final result and communicate it effectively to the screenwriters.⁵⁷⁾

Sound was a focal point in the series, deeply influencing animation and writing. Its diegetic use enhanced engagement and relatability, serving as a useful tool of plot construction. From a screenwriter’s perspective, we had to develop story ideas in which what is usually treated as a secondary element — sound — became central, with an ASMR-like quality. Our task was not to propose fantastical adventures, but to focus on tiny details, in-

55) Giulia L. Poerio, Emma Blakey, Tom J. Hostler, and Theresa Veltri, “More Than a Feeling: Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is Characterized by Reliable Changes in Affect and Physiology,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 6 (2018).

56) Ingham, email with the author, September 4, 2024.

57) Gaia Agostinelli, email with the author, August 18, 2024.

viting viewers to slow down, listen, and appreciate the world around them, one sound at a time. This represented an interesting variation in a context where fast-paced action is often the norm, both in children's animation and beyond.

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Biography

Maria Chiara Oltolini is a children's writer and researcher. She began her career in animation at Calon TV in Cardiff, specializing in preschool series, and later worked as a freelance writer. She has a BA, MA, and PhD from Università Cattolica of Milan, Italy, where she has been working as a Teaching Assistant in Semiotics and History and Language of International Cinema for several years. Her research interests include children's literature, adaptation, animation, and Japanese culture. She is the author of *Rediscovered Classics of Japanese Animation: The Adaptation of Children's Novels into the World Masterpiece Theater Series* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

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