

The Art of Sound : guest lecture

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The Art of Sound – presentation

I'm going to start by reading out an extract from an article by Bela Balazs wherein he talks specifically about the sound film and how we process aural cues along with visual cues and what this adds to our enjoyment and understanding of cinema:

“It is the business of the sound film to reveal for us our acoustic environment, the acoustic landscape in which we live, the speech of things and the intimate whisperings of nature; all that has speech beyond human speech, and speaks to us with the vast conversational powers of life and incessantly influences and directs our thoughts and emotions, from the muttering of the sea to the din of a great city, from the roar of machinery to the gentle patter of Autumn rain on a windowpane. The meaning of a floorboard creaking in a deserted room, a bullet whistling past our ear, the deathwatch beetle ticking in old furniture, and the forest spring tinkling over the stones. Sensitive lyrical poets always could hear these significant sounds of life and describe them in words. It is for the sound film to let them speak to us more directly from the screen....the vocation of the sound film is to redeem us from the chaos of shapeless noise by accepting it as expression, as significance, as meaning...”

In terms of how we interpret and understand films, sight is almost always foregrounded and sound is rarely given the credit it deserves. As Walter Murch says “hearing is the first of our senses to be 'switched on' in the womb, but...from the moment of birth onward, hearing seems to recede into the background of our consciousness and function more as an accompaniment to what we see.”

Clearly, something of this same situation marks the relationship between what we see and hear in the cinema. As Murch says “film sound is rarely appreciated for itself alone but functions rather as an enhancement of the visuals” Why DO we always think about how sound enhances image and not the other way round?

The great French director Robert Bresson believed that sound may be just as 'cinematic' as images and in one of his master works, *A Man Escaped*, sound is used in such a potent way throughout the film, that we are compelled to listen. Sound effects, for example, draw attention to the tiny gestures and objects that become crucial to the escape itself and therefore the sound enhances our perception of particular details – the scraping of a spoon, the ripping of cloth etc... In fact, sometimes sound doesn't just control the image in this film, it partially replaces it – several scenes are extremely dark so the sound conveys information about the action – the audience actually has to rely on the sound rather than the image in order to make sense of what is happening. Therefore, by putting sound over a black screen or a dark image, Bresson allows the soundtrack an unusually prominent place in the film. The relationship between sound and image shapes our experience of the film.

Consider, as Walter Murch says, “the image of a door closing accompanied by the right 'slam' can indicate not only the material of the door and the space around it but also the emotional condition of the person closing it.” For example, at the end of *The Godfather* (which had a sound crew of 6), there was a need to give the audience more than the correct physical cues about the door; it was even more important to get a firm, irrevocable closure that resonated with and even underscored Michael's final line “Never ask me about my business, Kay.” It's also notable that when Carlo is garrotted in the car by Clemenza that Coppola chooses to foreground the sound of the windscreen being smashed with Carlo's foot rather than focussing on his face. This killing has a much greater impact due to the use of sound. Murch goes on to use several other examples from the film which reveal how crucial a part sound plays in our interpretation of the image.

Sound then, engages another sense mode: aural as well as visual. Sound in cinema takes 3 forms – Speech, Music, Noise (or sound effects). I haven't got time to talk about the role music plays today

(I would be here for weeks!) so I'll be concentrating on some of the key aspects of sound as distinct from music. As I have already said, sound can actively shape how we interpret the image and it can direct our attention quite specifically within the image. Any film will display a hierarchy of sound and this hierarchy will determine which elements of the soundtrack will be privileged by the audience.

So how can we be more specific in terms of analysing what we hear? It can be difficult to isolate all the elements which make up the soundtrack (just as it is can be difficult to isolate all the instrumental sounds in a music score).

I will say a little about vocabularies of sound and how we can then perhaps attempt to separate the sounds out from this hierarchy and then I will go on to discuss speech and noise or sound effects in more detail so that we can begin to think about how the sounds help us to understand and interpret the image.

Diegetic – sound which arises from within the fictional world

Non/extra diegetic – sound does not arise from fictional world – it doesn't have a source within the film's mise-en-scene e.g the music score or an omniscient narrator who never appears within the film world itself.

On- screen sound – the sound made by objects on-screen – for example, a dog on screen barks – we see the dog and hear the sound, or the sound of footsteps when someone walks down a street or up the stairs.

Off-screen sound – very important for audience engagement and understanding - can be a clue to

the nature of off-screen space, that space which we cannot see but we are still aware that it exists. It can also be used to form particular expectations, for example, the sound of a creaking door which tells the audience that someone (or something) has entered the room. It also creates suspense, for example, the unseen presence which bangs incredibly loudly on the door in *The Haunting*. Or, the way off-screen sound is used to an unsettling and disturbing end in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* when the young boy is killed off-screen whilst the sound of a motor race on the television blares out.

Synchronous sound – matches exactly what we see in the picture – lip movement/speech – helps to support the illusion of what we see on screen.

Asynchronous sound – sound out of synch with the picture – can be done on purpose for comic effect e.g. *Singin' in the Rain*, but it can be incredibly off-putting otherwise – it breaks the illusion of what we are watching.

There are more complex descriptions such as non-simultaneous sound which can be a sound bridge i.e. the use of sound to connect two shots. This can mean that the sound from the first shot lingers, providing a bridge into the next scene. This is a common device in classical cinema. But it can also be used to give different effects, for example, the opening of *Apocalypse Now* – the sound of whirring helicopter blades which Willard hears in his disoriented, drunken state, fades into the sound of a ceiling fan which we see, and then bridges again into the real sound of helicopters outside in Saigon. Sets the tone of the film perfectly and also flags up the fact that this is the war from Willard's point of view. It's worth pointing out here that Murch's award winning sound design for *Apocalypse Now* is indeed remarkable - he wanted to make a soundscape which became like a musical score - helicopters in musical terms were like the string section he said. The whirring blades and the sort of 'thunk thunk' sound they make are almost like a heartbeat underlying the film.

It really is 'the sound of Vietnam'.

Now I want to move onto how we can describe the actual sounds more precisely and what effects they have.

Firstly, sound can be described in terms of volume – loud, quiet and anywhere in between - it can be constantly manipulated and therefore it can constantly manipulate how the audience reacts to the images on-screen. To refer back to *A Man Escaped* again – the volume of specific sounds is crucial to our interpretation - certain sounds are very loud, but they also have an echo effect to give a distinctive timbre or texture (I'll say more on this in a minute) – this includes the exaggerated sound of cells bolts being drawn shut or open, rifles being cocked, handcuffs being fastened. This use of volume intensifies our reactions to his imprisonment.

Secondly, consider pitch – is it a high or low pitched sound? How does the pitch of the sound make you feel? Is it unsettling, shocking, comforting?

Thirdly, timbre – the texture or feel of a sound – timbre is particularly useful when thinking about the qualities of a particular voice, for example, is it nasal, mellow, raspy, screeching, guttural (Reagan possessed in *The Exorcist* contrasted with Father Karras's measured and gentle speech) *The Exorcist* won the Oscar for best sound and BAFTA for best soundtrack – huge sound crew!

Finally, sound brings with it a new sense of the value of silence. Silence can then be used for dramatic effect, it takes on a new expressive function. In *A Man Escaped*, off-screen sounds alternate with stretches of silence – all which creates tension and suspense. The remarkable thing about this film is that we already know the outcome from the title! And yet Bresson manages to create almost unbearable tension by the manipulation of sound.

When analysing/interpreting movies, motifs are one of the elements which are often highlighted. In visual terms a motif is an object, or gesture/posture/expression etc...which gains meaning in relation to how often it is used and in what way it is used, for example, RoboCop's twirling of his gun in a particular way functions as a shorthand way of telling us that he still retains his human side.

Similarly, sound motifs are important to consider – in Fritz Lang's 'M' , Peter Lorre's increasingly frenzied whistling of 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' represents the moments when he can no longer control his pathological desire to molest and kill little girls.

In *A Man Escaped* , there are several sound motifs which increase in importance as the narrative progresses – some motifs have a practical purpose - the sound of the bell ringing and the trains passing by will be used to time the escape and the tapping on the cell walls is a crucial means of communication leading up to the escape. Whereas some sounds serve a more metaphorical purpose – a running tap (amongst other things) is used to represent Fontaine's thoughts or state of mind.

To sum up then:

Although I haven't been talking about music, it is clear that this, a sound form, has equal importance in terms of how we interpret and understand the image. Randy Thom writes about the 'talents' of sound – and the fact that music, dialogue and sound effects can each do any of following jobs and many more – you might want to think about these functions when watching *Eraserhead*:

- suggest a mood, evoke a feeling
- set a pace
- indicate a geographical locale
- indicate a historical period

- clarify the plot
- define a character
- connect otherwise idea, characters, places, images, or moments
- heighten realism or diminish it
- heighten ambiguity or diminish it
- draw attention to a detail, or away from it
- indicate changes in time
- smooth otherwise abrupt changes between shots or scenes
- emphasize a transition for dramatic effect
- describe an acoustic space
- startle or soothe, exaggerate action or mediate it

At any given moment in a film, sound is likely to be doing several of these things at once.

But, as Randy Thom says when commenting on the art of the sound designer,

“sound, if it's any good, also has a life of its own, beyond these utilitarian functions. And its ability to be good and useful to the story, and powerful, beautiful and alive will be determined by the state of the ocean in which it swims, the film ... if you encourage the sounds of the characters, the things, and the places in your film to inform your decisions in all the other film crafts, then your movie may just grow to have a voice beyond anything you might have dreamed.”

Leone's opening to *Once Upon a Time in the West* (sound dept of 6) brings all the above functions together as Thom suggests in a brilliantly executed sequence.

ERASERHEAD

Written and directed by David Lynch and released in 1977 – one of the few widely seen avant garde films which has gained a well-deserved cult reputation. The sound design was created by Lynch and the late Alan R. Splet, and apparently took three years to achieve. Like Bresson, Lynch recognises the potential for creating a soundscape which controls the image and *Eraserhead* certainly manages to do this!

Shot in black and white, the film is set in a seemingly post-apocalyptic universe, sparsely populated and thoroughly depressing. Old factory buildings, deserted train tracks, grimy apartments all serve to support the fact that this is a nightmarish world. This is the world which Henry Spencer (our nominal protagonist) inhabits along with his girlfriend Mary, her parents and grandmother, and eventually a grossly malformed baby.

In many ways, this is a film that defies analysis – there are numerous attempts (usually psychoanalytic readings) to try and make sense of it. I don't think you need to try and make sense of it necessarily, instead focus on the use of sound and how this affects you as you watch the bizarre, surreal images.

In fact it's hard not to focus on the sound! There is the incessant low rumble of industrial noise along with clanking and banging which suggests a steelworks, although the source of the sounds is never revealed – it all adds to the post-apocalyptic feel of the film. As in Bresson's *A Man Escaped*, sound is more pronounced and often juxtaposed with silence or long pauses in between dialogue – indeed when dialogue does occur it is sparse and uncomfortable, delivered in a strange halting fashion. We become more aware of ordinary sounds which, because they are given prominence, serves to make them seem strange or unnatural - Listen out for the sound of footsteps, the buzzer for the elevator, the opening and closing of the elevator doors, Henry's key turning in the lock, the

constant electrical fizzing of lights which flicker on and off, the insistent noise of the needle on a vinyl record, Henry's radiator steaming, barking dogs off-screen, suckling puppies in Mary's apartment, Mary's teeth grinding and eye rubbing while asleep, the steam pumping out of who knows where, pulleys being wound, the 'Lady in the Radiator' squashing sperm-like creatures on her stage, the tearing of lettuce leaves to make a salad, the 'Man in the Planet' pushing the metal levers in a sort of signal box, and, finally, the pencil factory which quite hilariously explains the film's title.

I can't finish without commenting on the baby... Lynch notoriously refuses to explain how he created this pitiful monstrosity. I don't want to say too much about it – experience it for yourselves, but in terms of the impact of sound, the noises this creature emits are unbelievably unsettling and disturbing – it wails, mewls, gasps, and spits food – at times it seems to cackle and laugh - worst of all, when it becomes seriously ill, the sounds it makes are those of a death rattle – the lungs sounding as if filled with fluid. This is all overlaid with the sound of a steaming kettle, which Henry uses to try and alleviate the baby's suffering. Amazingly, despite the grotesque nature of these sounds and images, they actually help to elicit audience sympathy for the poor creature.

It is certainly a triumph of sound and image working together, however, in light of what I have been talking about earlier and the title of this conference, arguably, you don't need the images to feel unsettled – the soundtrack does it all!