

FILMMAKER

Revolutionary Sounds: Sound Editor Christopher Scarabosio on “One Battle After Another”



Teyana Taylor, unnamed infant and Leonardo DiCaprio in *One Battle After Another*

by [Jake Kring-Schreifels](#)

Christopher Scarabosio only needed 15 minutes to start dreaming. The supervising sound editor and re-recording mixer was jet-lagged, drifting between trips to London, when writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson asked him to watch the first hour of *One Battle After Another*. The dialogue was rough, the score spare, but even in that stripped-

down state, Scarabosio was astonished at what his longtime collaborator had put on the screen. There were imposing semi-trucks darting across a bypass; fireworks lighting up the night sky; car chases and shootouts across Southern California. When the projector shut off, Scarabosio only had one question for the filmmaker: “How big can I go with this?”

Though Anderson hadn’t historically leaned into large sonic productions, Scarabosio felt his vision warranted it. So, he cut together the movie’s opening passage—scenes of the French 75, a radical group, plotting and executing acts of terrorism—with vibrant, abrupt sounds to complement composer Jonny Greenwood’s ruminative piano strokes, sharp accents in a montage of government-building bombings, electric grid blackouts and a bank heist that ends in a disastrous police pursuit. To maintain accuracy, his crew consulted with the production’s pyrotechnics supervisor and prop masters to record the same fireworks and guns used on set, adding authentic shocks to the group’s precarious cause.

But the real mood-setter comes during the opening shot, when revolutionary Perfidia Beverly Hills (Teyana Taylor) paces along a bypass above an immigration detention center. As she scouts captured migrants, Scarabosio punctuates the moment with nothing but Greenwood’s pedal-tone motif, a recurring blast of orchestral synth and the eerie howl of a semi-truck’s wheels barreling down the road—a bright, unexpected texture to heighten her looming jailbreak. “I didn’t want it to necessarily sound like a semi because I’m kind of setting up the movie,” Scarabosio says. “I’m hoping to tell the audience, ‘This is not your normal movie. Be ready for something you’re not used to.’” Anderson loved the blueprint—the attention to detail, the bold choices and the constant score. “This is how we’re going forward,” Scarabosio assured his director.

The rest of *One Battle After Another* jumps ahead in time, mostly following Bob Ferguson (Leonardo DiCaprio), a frequently stoned, washed-up radical who lives off the grid with his teenage daughter, Willa (Chase Infiniti). When old nemesis Col. Lockjaw (Sean Penn) locates their hideout and Willa goes missing, Bob must rely on old and new communities to track her down and preserve his family. It’s a scrappy, thrilling, sometimes comical pursuit, which Anderson wanted to refract through an unnerving, unpredictable and immediate soundscape, as though mimicking his characters’ rebellious lifestyles and paranoid decisions. “Paul likes it to kind of be gritty and dirty and a little messy. Nothing should be overly clean,” Scarabosio says. “In my mind, I’m always trying to make it sound like it was the best production recording ever—to immerse you into the fact that this is gritty, it’s real; you’re on the set with the actors, and you’re involved.”

To achieve that, Scarabosio took Anderson out of his comfort zone and introduced him to Dolby Atmos. Inside the Skywalker Ranch, where Scarabosio mixed the movie, he

showed off the technology's capabilities by screening the movie's edited riot scene, when sanctuary city protesters clash with crisis actors and local police in a fiery street showdown. Scarabosio shot Greenwood's pianos and drums from different directions around the room, filtering in smoke bomb effects and screams over Anderson's right and left shoulders. "One of the things we talked about was making the screen figuratively bigger, using all those speakers, using the format to really create as much chaos as was needed for any part of that wild ride," Scarabosio says.

As much as Scarabosio's job involved recording echoey, visceral gunshots and sourcing and augmenting Skywalker's enormous sound bed for explosive effects, he spent just as much time manufacturing the soft, scratchy, fuzzy sounds that accompany the underground operations at the heart of the story. After all, this is a movie filled with trap doors, hidden tunnels, radio transmitters, untraceable phone calls and codenames—the kinds of clandestine quirks that aid the communication and connectivity of both revolutionary and far-right secret societies. Anderson was adamant about how he wanted Scarabosio to approach the material: "Don't try to do it with digital software. I want the real thing."

That was easier for phone calls between Bob and an obstinate operator; Scarabosio used a phone patch that he and Anderson had implemented while working on *Magnolia*. But the sound editor had to get more creative when capturing French 75 organizer Howard Sommerville's (Paul Grimstad) radio alerts and rants. Because Anderson wanted Scarabosio to capture sound from an actual shortwave radio, Scarabosio spent a half-day scrolling through different signal bands to find the least noisy patches to record. Then, he put a microphone up to a speaker playing Grimstad's pre-recorded voice, which he later mixed together with various takes and clean recordings so that it would occasionally filter in and out of Greenwood's running score—a perfect, scratchy contrast to the "hermetically sealed" rooms within the Christmas Adventurers Club.

The most intensive and time-consuming section, however, occurred during the movie's climatic three-car chase involving Bob, a hitman and Willa. On a thematic level, Anderson had already given Scarabosio rich imagery to play with. The sequence takes place along a winding, mountainous highway filled with steep, rollercoaster hills that turn various sections of distant road into blind spots. Anderson builds tension with cuts between each car, glances through the rearview mirror and point-of-view shots to emphasize the height of each hill. But Scarabosio knew he could ratchet up the intensity with slow crescendos and instrumentation decisions. "Most car chases are fast cuts—big accelerations, deceleration, skids, hit something, accelerate," Scarabosio says. "This is the absolute opposite."

To diversify the sound of the long sequence, Scarabosio made sure production sound mixer José Antonio García attached microphones to each car for its own sonic signature. Though the hitman's Mustang and Willa's stolen Dodge Charger offered only slight distinctions in engine noise, Scarabosio was mostly pressed on capturing Bob's beat-up, trailing Nissan, whose smaller engine had a much whinier, pitched-up noise. "It was freaking great because that car—where would you find that?" he says. "*That's* the car. *That* is Bob. I mean, it personifies him." In effect, it enhances Anderson's cutting with an almost subconscious character theme song. "One of the things you're always trying to do is, if you close your eyes, could you say, 'Oh, that's *that* car?'" Scarabosio says.

The next task involved mixing Greenwood's call-and-response score—a syncopated drum beat he concocted with a Rube Goldberg-style kit—on a soundstage. Scarabosio layered the snare and cymbal taps with strings as the chase grew to higher speeds, paused the track for a beat, then reengaged it once Bob's car darts into the frame. At the same time, he complemented the off-kilter rhythm with the appropriate effects: "howl-y, ethereal wheels-meet-road sounds that I created" around Anderson's cuts. "We have the engine, we have Willa's breath, the rearview mirror, the sideview mirror—adding a little wind here, rattle there, the ding of the alarm," he says. "Trying to find interesting sounds that kept this thing propelling forward."

Scarabosio and his team listened, analyzed and tinkered. When they hit a wall, they took breaks, then returned to the studio a day later with fresh ears and new ideas. The goal was to capture the topography's undulating "ocean waves," maintaining the movie's titular throughline—that progress is not a linear fight but an up-and-down struggle each generation must endure. "The whole point of it is to get Bob and Willa back together," Scarabosio says. "As much as you want to make a sonic statement, our goal is to build that reconnection, so everything should be in service to that." When the chase abruptly ends with a head-on collision, Scarabosio heeded Anderson's unflinching Scarabosio with an extended metal-scraping aftershock. "That is not a pleasant sound," he says. "But it really does help tell that story of 'gnarly stuff is happening.'"

The whole process took about six on-and-off months, but Scarabosio was most proud of the way his crew captured—and saved—the movie's dialogue. Because Anderson shot the majority of the movie in VistaVision, the colossal camera's external noise often interfered with actors' lines.

At first, Anderson considered using a blimp—a large device that wraps around and quiets the camera’s noise—but its size kept the sound team from capturing production sound during intimate, close-quarters conversation. (Anderson compromised a few times by shooting with a 35-millimeter film camera.) That meant a prolonged refining process with dialogue editor Rich Quinn, who found alternate takes and subbed in similar, clearer readings. “There were lines that Paul thought he was going to have to re-record with certain actors, and we got in there with multiple mics and cleaned up a bunch of stuff,” Scarabosio says. He seems overwhelmed recalling the performance-saving work.

“You really want to preserve that,” he says. “We got it done.”