

The Wheels on the Bus Go Round & Round: How does sound design communicate themes of social immobility and longing in Wasp (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2003)?

Set in Director Andrea Arnold's hometown of Dartford, Kent, *Wasp* (2003) is an Oscar-winning short film and, alongside contemporaries such as Lynne Ramsay and Shane Meadows, is a classic example of the 'New Realism' movement of British Social Realism (Paszkievicz, 2023). The film tells the story of Zoe, a young single mother of four who struggles to navigate through financial deprivation and social immobility. The audience is presented with only a vignette into the life of Zoe and is offered little-to-no context of the events which led to her current set of circumstances. Nonetheless, the film's mise-en-scene is incredibly effective at establishing a setting which requires minimal exposition. Zoe's cluttered flat, the utilitarian bleakness of the council estate in which it is situated, and even the raggedy clothes on her children's backs are the pallet with which Arnold paints a picture of a neglected class. The beautifully simple visual language of the film works in tandem with its sound design. Relying almost entirely on diegetic sound is a choice which, on the surface, may appear to be purely functional in abiding by the conventions of realist cinema—and while this is true, the soundscape is, upon further inspection, also a deeply layered element in its own right which contributes to a hidden depth of subtext one could easily ignore. With that in mind, this essay seeks to examine *Wasp's* sound design through the lens of its themes of social immobility and the varying forms which longing take in the film.

Andrea Arnold's work has a particular vernacular, which always makes it feel unmistakably hers. Widely regarded as a pillar of modern British Social Realism (Bose, 2023), Arnold's status as a figurehead of this cinematic movement is borne in her consistency in utilising the thematic, narrative, and technical elements which frequently comprise her work. In the bulk of

her filmography, one can expect to encounter the stories of young female protagonists who are trailed unwaveringly by hand-held cameras (Murray, 2016) as they navigate through the social deprivation that often comes from being working class in Britain. However, that is not to say that Arnold is a one-trick pony, nor that she simply repeats the same narratives. While her films are elementally autobiographical (The Newsroom, 2009), Arnold's protagonists are clearly separate from one another; it is simply the "austere poetry" (The Newsroom, 2009) of her filmic grammar which makes them feel so similar.

While some may read her work as politically neutral (Nwonka, 2014), it is evidently rich in social commentary. Arnold's work centres around marginalised groups (Goss, 2022), and she immerses the viewer into the headspace of her protagonists by following them unrelentingly with her "quasi-documentary" filming techniques (Murray, 2016). She also utilises exterior settings to great effect; the highrise council housing which appears frequently in her work is almost a character itself. The dilapidated, joyless landscapes in which she often situates her stories are not only a manifestation of Arnold's tendency to shed light on "the dramas of the everyday" (Paszkievicz, 2023) but also are metaphorical reminders of a social class that have been ostensibly forgotten by the state (Burke, 2007).

Of all the elements comprising the grammar of a film of any genre, sound design is a factor which - while absolutely paramount to a realist film - is arguably often overlooked. It has been posited that this is due to the prevalence that auteur theory has in discussions about the foundations of filmmaking which tends to credit Directors with sole authorship of a film (Whitford, 2021). However, it could also be equally true that the reason for sound design's apparent omission from filmic discourse around authorship (or just generally as an element of filmmaking) in realist cinema lies in its subtlety when correctly executed. Realist film, and more specifically British Social Realism as it is the focus of this essay, is defined by its commentary on failings of the state in a socio-political context; often taking a politically leftist stance whether this is overt or not (Nwonka, 2014). In terms of the formal elements of the genre, these films are usually characterised by their non-stylised nature; aiming to produce content which is truthful in its character-driven nature (Loach, 2014) and therefore (as the title would suggest) grounded in reality.

The function of sound in film is to immerse the viewer into the story's world. And while

plenty of Social Realist Directors, such as Ken Loach or Shane Meadows will rely on non-diegetic music, there are many (such as Arnold) who tend to veer more toward a diegetically driven approach. Either way, the golden rule to sound design in realist cinema, as with all other practical and conceptual elements, is authenticity. Given that British Social Realist films are centred on their commentary of the structural make-up of British society, the physical settings of these narratives are essentially a character in themselves, and if the sound design does not accurately reflect these locations, the films are ostensibly inauthentic (Loach, 2020).

Many aspects of the sound design for *Wasp* tie in closely with the film's key themes to simply have the practical function of creating audience immersion. A key example of this is the near-constant intrusion of cars, which is somewhat of a recurring motif in Arnold's filmography. In her earlier short *Milk* (1998), the protagonist Hetty goes on a sexually charged joyride with a stranger as a means to escape the death of her daughter, and at the end of her second feature *Fish Tank* (2009), Mia departs for Cardiff with an incidental male character. In these instances, the car carries strong connotations of escape or liberation (Hanson, 2020) and *Wasp* is no different in expressing this. The inciting incident in the film is when Zoe bumps into Dave, an old boyfriend. He's in his car when they meet, the significance of which feels heightened when considering that Zoe has been walking around barefoot. The juxtaposition of the bare-foot Zoe in her pyjamas and Dave in his car highlights the class barriers that she faces, and the attraction that she expresses towards him in this scene feels indicative of Arnold's clear tendency to use it as a metaphor for escape.

One of the main themes at the heart of *Wasp* is social immobility. Due to a plethora of factors, Zoe's life is marred by extremely strict boundaries – both physical and socio-politically – which limit her movement (Hanson, 2020). As Michael Goss (2022) points out, Zoe is practically a child herself, and clearly ill-equipped for the task of raising children; unable to provide basic necessities such as food. She also appears socially cut-off – ostracised by her neighbours and even unable to get her mother to babysit for her. Her immobility is also manifested in the literal sense that she cannot move freely due to not having a car. As will be expanded upon in this essay, the car is a prescient motif for immobility in *Wasp*; not least because it is a reminder that she is forced to walk everywhere, which also has a heavy metaphorical importance in the film- as well as many of Arnold's other films (Hanson, 2020). Returning to the sound design with this in mind, Arnold often – without departing from naturalism – amplifies particular noises to highlight their significance. When the audience first

meets Zoe, she is marching from her flat to confront someone across the estate. She, with her four children in tow, are all barefoot as they traipse across the terrain of the urban hellscape in which she resides. Zoe's feet thudding down the steps of her council flat building are artificially amplified, which elevates the already bold imagery and adds an element of brutalism to the situation. Techniques such as this are commonplace for Arnold as a Director whose work is often described as being "sensory-driven" (Paszkievicz, 2023).

Cars can be heard almost constantly in the background of every scene. While this is functional for world-building purposes to establish the urban setting, they are also arguably a reminder of Zoe's social immobility and desire to escape. Sometimes the sound of cars can be heard only faintly in the distance, implying that escape is always at least at the back of her mind, but there are other moments - particularly when cars are on screen - where their sound feels artificially amplified and they have a thunderous presence. This amplification of cars is at its most prevalent when Zoe and her kids are marching to her date with Dave, where they have to cross a footbridge over a dual carriageway. In the prelude to this scene, Zoe and her kids walk down a street which almost mirrors the audience's first meeting with them. This time, however, instead of marching on her bare feet, she saunters in high heels towards her date with Dave. The sound of her high-heels clinking across the concrete is the first thing the audience is confronted with in the scene, followed by a tilt-up of her body to reveal her in a short skirt, with her hair done; a clear departure from the Zoe in a stained nightie that we first meet. It has been noted that in her works, Arnold is one to positively sexualise her female leads (Jacobs, 2016), and that certainly appears to be the effect she attempts to have in this scene. Following this brief moment allocated simply to Zoe is the intrusion of the rest of the kids who enter the frame, as they all talk over each other to a disorienting effect while one of them pushes a fake pram that rattles sharply over the concrete. However, returning to the crossing of the dual-carriageway, it is at this point that all the noise of walking is drowned out by the blistering sound of cars whizzing past. Zoe walking across this footpath is significant because it marks the crossing of a threshold as she partially escapes her usual confines (Hanson, 2020), but it also illustrates what is on the line for Zoe. Arnold's work often places her female leads in positions where they are longing for male intervention, which is arguably a fairly conservative ideal to represent, (Goss, 2022), but there is a clear sense that if her date goes well with Dave, she might be granted a sense of social mobility by being with someone with a car of his own. This notion even comes to fruition in the film's closing scenes where Dave, upon discovering that Zoe has been harbouring her children outside in the car park for the duration of the date,

whisks them all away in his car to go and get chips. As they cross this threshold, one of the children dissonantly sings “The wheels on the bus go round and round” on a loop, which feels particularly significant as the family unit is forced to traipse across a landscape which feels somewhat treacherous, open to the elements.

In tandem with Zoe’s social immobility, is her obvious desire to escape her surroundings. While, as a product of social realist cinema, this has clear “big picture” connotations in a sociological context which sheds light on the economically depressed backdrop the film is set against (Nwonka, 2014), Arnold still designs Zoe as a character in her own right who has her own individual desires and motivations. Harking back to the film’s plot, Zoe’s core desire is to try and re-spark a romantic flame with her ex-boyfriend Dave whom she meets in a chance encounter. The scene which directly follows Zoe’s meeting with Dave is doing everything in its power to highlight the profound sense of confinement feels in her life.

Up until this point in the film, there have been only exterior scenes, so Arnold balances this out by showing Zoe and the kids all packed into her tiny, cluttered flat. As Hanson (2020) notes, Zoe becomes increasingly confined by her surroundings in this scene as the audience sees her for the first time trying and failing to execute the balancing act of parenting and maintaining a sense of personhood outside of her mothering duties. With a phone pressed between her shoulder and ear, she begs a friend to babysit so she can go on the date she just arranged while rummaging through her empty cupboards in a fruitless search for food. All the while, her kids – each shot individually in a tight frame which isolates them – languish, passively engaging with their surroundings and seemingly unaware of the stress their mother is under. While the camera is doing a lot of the legwork to paint a very visceral image of imprisonment, the sound design is always there as a supplementary tool to further amplify this. The fact that you never hear the person’s dialogue on the other end of the phone call has the effect of isolating Zoe, and highlighting the fact that she is on her own. Amid this scene, where Zoe is oscillating between trying to feed her children and trying to prepare for her date, she opens up her purse. All that is contained within is a modest pile of shrapnel which spills out onto the countertop, the sharp ping a cutting reminder of the poverty which holds her back from living a normal life. On top of all this, each of her children are each having to occupy themselves. One watches TV, the other plays with a guitar toy and the baby cries in the kitchen, which her mother ignores. All of these overlapping sounds create a sense of disorientation which builds as the

scene progresses. Finally, the scene culminates with Zoe noticing a wasp banging against the window and trying to escape. The sound of the wasp banging against the wall, as well as its buzzing appears amplified by the sound design, and everything stops short for a brief moment while Zoe observes it for a second before eventually opening the window to let it out. “Arnold’s animals”, says Paszkiewicz (2023), “...are stand-ins for the marginalised protagonists, whose vital energies are stifled by the grim social conditions in which they find themselves”. Zoe feels an obvious connection with this trapped insect, and being a ubiquitously poetic filmmaker (Forrest, 2020), Arnold is clearly using this interaction as a device to highlight the profound sense of entrapment that Zoe feels in her life.

In conclusion, Andrea Arnold’s *Wasp* utilises a lot of technical elements to communicate its themes, the sound design being a major component. While subtle and understated from a stylistic point of view, the simple use of amplifying particular sounds in the film creates sonic motifs, such as the repeated intrusion of car sounds which permeate through multiple scenes. Without the sound design, the film would not feel so entrenched in reality, and the themes of social immobility and longing would not have the same weight. Each subtle choice contributes to the already textured story because it grounds the audience in the world that she has designed.

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