

Soundtrack:

A Device to Guide Perspective in Film

Sonny Bacon

15842863

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With such a vast use in moving image, sound has many faces. Whether it is to convey a sense of time and place in the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now (1979)*¹ or the jarringly symbolic environments featured in the various dream sequences in *The Sopranos*². Sound can be used to push the agenda of the visual stimuli.

The word Sound when used in relation to Moving Image is incredibly vague. Incorporating four main components; Soundscape, Foley, Narration and Soundtrack. It is firstly important to pin down the aspect we are in fact talking about. This essay will focus predominantly on the soundtrack and the alternative role it plays across a variety of films.

“Almost from its inception in 1895, the silent film was provided with accompanying music and sound effects by local theatre musicians. These live accompaniments, though occasionally first rate, were plagued by inappropriate music, poor performance quality and the difficulty of synchronisation with the image on screen.”
(James, 1986)³

Film as we know it today is a constant, all encompassing package. We can see the same film twice without any changes upon each viewing. If we step backwards into 19th century the main contrast between these and today's films would be the live music accompaniment to picture. Sound was a variable component in the otherwise ‘mute film’⁴ experience, recognisable from different orchestra's and performers of varying talent between two viewings of the same film. Note that improvisation was also a used technique to accompany film with such composers as *Neil Brand* still presently doing this today. Hired to perform for his ability and execution alongside the footage, this had the ability to radically alter the listeners interpretation of the moving image content. The world of film sound began to change with the introduction of the cue sheet in 1910; issued by studio's and the Edison Film Company which both formalised and standardised the procedure of performance. The same person to person variables would still be present but there would be more of a coherence between viewings from this point forwards. Progressions in techniques involved the use of underscore and the improvements to ‘mickey mousing’ which involved acoustically expressing the movements of characters on screen.

¹ *Apocalypse Now*, Film on DVD, United Artists, United States, 1979

² S2E26 Episode 26 Funhouse David Chase and Todd A. Kessler April 9, 2000

³ James, R.S. 1986, "*Avant-Garde Sound-on-Film Techniques and Their Relationship to Electro-Acoustic Music*", *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 1, pp. 74-89.

⁴ C. Michel. *Audio – Vision: Sound On Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York/ Chichester, 1994.

The huge efforts made and desire for composers to perform during these projections demonstrates the complex necessity for sound in film. It becomes evident that its role is noticeably more dominant than previously understood, giving us an aspect of realism whilst also orientating us as viewers into the space.

The purpose of sound can be to backup what we see on a literal level, add things we don't see but would associate as fitting in the scene/sequence and bring in elements which are not visible. This third technique would make sound the primary source of narrative. This is predominantly evident in such animated films as *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003) which rely completely on the use of sound to drive the narrative forwards.

From here I will introduce a case study *Spring Breakers* (2012) and a selection of films which contrast with each other to demonstrate the spectrum of approaches for soundtracks when applied to footage.

With a largely experimental backlog of films from the dubious *Kids* (1995); exploring the darker side of unrestrained teenage behaviour in New York to *Gummo* (1997) with its portrayal of a post apocalyptic, poverty stricken Ohio and the bizarrely harrowing behaviours of the characters throughout. It's safe to say *Harmony Korine* deals with some controversial matters in the films he creates.

One thing that separates *Spring Breakers* from these other films is the ironic writing and self reflective undertone placed by the soundtrack, which bring with it a separate perspective on the events taking place. This contrasts radically with the majority of the film which follows four students in their hedonistic chase for alcohol, money and electronic music. Cliff Martinez arranges the perspective angle from which we view the on screen events. The film has various narrated sequences which serve in combination with the soundtrack to create a perceived split in the characters external and internal personality. This presents itself in the film when three of the girls tell each other to "pretend it's a video game" before committing a heinous act of robbery to obtain money in order to get to Florida on an ironically generic quest to 'find themselves' which is portrayed as a rather depressing process of morally questionable behaviour.

Throughout this sequence '*Pretend it's a Video Game*' by Cliff Martinez, brings an introspective component into the mix, guiding the perceivable interpretation, whilst

outweighing the very imagery on a hierarchical scale of information transmission that we pull out of the scene. The soundtrack to this sequence is a sonified projection of the act. *'Pretend it's a Video Game'* does just this, gamifying the events on screen with an Ethereal minimalistic wash of pulsating synthesizers and bells, progressively shifting into a digitally bitcrushed pseudo reality within the filmic space.

"The standard of composition for film has deteriorated. I have suffered a lot in watching many films because of that." (Morricone, 2015) ⁵

Through assessing 3 films and their considered use of soundtrack I intend to challenge *Morricone's* arguably cynical statement. Whilst there are bad scores to films evident in the mass of productions available to us. There are also some incredibly innovative approaches to soundtrack demonstrated in the following text.

Catch Me if You Can (2002) set in the 60's *John Williams's* conveys *Leonardo DiCaprio* and *Tom Hanks'* chase with a classy blend of Orchestral-Jazz instrumentation adhering to accurate 1960's stylistic mode of arrangement whilst giving us a sense of the overriding theme of the plot which has a motif of disobedience. The arrangement of notation in the main theme⁶ conveys a tip toeing motion with a playful, childlike relationship between the brass, percussion and strings acting as a sonic demonstration of the two characters cat & mouse relationship.

Take Shelter (2012) using dissonant drones the score conveys the inner workings of the character's mind throughout the film. Not knowing if events are completely internal or really happening the film score conveys this psychological battle that *Curtis LaForche*⁷ is having to the viewer. Scared to mention this to others in fear of being stigmatised he becomes progressively unwell throughout the film. This is the void that the soundtrack fills using strangely melancholic notation which creates an inward reflection on the events taking place.

"in 1968, 2001: A Space Odyssey exemplified what film historian Paul Monaco called the "cinema of sensation;" which emphasized self-conscious aesthetic experimentation in the fields of editing, cinematography, and sound and the

⁵ DA. Alberge, *'Ennio Morricone: good film scores have been replaced by the bad and the ugly'*, Music, last update 8 June 2015, accessed 12 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/03/ennio-morricone-good-film-scores-replaced-by-bad-and-ugly>

⁶ Williams, John. *Catch me if you can*, 2002.

⁷ Michael Shannon, Actor, *Take Shelter*, 2011

integration of new technologies and narrative components, to evoke visceral (and contemplative) responses from filmgoers?" (Monaco, 1968)⁸

No Country for Old Men (2007) uses a minimal approach to scoring with a mere sixteen minutes of soundtrack over the two hours and three minutes. Allowing the environmental sounds of the barren Texan desert to act as a motif in place of score, effectively forcing attention to the imagery and landscape. This considered decision lends itself to the nature of the film's pace and simplicity with a use of singing bowls which serve to fade in and out in an almost unrecognisable nature throughout the duration of the film.

These are all, from a sound perspective, well crafted and considered films. Re-evaluating my response to *Morricone's* statement requires looking into an arguably bad approach to scoring and why this may be so. During a screening of widely disputed *The Room* (2003) is a sequence which involves an argument between characters, partnered by a rich orchestral score. You ask yourself subconsciously does this bear any significance to the overall story or message?. You continue watching to see how the film concludes. The film is boring but why? The soundtrack is heard during trivial scenarios which do not appear to be of much significance to the main plot whilst the very array of instrumentation does not fit the style of the characters, environments and narrative. The score is actually trivialising the actions on screen, ironically serving the complete opposite purpose that a soundtrack should. This is very much common place in the wealth of mass-produced film today. Ultimately this reminds us of the crucial relationship a composer and director need to have. If they are distant during brainstorming/production. This may be distinguishable when viewing as a fragmented audio/visual relationship due to a contrast in vision or interpretation of the film script as it progresses and changes.

Taking a series of film soundtracks and looking at the stylistic approach is intriguing to say the least. It becomes apparent that imagery and editing are perhaps informed by each other, working in a complex relationship. Soundtrack conveys a sense of time and place, orientating us into the mood, environmental characteristics of the imagery and depending on its perceived success or failure, can make or break a production.

In conclusion there is some truth to *Morricone's* statement but more prominent is the noticeable progression in new approaches to sound experiences, taking a step back

⁸ Whittington, William (2007a) Sound design & science fiction. 1st ed. Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press. p.18

approach seems to be a new way of allowing composers to distance themselves from their work and assess the content from a 'viewers' point of view. Video-games developers are also discovering new ways to arrange sound. Such pioneering sound artists as *Martin Stig Andersen*, video games composer⁹ are building new dynamics in regards to the relationships with a director. *Andersen* is allowed complete freedom to explore his own approach, effectively rendering him level with director in regards to the dictatorship of his own practice. Sound Design and Soundtrack merge in these ambiguous experiences, forming a new execution of soundtrack.

"But a director with a strong vision, and belief in the team he assembles... it makes the music an integral, organic part of the film's DNA. The music grows as the film grows, and they feed each other." (Jóhannsson, 2016)¹⁰

Jóhann Jóhannsson discusses his process when scoring for the film *Sicario* (2015). Gathering content and trying a variety of ideas out in the early stages of the filming. He sends these drafts across to director *Denis Villeneuve* who, in turn uses these as a guide for the pace and mood, sparking imagery in the director's mind, giving him a 'vision' of what he wants to achieve.

Perhaps the formerly used process to create film is not well suited to soundtrack composition. Maybe the soundtrack & narration should be the first elements to be recorded with the visual component informed by sound instead of the the other way round. Maybe this is why some of the most unorthodox soundtracks spawn from independent film productions which set aside the process formalities in place within the realms of film, favouring experimental approaches over linearity and organisation. Through exploration of the various scenes and sequences mentioned I conclude with this statement; soundtrack has the ability to sonify the perspectives of characters, environments and events, in turn governing the interpretation of imagery on screen.

⁹ *INSIDE*, Video Game, 2016 , *Playdead*, Copenhagen, Denmark

¹⁰ R.J. John, The Reykjavik Grapevine, '*Does Johann Dream Of Electric Sheep? The Rise Of Johann Jóhannsson*', 9 Sept. 2016, accessed 8 December 2017, Available at: <https://grapevine.is/culture/music/2016/09/09/does-johann-dream-of-electric-sheep-johann-johannsson/?ref=gpv>.

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Catch Me if You Can, Film on DVD, DreamWorks Pictures, United States, 2002

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No Country for Old Men, Film on DVD, Miramax Films, United States, 2007

Psycho, Film on DVD, Paramount Pictures, United States, 1960

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The Triplets of Belleville, Film on DVD, Diaphana Films, France, 2003

Spring Breakers, Film on DVD, A24, United States, 2012

Kids, Film on DVD, Shining Excalibur Films, United States, 1995

Gummo, Film on DVD, Fine Line Features, United States, 1997

The Room, Film on DVD, Chloe Productions, United States, 2003

Sicario, Film on DVD, Lionsgate, United States, 2015

Music

Williams, John. *Catch me if you can*, 2002.

Martinez, Cliff. *Pretend its a video game*, 2013

Video Games

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Limbo, Video Game, 2010, Playdead, Copenhagen, Denmark

Self Assessment

Relevant of topic quality of research

I feel good about producing a document which bears such relevance to my perspective and studies. The use of contrasting themes such as the perception of 'good or bad' film scoring helped round off or backup points made with the addition of quotes from relevant artists

Contextual Research

I consider this to be an area that could be improved into the future. The points I make are Contextually backed up in most cases, although I would next time like to use these as my initial guide to craft the writing and argumentation around

Content

I used a variety of Journals, Articles, Websites, Music and films to inform my research. I think in hindsight I included a few too many examples and may consider minimising this in the future. Creating a coherent structure and format proved the most challenging. I found that splitting up the essay into 3 sections; research, writing and editing made things simpler during work.

The analysis of the 3 soundtracks in addition to the main case study felt like a lot of content in the essay. I would consider going about this differently in the future but felt it was necessary to demonstrate the varying approaches to soundtrack.

Critical approach

I found the reading list provided to be of much help during the creation of this essay; often reading short portions of relevant texts to remind me of the historical landscape of events which governed the progression of audio-visual material

Presentation

I have gained an understanding of the format in which to demonstrate an idea. My exploration and research for this essay eventually lead me to the idea of exploring soundtracks role within moving image which I found to be an extremely exciting topic.

Having looked deeper into the layers that build these scenes I have noticed on various occasions that I would 'tap out' of the film visual realm momentarily only to hear the complex spectrum of sonic events taking place and appreciate them as singular to the footage. I will certainly use this as a technique to assess the sound aspect of a moving image production into the future.