

The Psychology of Sound in the Genre of Horror Films: Why are specific sounds perceived as creepy and disturbing in horror films, and how do they build towards the overall spine chilling experience?

For this dissertation, I will be exploring the relationship between sound and moving image, and how this influences the audience's viewing experience. I will specifically be investigating the genre of horror films, and their sound scores. Through analysing examples of scenes from films, examining how specific sounds compliment certain movements in scenes, I will be acknowledging the influence of audio films can have on a viewer, in an unconscious and psychological sense. I will be outlining various categories of sounds and moving image, and inspecting their relationship, as well as considering a number of horror film composers, and their individual styles and techniques.

The three key words that sum up my investigation are: horror, psychology and affect.

My questions are: Why are specific sounds perceived as creepy and disturbing in horror films, and how do they build towards the overall spine chilling experience? How do sounds and certain auditory techniques psychologically affect the viewer?

I will be analysing a number of scenes from various horror films, in order to demonstrate how music and composition play an enormous role in the success of films creating an experience for their audience. A sufficient experience for an audience watching any film, of any genre, is half based on the imagery of the film, and half based on the audio. The auditory is what brings the moving image to life whether it would be music or sound effects.

"Sound evokes. It holistically penetrates the human experience, touching us and putting us in touch with aspects of our lived experience not easily expressing in words." (Lederach et Lederach, 2010)

Sound and Moving Image

In terms of the relationship between sound and moving image, it is the sound that compliments the moving image, and can provoke a stronger atmosphere in a film, and enhance emotional impact for the viewer. Music brings films to life, through setting scenes and heightening ambience, often triggering emotions and feelings in the viewer, such as: sad, happy, angry, fear, and suspense, along with many more. From my research I have found that there are six different types of moving image - television, animation, film, web, hand held devices and video each of these moving images use the same types of sound except they are all used differently. An example of this would be TV soaps. This nature of television mainly use dramatic music to make it more identifiable to the audience. Animation however focuses mainly on sound effects.

I have also found that there are three categories of sound. 'Diegetic sounds' which can be heard in the shot of a scene - the sounds from things that are happening directly around the characters. 'Non diegetic sound' - sounds from the outside shot, which would include music, audio components or a soundtrack. 'External dietetic' sound, which are similar to non diegetic, as they are perceived to be out of the scene shot - an example would be foley sound effects, as these sounds are ambient and in the background, added to the shot in the editing stage.

The Intensity of Horror Films

In investigation of the genre of horror films specifically, the atmosphere and experience created for the viewer is that of an intense and horrifying nature, very often leaving the audience in a spine-chilling state.

A first example of a composer who has worked with many horror films, is the American record producer and composer Charlie Clouser. A former member of the industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails, Clouser later began composing for films, and has worked on horror films such as Saw, Dead Silence, and Jigsaw, along with numerous others. The first scene composed by Clouser, that I will be analysing in terms of how the audio impacts the viewing experience, is 'the reverse bear trap' scene, from the film Saw.

The scene begins with an impactful burst of sound, almost mimicking the sound of someone waking up quickly from a bad dream. The character Amanda states: "I woke up", and the auditory consisted of industrial sounds such as screams and what sounds like a door slamming but with reversed cymbal samples slightly before the Slam. This sudden burst of sound certainly alerts the viewer from the offset, however there is a drop in texture and dynamics which creates a suspensive silence, setting a tense tone. There is a great use of space in this section, generating an air of anticipation, which compliments the busier parts that begin simultaneously with the quieter and more anticipated parts. This then gradually builds faster, back and forth, until it eventually glitches, building even more tension for the viewer.

Here, Clouser has deliberately chosen to drop the texture and dynamics of the audio, in order to create room and yet again build tension. In this space, there is an introduction to an animal-like sound, resembling growling - which is an interesting technique for the composition, as there is no particular relation to animals throughout the film at all. Psychologically this growling sound enhances the emotional connection between the viewer themselves, and the film. There have been studies into non linear sounds that reveal, "***nonlinearities are commonly produced when animals are under duress, such as the fear screams produced when animals are attacked by predators***" (Wilden et al. 1998; Fitch et al. 2002). It is clear that Clouser has used a similar method here, with the exception of using it from the predators perspective. Amanda is made to be the prey in this auditory, fitting in perfectly with the scenario of the moving image, and creating an uncomfortable, and chilling atmosphere for the viewer. The growling in this particular scene works well, as it has been produced with compression and other sounds used slightly to mask one another.

As the viewer is visually fixated on the moving image, the film score is more of a sub conscious, subliminal, background noise, setting the tone and affecting the mood. The audience does not necessarily have to be aware of the auditory sound, but in connection to the film over all, it can provoke feelings and create a compelling atmosphere for the viewer. **"That's the magic of film-making. We're all dealing with atmosphere, and we try to enhance it for an audience.**

[...] They shouldn't be aware of it; they should just be made to feel, in some kind of manipulative way.” (Grusin.net, 2018)

As the sense of tension builds once more, the exact same sounds are used, giving the viewer a sense of familiarity, and keeping the same unnerving atmosphere alive. Any change in sounds here could potentially clash with the current atmosphere, and completely throw the viewer off. The second time around, these sounds are not as intense as they were in the introduction of the scene, but again Clouser keeps the viewer under a lot of anticipation by not breaking the rhythm of the audio through making any explosive sounds, as of yet. The TV then turns on, and Clouser uses “*white noise*” in many frequencies with equal intensities, which psychologically creates a busy and intensive vibe for the viewer. Along side the white noise, there is a slow oscillating horn in the background of Jigsaw’s voice. This sound is hypnotic, which effectively draws the viewer in, and as soon as Jigsaw stops speaking, the explosive sounds begin - releasing the whole build up of tension and anticipation. This begins with a reversed symbol, which is a powerful sound for creating a suction effect into a busy part of the scene. As Amanda stands up, she releases the chord that was attached to her, which sets off the timer, and Clouser emphasises the shock of this moment through rapidly dropping the texture right down.

Through out the scene it is evident that many of the sounds Clouser uses are industrial sounds, complimenting the visual aspects of the scene very well, as the character is situated in a wear house, with a device around her face and tools in the back ground. Both the moving image, with the relevant industrial sounds, create a greater psychological impact for the viewer.

A renowned and award winning film composer called Aaron Copland, states five ways music serves moving image. These being **“*creating a more convincing atmosphere of time and place, underlining phycological refinements, serving as a kind of neutral background filler. Building a sense of continuity, under pinning the theatrical build up of a scene and rounding it off with a sense of finality.*”** (Porter, 2018) If we were to compare this scene with music, to this same scene but without music, there would be a substantial difference in the emotion and physical feelings felt by the audience. This would apply to almost any scene from

any film, as the music of a film creates the relevant atmosphere, and unquestionably compliments the moving image.

Many horror scores are written in non linear, this consist of frequency jumps, non standard harmony, a voice or an instrument, that is pushed beyond its normal range, and no consistent or sequential patterns - non linear sounds are mainly disordered. This psychologically keeps the viewer on edge with suspense. **"Nonlinearities [...] seem to be broadly evocative in vertebrates and their analogues can be used to influence human emotions."** (Blumstein, Davitian and Kaye, 2010)

An example of Clouser using non linear sounds in his score for this particular Saw scene, would be the growling followed by the high pitched screaming - the growling is placed in the space where the scene increases in anticipation and tension, and as it comes to the release, there is a very high pitched scream with reverberant effects. This subconsciously creates a narrative for the viewer, of someone being hunted. Although we are at the top of the food chain naturally, we as humans have evolved to be instinctively aware of other animals in order to survive.

Many other composers for this genre use the same methods and techniques as Clouser, only in their own unique ways - making each composer original. Having said this, there are rules that need to be followed in order to suit the genre, and create the correct atmosphere for the film. Another interesting technique composers use for scoring horror films is using nursery rhymes. Throughout my investigation, I have gathered that most nursery rhymes such as Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy, Rain Rain Go Away, Three Blind Mice and, Mary Mary Quite Contrary, originated from their very own, true and disturbing stories, for example Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy was based on the great plaque of London.

A second horror movie composer is Bernard Hermann - an American, award winning composer, who has working on films such as Psycho, Taxi Driver, and Vertigo, along with many more.

Bernard Hermann is another uses similar, and also very different techniques in order to create a relevant atmosphere for the viewer. In comparison of a scene composed by Hermann for the film

Psycho, and a scene composed by Clouser for the film Saw. In relation to the 'shower scene' in Psycho, Hermann uses music and instrumentation for his compositions, where as in the 'bear trap scene' of Saw, Clouser uses mainly industrial sounds. This is an obvious difference in the method and execution from these two composers, in constructing the composition of various scenes - adapting the use of their sound to best suit the visual and emotional aspects of the film at certain points.

An example of Hermann using a similar method, is when the lady in the shower has the curtains draw back by a second character and begins being repeatedly stabbed. In this scene Hermann uses non-linear sounds to enhance the emotional impact for the viewer, these sounds consist of strings screeching. This falls under the non-linear category as its is an instrument or instruments, straining beyond their natural range. The tension created for the scene builds up until the curtains are drawn back, revealing the character, with Hermann using slow strings in the minor key here - major keys are commonly used for bright, happy and cheerful moments, where as minor chords are usually used for sad, darkening and apprehensive moments. This certainly does create an apprehensive atmosphere for the viewer.

Although the time periods of these films have a substantial gap between them, similar methods carry through, having the same psychological impact on the viewer. This applies for almost all horror films - the same techniques often used, but in various ways.

Dissertation Structure:

My investigation will take the form of four chapters, building to my final answer of the question: Why are specific sounds perceived as creepy and disturbing in horror films, and how do they build towards the overall spine chilling experience?

Introduction

Introducing and outlining my investigation.

Chapter 1: The relationship between sound and moving image

For this first chapter I will be considering the relationship between sound and moving image, investigating how sound affects the viewing experience of an audience, through demonstrating examples of this being done. I will be outlining the different types of sounds and moving image, and expanding on how these work together in relation to the viewer, showing examples of their use and effect throughout.

Chapter 2: The Intensity of Horror Films

For my second chapter, I will be looking closely at the intensity of horror films, and how their sounds and compositions create relevant atmospheres in horror films, adding to the overall experience of the viewer. Focusing mainly on techniques used by composers, comparing different composers and scenes throughout.

Chapter 3: The Psychology of Horror Films - Why are certain sounds creepy?

For the final chapter of my investigation, I will be considering the psychology behind the compositions of horror films, evidencing my theories with examples of scenes from these films using certain techniques, as well as ideas from psychologists. I will be looking at a number of creepy sounds used in these films, such as nursery rhymes, and concluding why these are perceived as creepy in relation to the psychology behind them. I will also be considering how these have been modified to emphasise the eeriness of certain scenes, what affect this has on the viewer, and why - using examples throughout of nursery rhymes being used, as well as composers who use them.

Conclusion

Concluding my findings.

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