

Title: Question 2: *Using at least three examples, consider how storytellers have utilised film and/or music/sound design to explore at least one of the following: sublime, weird & eerie, transformation conflict, the self, silence, leitmotifs, symbolism, archetypes.*

Title: Silence and Symbolism in Horror Films

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Silence can speak volumes, especially in a horror movie. 'Through the act of listening, they hear the secrets that were meant to remain hidden' (Benshoff). Silence can be used to express many different messages to the audience such as character traits, hidden intentions or emotions, to make the audience aware of the isolated, secluded setting of the film or simply to build suspense or tension within a scene.

As well as silence, symbolism can also be very prominent in the horror genre as symbolism can be used for anything from hinting a character's true intentions to foreshadowing future events that take place later in the film without revealing too much of the storyline. 'Objects can be powerful symbols that add depth and meaning to a story' (Caldwell). Symbolism can be displayed in a range of different ways such as through the use of objects, through the representation of a character or through the use of colour.

In this essay I will talk about some of the ways in which silence is used in the horror genre. I will be looking at how silence has been used through the years and will compare how successfully the storytellers have used silence to create suspense and if the use of silence has improved over time. I will also talk about how silence has been used as a key feature of the storyline in recent years. The films I will be looking at are *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Halloween* (1979), *The Woman in Black* (2012), *Hush*, *A Quiet Place* and *Don't Breathe*. I will also talk about what symbolism could be present in these films and what they could represent.

I have decided to write my essay on these topics because I find the way that symbolism is used to express hidden messages in a film or to foreshadow a specific event really interesting. I am also interested in how storytellers can utilise silence to make the audience think or feel a certain way and would like to research further into this topic.

'Silences are the calm before the storm, the short respite designed to make the following sudden pounce or scare heightened by contrast' (Burgos). Silence is a key element of the horror genre. One of the most popular uses of silence in this genre is used just before someone is attacked or killed. Any sound or music stops and usually silence follows for a few seconds to build suspense as, for example, someone goes to open a door after hearing a noise from that direction. Sudden loud music often follows the silence as the antagonist reveals themselves and attacks the character who opened the door.

In the 1957 film *The Curse of Frankenstein*, there is not many scenes then contain silence and in the scene that did contain silence I found did not provide a suspenseful atmosphere like the other films I looked at. This film however did contain a lot of symbolism. Fire is a major part of any film surrounding Frankenstein's monster and when looking into what fire could potentially symbolise I found out that 'fire symbolises many things, including passion, desire, rebirth, resurrection, eternity, destruction, hope, hell and purification.' Fire and light can also symbolise

knowledge and in the film, lightning helped to bring the creature to life and fire helped to destroy it. So, fire could symbolise that while knowledge could build you up, it could also be the cause of your destruction. In my opinion, I think human imperfection is also symbolised throughout this film as Victor Frankenstein is trying to create the perfect human but inevitably fails and blames his failure on his former tutor turned friend, Paul Krempe, instead of admitting that he was wrong and that it was a bad idea to continue the experiment in the first place. This proves that Victor Frankenstein is in fact flawed himself.

John Carpenter uses silence to create an eerie and unsettling atmosphere from the start of the 1979 film *Halloween*. The opening scene of the film is shown from the point of view of Michael Myers, the antagonist of the film who later escapes from a mental asylum and goes on a killing spree. This scene uses silence as Michael stalks outside of what is reveal to be his own house watching his sister which is then followed by loud suspense-filled music as the light is switched off. By showing the first scene of the film through the point of view of the killer I think this hooks the audience and makes them want to continue watching as it is not common in horror movies to see things through the killer's eyes. I think the use of silence during the point of view scene adds more suspense and unease as the audience knows the killer is there but his victims do not.

Another scene towards the end of the film that utilises silence well is when Michael kills someone and all that can be heard in the silence is Michael's breathing through his mask for a few seconds before the scene goes completely silent as Michael stands looking at his victim's dead body hanging on the wall. I think by having silence during this scene it provides the audience with a clearer understanding of the person the antagonist truly is. As he stands there, he is silently revelling at his triumph. He has no remorse over anything he has done.

Throughout the film, Michael Myers is referred to as the 'Boogeyman'. When researching what this could symbolise I found out that 'the term 'Boogeyman' can be interpreted symbolically, as a reference to an ordinary human being with evil or monstrous tendencies. It can also be a metaphor that describes a thing or phenomenon that people are generally afraid of'. I think that the use of a mask to hide the killers face helps to symbolise and reinforce the idea that Myers is the 'Boogeyman' as no one knows what Myers really looks like which is the same with the 'Boogeyman' as description vary between cultures.

The way in which silence is used in the 2012 film *The Woman in Black* is very effective when trying to frighten the audience. Director James Watkins has used silence to create an unsettling atmosphere and provides the audience with a constant uneasy feeling throughout the film as the main character, Arthur, roams an old, abandoned house, that can only be assessed when the tide is low, located near a small village. The silence amplifies any sudden creaks of the house or any noises that are made for example, in one scene Arthur walks into a room in the house after hearing something and finds a baby bird that has fallen out of its nest. At this point the audience assumes that the source of the noise has been found which makes the loud, sudden appearance of a crow flying across the room even more frightening.

As Harry M. Benshoff states in his book, *A Companion to the Horror Film*, 'silence in film has never been silent. It is filled with both noise and meaning – Most readily it symbolises death.' When looking into what a crow could symbolise I found out that 'Encountering a crow is more of a message than a sign of something. This message can be a piece of advice, an omen, or a warning' (Clifford). Therefore, I think that the crow in this film could symbolise death or the warning of impending death as just after the appearance of the crow the main character looks out of the window and notices the tombstones outside for the first time.

Over the years the audience has grown accustomed to how silence is used in horror films and the method of silence just before an attack has become cliché and predictable. Therefore, over the past few years films that use silence differently than it has been used previously have gained popularity.

'Sometimes the sound of silence is the most deafening sound of them all' – K.L. Toth. *A Quiet Place* takes suspenseful silence to a whole different level with at least 90 percent of the entire film being silent. Containing only one song in the movie soundtrack and only one or two scenes containing dialogue. 'In the horror genre, silence is a cause for alarm. When the wind stops and the footfall ceases, death is near' (Benshoff). This makes the film more unsettling for the audience as it provides no hints to the audience, making the appearance of the creatures seem even more terrifying. Re-writer and director John Krasinski along with co-writers Scott Brett and Bryan Woods have used silence very effectively to tell a terrifying story, based in a post-apocalyptic world, that could be a metaphor for lack of communication and the fear of not having your voice heard or not being able to voice your opinions.

One of the most effective scenes that uses silence in *A Quiet Place* is the scene where it is revealed that one of the main characters, Regan, is deaf. It is also the scene where we are introduced to the creatures for the first time. The way in which it is revealed that Regan is deaf is when her younger brother, Beau, activates the sound effects on a toy that she had given to him earlier in the scene. This is first shown by the audience hearing the noise the toy is making before the sound stops and the scene becomes silent as it cuts to a close up of Regan's face while she watches her parent's reaction to the toy as she cannot hear it herself and doesn't know what is happening until she turns around and sees the lights on the toy. The audience begins to hear the sounds of the scene again just as one of the creatures attacks and kills Beau. I think that the death of a young child so early in the film symbolises the end of childhood and naivety in this film world. It's not safe to be a child in that world and in order to survive you must leave your childhood behind. The main priority is to adapt to a silent world and learn how to survive.

Another symbolism used in *A Quiet Place* is when the basement of the protagonists' house is being flooded with water. The lighting is red as Evelyn, Regan's mother, must try and silently move through the water to her newborn baby while the creature is in the same room. The use of red in this scene could symbolise the danger that the protagonist is in.

Another horror film to use silence effectively is the film Hush. Writer and director Mike Flanagan creates an intense atmosphere in this American Slasher film through the use of silence as he tries to emulate how the main character hears and feels as she is deaf and is unable to speak, due to a medical complication, and lives in a remote and isolated location. 'Silence is not the space left by sound but the space at the basis of all sound' (Voegelin). I think what Voegelin means by this is that without silence, sound could not exist. Without one we would not have anything to compare the other to.

The film Hush reveals that the main character, Maddie is deaf in a similar way to A Quiet Place. In the opening scene of the film, we first hear the noises of sizzling pans and a knife hitting the chopping board as it cuts through an onion, all common sounds that are associated with cooking. Then all of these sounds stop and are replaced by silences as the scene continues. Flanagan uses silence as a comparison to what we, the audience, hears and what Maddie, the main character, hears. By making the audience aware of the fact the main character is deaf in the opening scene of the film, it establishes that it is an important part of the storyline.

Don't Breathe is different than many other horror movies as for the first part of the film it is unsure who the true 'villain' of the film is. Is it the 3 people who break into the house or it is the blind man who tries to kill them for breaking into his house? It is not until the second half of the film the 'villain' become clear when it is revealed that the man has kidnapped a woman and is keeping her locked in the basement. I think that the plot of this film symbolises how we shouldn't 'judge a book by its cover' and how we shouldn't judge people before we know them because we don't know what they've been through or, in the case of this film, we don't know what they are capable of.

Another symbolism used in this film is when the man turns the lights off leaving the protagonist in darkness and leveling the playing field. 'I fear not the dark itself but what lurks within it' (Unknown). The darkness could symbolise the uncertainty of the protagonist's fate and it could make the audience reminisce in the opening scene we see the protagonist, Rocky, being dragged down the street by the antagonist. The darkness could also symbolise the hidden secrets or motives of the antagonist that have yet to be revealed.

In conclusion, I think that the use of silence in horror films has greatly improved over time as I feel that the way in which storytellers have applied silence in more recent films creates a more unsettling atmosphere when compared to the films of earlier years. Silence tends to draw people's attention and I think that's why the method of having silence just before someone is attacked or killed followed by loud, sudden music is commonly used and has worked well and continues to work well. I think that storytellers feel that this is the most effective way to get the audience's attention before frightening them. I also think that the use of silence in films allows the audience to think for themselves and to analyse the silence in their own way.

I also think that the use of symbolism continues to become more creative as the years go on and technology advances. When looking at the symbolism in the earliest film I looked at and

compared it to the most recent film, the symbolism was very simple. I also found that the as time goes on, films begin to contain more symbolism than previously and that the messages that the symbolism represents begins to have deeper meanings.

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