

Sound

IA Independent Activity

Watch a trailer for four films you are studying from different countries and decades.

- How have they used diegetic and non-diegetic sound?
- Are there voice-overs? If so, how do these match the pace of the visual images used?
- What kind of music is being used, if any?
- What kind of language is used to sell the film to the audience?
- What is the relationship between the editing of the trailer and the sound?

Watch them again with the sound muted.

- What are the key images used?
- What impact did any voice-over or music have?

Consider the following:

- Are these indicative of the genre?
- What are your expectations of the film from the trailer?
- Who are the target audience for this film?

S&C

Now have a go at storyboarding/writing or editing your own trailer for another film you are studying.

Things to consider:

- A summary of the main elements of the story.
- Who is starring in the film.
- A tag-line for the film.
- Use persuasive language that 'sells' the film; remember that a trailer is an advert for a film.
- The soundtrack and any music that you want to include.

For a visual medium, it is surprising how important sound, particularly music, is to a film. In this section you will gain insights into the ways in which aural elements – speech, music and noise – and the absence of it are used in relation to visuals.

Most films have music comprising an original music score from a **composer** (**non-diegetic**) and/or existing/new songs (both **diegetic** and **non-diegetic**). Music is used to set the tone, further the character/story and enhance the filmmaker's aesthetic. A **music supervisor** is responsible for bringing the two together. Sound and dialogue are recorded on location by a **sound recordist** with further sound added during post-production by **Foley** and **additional dialogue recording (ADR) artists**. The **sound designer/sound editor** brings these components together.

Diegetic and non-diegetic sound

There are two types of soundtrack:

- **Diegetic sound** is the **vocal and ambient sound** that the characters can hear: the sounds that emanate from within the world of the narrative. This can include sounds such as footsteps when a character is walking or music when a car radio is turned on. The sounds will be those from both the on- and off-screen spaces.
- **Non-diegetic sound** is the sound that does not come from the actual world of the narrative, including accompanying music (when no-one on screen is actually seen playing or listening to music) and voice-overs.

Vocal and ambient sounds (diegetic)

The primary focus for the **sound recordist** on set or location would be to capture the actor's **dialogue** and **performance (vocal sound)**, which would be harder to reproduce later. The **ambient sounds** are recorded on location, but they are often added or enhanced in post-production.

A **Foley artist** focuses on the **ambient sounds** of objects (clinking teacups, etc.), the environment (weather, transport, etc.), human noises (footsteps, drumming fingers, etc.) and special sound effects (bones breaking, stabbing, strangling, etc.).

These sounds are usually pitched at a natural level; when a sound is exaggerated, such as a dripping tap, this is known as a **pleonastic sound**. The sound of the knife being sharpened in the opening sequence of *City of God* is pleonastic.

In an **additional dialogue recording (ADR)** session, actors will reproduce missing **vocal sounds** such as the background artistes' chatter, or those that later were deemed unsatisfactory such as a blood-curdling scream. Lead actors may have to carry out ADR work if the original recording is not of good enough quality, or changes in the edit requires new lines of dialogue or an alternative delivery of a line.

Narration (non-diegetic)

Although a voice-over narration, such as Renton's in *Trainspotting* is part of the actor's performance, as it cannot be heard by the characters this would be considered non-diegetic.

The narrator can be a character within the story, which would indicate that the story is being told from their perspective, or it can be delivered by an omnipresent narrator or storyteller in the 'Once upon a time ...' tradition.

Narrations can be used just to draw the viewer into the world or used throughout to provide commentary on the action.

Breaking the fourth wall (non-diegetic)

Breaking the fourth wall is when a character stops interacting with the narrative/other characters, turns to the camera and talks directly to the audience. The dialogue is then non-diegetic – not part of the narrative world.

Case study: Sound and music *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982)

A major part of *Blade Runner's* impact is due to the way the film uses score and sound design to reflect the mood, setting, genre and characters' emotions, which in turn affect our emotional response.

Vangelis' score greatly contributes to the film's mood and reputation. A year earlier, with *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981) he changed the music landscape with his pioneering use of synthesisers combined with real instruments. This 'new' sound was a complete change from what had dominated film music for the previous 50 years of recorded film scores and 80+ years of film music.

Vangelis' approach was to watch edited sequences of the film and improvise, drawing on how the scenes made him feel, then developing them for the final score. This is why the music combined with the sound is so powerful, as it works on a visceral level. On occasion, the sounds are so low they are felt physically, creating tension that is only apparent when the sound ends.

At times, it is hard to tell where the non-diegetic score ends and the diegetic sounds of the narrative world begin. This is achieved by matching the qualities of the music (pitch, tone and mood) with the industrial elements of the landscape.

Opening sequence (00:00:31–00:04:45)

The film's first 2'30" contain the opening credits (black screen/mainly white text) but the soundscape is already drawing us into the narrative world.

The first sound we hear seems to be a drum roll, announcing the start of the film. This 'drum roll' continues, interspersed with music. Its blend of synth with real percussion serves as a link from the familiar scores of the past (largely orchestral) with this new



sound. This non-diegetic score seems to fade in and out as the credits appear on screen. A greater sense of urgency develops over the explanation text (00:02:06), generated by an industrial sound emulating a heartbeat. Percussion is used to draw attention to key visuals, such as when the location and date appear on screen.

The first shot of the film (00:03:08) is an establishing shot of Los Angeles at night. It is now revealed that the 'drum rolls' are the diegetic sound of explosions; their sound level softer or louder depending on whether they are in the foreground or background.

Spaceships emerge from the background to foreground, their sound growing in intensity. We can hear the sound of a spaceship emerging from the off-screen space behind the camera before we see it, the sound getting softer as the spaceship disappears into the distance.

The flash and representational sound of lightning signals the start of the main music theme (00:03:29), which builds as the camera floats closer towards the skyscrapers. The music fades as we cut to an interior scene of a man in an office, then back to an extreme long shot of the office from outside, before returning to an overhead shot of the office, where a thumping non-diegetic sound mirrors the rotation of the fan. Two tannoy announcements can be heard, followed by a knock on the door, and the film's first line of dialogue: 'Come in.' Inviting both his visitor and us into this world.

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Watch Nerdwriters' short film on YouTube on how sound design enhances a scene: 'See With Your Ears: Spielberg and Sound Design.' Now watch a short scene from one of the films you are studying and make a list of all the different uses of sound and how they reinforce the action.

Sound: Music

Music (diegetic and non-diegetic) helps to create further meaning for audiences. It can do this by:

- serving as the unseen narrative voice pushing us towards the appropriate emotive response, whether it be fear, longing or pride
- highlighting the character's psychological or emotional response to a situation
- creating a sense of continuity from one scene to the next (sound bridges)
- building tension and giving a sense of relief/finality.

Music also helps to indicate:

- the mood or personality of the character/scene
- location
- a realistic setting.
- period setting

There are three types of music:

- Background music (also called a film score, film music, incidental music) is written specifically for a film by one composer and used throughout the film.
- Found music is existing music such as pop songs or classical music/opera.
- Music and songs performed as part of the story.

Background music

A film score can bring all the visual elements together, and can help to add weight, meaning or power to an otherwise flat scene. Try watching a scene with the sound down and you will see how much of an impact music has in creating tension and atmosphere.

Non-diegetic background music is used to:

- define genres
- create mood
- establish setting
- develop character
- provide short cuts
- form part of the aesthetic style
- further plot
- enhance action
- offer in-jokes or knowingness.

Composers themselves disagree as to whether their work should be visible or invisible. You may not even notice that music is playing until it is gone. If it is noticeable, then this too is a form a manipulation.

The music can either enhance or reinforce the action on screen, mirroring the pace of the film created by the cinematography and editing, or it can work against such expectations, which is known as **parallel and contrapuntal sounds**.

Background music has to work immediately; there is no time to develop the mood. Some composers will use recurring themes as a recurring theme to reference the character, location or idea. These are called **leitmotifs**. Probably the most recognisable leitmotif is just the two notes (F and F sharp) used to indicate the approach of the shark in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975).

Further information

Silence

Strange as it may seem, the **absence of sound and music** is also a significant part of a soundtrack. A filmmaker may use the lack of sound in the same way as they use the freeze-frame to draw attention to something or signal a change in direction or mood.

Without the music cues to guide emotions, you are left in suspense, which creates a greater tension. Silence is therefore a significant part of the horror filmmaker's use of sound, so much so that it has become a genre trope that a quiet passage will be followed by a loud noise. So, think about silence while you are studying the use of sound.

S&C

Search for Neil Brand on YouTube and on the BBC Radio 4 Film Programme and you will find a number of films/ interviews with Brand analysing film scores. Watching and listening to these will give you a greater understanding of the importance of film music. Brand is also a silent film accompanist of international repute. If you are studying silent film do watch and listen to his work on that too.

Found music

Even though this is called 'found' music, considerable thought will have gone into the choice of song and how it is used within a scene. If a song is going to be used to underscore a particular piece of action (e.g. walking down a road) or to accompany a fight scene, the rights to use this would have to be cleared before filming, as the performance and the editing would be timed to the music.

A song can be used **diegetically**, such as listening to a vinyl record or by turning on a radio. The whole song may be used or just an important lyrical phrase to either support or work against a character's mood or action. Or it can be used **non-diegetically** – such as the 'Eye of the Tiger' montage training scene from *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976).

Performed music

There are two types of performed music:

- Musical numbers that are seen within or as **part of the narrative** (a busker or nightclub act), such as the bands we see in *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2015). These are **realist** uses of performed music and can be seen across a number of film genres.
- Musical numbers that are used to express **heightened emotion**, such as the 'Another Day of Sun' in *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), are **anti-realist** and are usually only used in musicals.

Parallel and contrapuntal sounds

Filmgoers develop automatic responses to the combination of sounds and images. Filmmakers can either work with these expectations or against them; music is a primary tool in doing this.

Parallel sounds are sounds that go hand in hand with the images on screen: upbeat music for a comedy, sinister music for a thriller. It can also be used to mirror the life of the characters – the music in the opening sequence of *Trainspotting* appears appropriate for the characters and setting.

A **contrapuntal sound** is one that is in counterpoint the action; the mood of the sounds (often music) you are hearing does not match what you are seeing. For example, if we see children playing, but hear an ominous sound effect or sinister music score, this could be a cue that something bad is going to happen.

Songs offer opportunities to juxtapose sound and image. In *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971) and *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990) scenes of great violence are played out to upbeat energetic music. The music works against what we are seeing. This could be used for humour or to emphasise the characters' gleefulness and/or relaxed attitude to the violence they are perpetrating.

Synchronous and asynchronous sound

Synchronous sound is most commonly used. It simply means that the recorded sounds are exactly aligned to the image on screen, primarily so that the words people speak match their mouth movements.

Asynchronous sound is diegetic sound heard before the action that produces it is seen or sound that continues after that action is no longer on screen. This term can also refer to intentional background sounds not directly related to the image on screen.

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Neil Brand on film soundtracks

How far are we supposed to notice soundtrack music? The received wisdom is that the best score is the one you don't notice ...

But most memorable movie music announces itself, whether with the blast of trumpets that begins Star Wars or the low, febrile string notes that usher in Jaws; whether the electronic hammer blows of Blade Runner or the unexpectedly lyrical solo piano that opens the Coen Brothers' True Grit ... Surely this is the music that makes the movies? (Brand, 2013)

Read the full article, 'The Secret Art of the Film Soundtrack', on the *Guardian* website.

Consider the above quotes as you watch two films from different genres and decades that you are studying. Make a note of how music (both diegetic and non-diegetic) is used in two key sequences. Consider how the music makes you feel, and what further meaning is generated from the use of the music.

Synchronous sounds, contribute to the realism of film as the sounds heard match the actions on screen.

Asynchronous sounds, sound effects that are not matched with a visible source of the sound on screen.

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Watch a dialogue-free sequence in any film that relies on music to help convey the emotion. Now watch it again with no music, and then again with a different style of music. Note how this changes the mood and your interpretation of the scene.