

Sound



Film Studies

Cinema is 100% image and 100% sound.

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Sound works on three levels:

1. **Dialogue** – dialogue editor
2. **Sound effects** (sfx) – Foley editor
3. **Musical accompaniment** - composer

These three elements must be **mixed** and **balanced** in post-production so as to create desired effects.

We can divide sound in to two main elements, according to whether it emanates from the films diegesis or not. The term **diegesis** refers to the world of the film:

- **Diegetic Sound:** refers to the sound characters in the film can actually hear. It is sound from the film world.
- **Non-diegetic sound:** refers to the special effects, music and voice-over put on afterwards. These are added to the sounds from the film world.

Two important terms relating to sound are **pleonastic** and **contrapuntal**:

- **Pleonastic sound** is added to give extra resonance to an action by mimicking the action itself. For example, the violin sound that mimics the stabbing action of the knife in the shower sequence of Hitchcock's 'Psycho'.
- **Contrapuntal sound** is often non-diegetic, but instead of emphasising or complementing the image, it works in opposition to it. This creates an ironic, comic or shocking effect.

The torture scene in Tarrantino's 'Reservoir Dogs' shows a policeman's ear being hacked off, while the music track plays Steelers Wheel, 'Stuck in the Middle with you', an upbeat and jaunty song. The effect is to emphasise Mr Blond's psychotic ruthlessness. The contrast between the upbeat music and the horrific violence of the act shows how much Mr Blond relishes the deed.

- **Ambient Sounds** are the background sounds which are present in a scene or location. Common ambient sounds include wind, water, birds, crowds, office noises, traffic, etc. They can indicate **character, time period, mood** and create **atmosphere**.

Synchronous and asynchronous sounds

- **Synchronous sounds** are those sounds which are synchronized or matched with what is viewed. For example, if the film portrays a character playing the piano. **Synchronous sounds contribute** to the realism of film and also help to create a particular atmosphere. For example, when the "click" of an opening door is part of an ominous action such as a burglary, the sound mixer may call attention to the "click" with an increase in volume (termed **hyper-real sound**); this helps to engage the audience in a moment of suspense.

- **Asynchronous sound effects** are not matched with a visible source of the sound on screen. For example, a film maker might opt to include the background sound of an ambulance's siren while the foreground sound and image portrays an arguing couple. The asynchronous ambulance siren underscores the hurt emotions caused by the argument.
- **Sound perspective:** The sense of a sound's position in space is often suggested by changes in volume. A dramatic example is the 'Reservoir Dogs' ear scene when Mr Blonde leaves to get the petrol can.
- **Sound flashback:** Sound from one diegetic time is heard over images from a later time. See opening of "Once Upon a Time in America".
- **Sound bridges** can lead in or out of a scene. They can occur at the beginning of one scene when the sound from the previous scene carries over briefly before the sound from the new scene begins. Alternatively, they can occur at the end of a scene, when the sound from the next scene is heard before the image appears on the screen. Sound bridges are one of the most common transitions in **the continuity editing** style.
- Background **incidental music** is used to add emotion and rhythm to a film. It often foreshadows a change in mood. For example, **dissonant** music may be used in film to indicate an approaching (but not yet visible) menace or disaster.
- **An aural motif** is a phrase of music or a musical effect which keeps appearing in the film as a prelude to dramatic moments.
- **A character motif** is a musical phrase associated with a particular character. Think Darth Vader, Indiana Jones.
- **The lyrics** of a song may relate directly to the themes or characters in the film. **Musicals** often contain songs that are part of the film's narrative.
- **Voice-over:** When a voice, often that of a character in the film, functions as narrator. The voice over is often used to give a sense of a character's **subjectivity** or to narrate an event told in **flashback**. It is associated with certain **genres** such as *film noir* (dark, crime stories). It also features prominently in most films dealing with autobiography, nostalgia, and literary adaptation.
- **Dialogue** authenticates the speaker as an individual. Dialogue serves to tell the story and expresses feelings and motivations of characters as well. Often, the very texture of a performer's voice supplies an element of character. The **amount of dialogue** in a film can be determined by the film's genre, or the director's theme. **Action films** are a genre that have very little dialogue. The sophisticated comedies of Woody Allen, on the other hand, presents practically non-stop dialogue to suggest the intellectual qualities of the characters.

Writing about Sound. When writing about sound in your micro essays, make sure that you are analytical. Don't just list or state the type of sound used, try to comment on the effect. For example:

The diegetic sounds of Margie's steps in the snow indicate not only the environment she is in, but also her isolation. The sound of Margie's steps confirms that she will have to confront Gaer alone. And in a snow-bound environment that is likely to make her situation even more vulnerable and hazardous.

As Margie approaches Gaer, the non-diegetic soundtrack begins. The soundtrack is instrumental and uses long chords to in order to increase the tension within the sequence. The duel effect of the loud,

mechanical wood chipper and the long ominous chords of the non-diegetic soundtrack is intense and unsettling.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLTqecGbdCc>

A web-site to find out more about sound is

www.filmsound.org



Soundtrack	
Diegetic sound	
Non-diegetic sound	
Pleonastic	
Contrapuntal	
Sound perspective	
Sound bridge	
Source music	
Dialogue	
Hyper-real sound	
Ambient sound	
Film score	
Synchronous	
Asynchronous	

Describing Music

