

THE FEAR OF BEING PERCEIVED VS. THE DESIRE TO BE KNOWN: HOW *PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE* CREATES AN AUDIOVISUAL ENVIRONMENT THAT BATTLES THIS INNATE HUMAN CONTRADICTION.

INTRO.

Humans, in their most natural form, are a tangled mess of contradictions. This is exactly what *Punch-Drunk Love* explores. We as a species are so afraid of being seen yet what we crave above all is to be known. The core theme of this film is that loving (and being loved) is a skill that must be nurtured, even if it is through the means of a peculiar instrument, hundreds of pounds of pudding, and frequent flyer miles. Described as a “musical without words” by the composer Jon Brion, *Punch-Drunk Love* combines stunning visual design with a compelling audiovisual environment that bridges a dissonant diegetic soundscape into an integrated, harmonious orchestral soundtrack.

We follow Barry Egan— a socially awkward young man with seven overbearing sisters. In desperate attempts to find social connection without opening himself up to shame, Barry seeks connection in the strangest of places. First, through the customer service line of the food company that offers the frequent flyer miles as a reward for purchasing their products. Secondly, to a phone sex line that ends up coming back to bite him as four angry brothers hunt Barry down.

This essay will explore exactly how the team behind *Punch-Drunk Love* utilised different audiovisual techniques to enhance the themes of vulnerability and love throughout the film. It will explore the starting position of the film in relative silence and dissonance through one key scene and other varying examples. It will also look at the final scene of the movie, and dissect how they created harmony from the initial dissonance at the beginning of the movie— both visually and audibly.

WIDER CONTEXT.

To delve more into the context of the central theme, *Punch-Drunk Love* is about Barry's crippling fear of being perceived battling with his desire to be known and loved— two truths that remain ever dissonant in Barry's life. The audience sees this from the very beginning of the film. He's awkward and soft-spoken, constantly retreating into corners and dark spots. In Bert Krager's 2005 book *The Art of Composition*, he mentions that the rule of thirds is used to create a balanced and unified appearance. This film often deliberately breaks this rule, creating a discordant atmosphere where Barry feels like he's retreating further into the frame. He's very often placed, *squashed*, into corners of the frame with nothing but negative space surrounding him. When he first meets Lena, when he first has a glimpse of what it is like to be seen he *rather literally* denies the

spotlight, standing just to the side of it– physically and metaphorically avoiding attention, even by an unseen observer. Even as he desperately attempts to feign connection, Barry is afraid. When calling the phone sexline operator, he is visibly nervous to give out *any* personal details, even his name. We see his reluctance within his own identity. His craving for love is undeniable, still. Despite his nervousness, Barry persists with talking to Lena even when it is painfully difficult for him. He looks back. The longing is there. The call to the phone hotlines just prove he is afraid to pursue this intimacy in a real and vulnerable way.

This internal contradiction often boils over in violent outbursts. Whenever Barry places himself in situations where he might have a fleeting chance of achieving the closeness he desires, the second something *deeper* is brought up his fears take control. Take for instance, his sisters' mention of the event from Barry's childhood– when he broke the sliding glass door with the hammer– from Lena, the last person he wanted to know. The tension between yearning and fear are presented literally through Barry literally shattering glass and punching holes through walls.

A notable motif, both visually and through the soundtrack, is the harmonium. It represents Barry's battle in reconciling his fears and his desires. He seeks emotional harmony, and he needs that to build a connection with Lena. An instrument must be learned and treated with care, as does one's relationship with themselves and others. Barry's relationship with the harmonium continuously displays his emotional state and the harmony between these two inner contradictions. The harmonium represents Barry letting music into his life, in turn allowing love into his heart.

Punch-Drunk Love takes a fun turn from conventional romantic comedies. Barry is an unconventional protagonist who could very well cross the line of unsympathetic. Adam Sandler's performance imbues him with enough endearing vulnerability to veer the audience back from that line. This film subverts genre expectations by blending unsettling, tense, and overwhelming elements with charm and romance. It creates a startling contradictory love story in all senses that is just as awkward and absurd as its protagonist.

THE DISSONANT EVOLUTION INTO HARMONY

A key example is the sequence where and thereafter Barry finds the harmonium and takes it into his workspace. This introduces us to the varying ways that the filmmakers employ sound and visual design to further immerse us into Barry's isolated internal world. He starts in relative silence, accompanied by nothing but quiet birdsong. Despite being quiet, even this birdsong gives us a glimpse into Barry's central contradiction– he's so afraid of letting music (love) into his life, but every part of the world is trying to

encourage him to do so. There are almost no foley sounds surrounding Barry, either. It's almost as if he's frightened to make noise, to take up space, which is emphasised by his small physical presence in the framespace. A lot of these shots also surround him with negative space. Western media has been inspired by the Japanese concept of negative space (Ma) historically, taking similar interpretations. It is described as "an emptiness full of possibilities," (Kisaki, 2023). This supports Barry's loneliness and isolation and promises more to come, the harmony awaiting him.

On top of that, they often break the rule of thirds, making Barry feel even more isolated and alienated in his own world. In the very first reference to the rule of thirds (Reynolds, 1793), the author describes an unbalanced artwork as "awkwardly suspended". He also states that it is difficult for an audience to interpret "which of these parts are to be considered subordinate," which further emphasises this as an intentional compositional decision. It continues to dwarf Barry in his own environment and blur the lines of his individuality. He's afraid to make a mark on his environment; it's more likely that the environment is making a mark on him.

The audience is abruptly snatched out of this world of silence by the sudden screech of a truck. Despite seeing this truck earlier in frame, it did not make noise. This showcases it was an intentional decision on the filmmaker's behalf— especially as following this loud noise, Barry snatches the harmonium and runs back to his office, for the first time accompanied by foley— the jingling of his keys, his dusty footsteps, etc., etc.,. The introduction of the key jingling foley also comes with the introduction to the score's central leitmotif. This is, as John White describes in his 1976 book *The Analysis of Music*, is the smallest structural unit that possesses a thematic identity in a piece of music. Although barely perceptible as non-diegetic noise, this melody is clear on a rewatch to resemble the melody that Barry later plays on the harmonium. As the scene progresses and he attempts to play the harmonium once more, no sound originally comes out. This once interlinks with Barry's fear of being perceived— he rather literally cannot make noise, be heard. As he tries once a couple more times, he finally produces his first note. Alongside that first note, for the first time in the entire film, the orchestral soundtrack begins. We hear that leitmotif again. Opera composer Richard Wagner is one heavily associated with this technique. He used musical motifs to connect parts of the plot which might have otherwise been juxtaposed (Wagner & Ellis, 1995). In the case of *Punch-Drunk Love* this musical motif begins to connect the central contradiction of the film and the protagonist— the fear vs. the desire.

As Barry plays the harmonium, we are introduced to a key recurring element of the audiovisual design and the integration of actual and non-diegetic sound— the transformation of the dissonant into the harmonious. We begin at a place of dissonance,

both thematically, visually, and audibly. The notes that Barry plays on the harmonium, despite being in tune with the orchestral melody, are out of rhythm with the orchestral soundtrack. They feel out of place, out of time. Barry is unconfident, but there's light in his path. This light is physically on screen too, a visual motif that appears alongside the harmonium as well as other important moments in character development. This light is red, blue, and purple. These are central colours in the film's composition. Barry is associated with blue; Lena is associated with red. The former is often associated with isolation, sadness, and loneliness, whereas the latter with love, passion, and anger. The purple is especially significant as it implies the joining of the two— as if widely known, the mixing of red and blue makes purple. The joining of Barry and Lena would, hypothetically, create balance. This once more doubles down on that central contradiction within Barry— his fear of being seen and its repercussions on his mental state— VS. the connection and intimacy that he truly desires. Not only that, but the visual image of the harmonium is juxtaposed by its surroundings— the old, antique looking instrument in an almost warehouse-like setting with modern equipment and brutalist designs. Not only is it dissonant audibly, but also visually.

Another notable development in both the general soundtrack and the leitmotif utilised within it is the direct juxtaposition of some other tracks in the film, including the one that immediately follows. It's entirely percussive with additional environmental sounds that appear as if they *could* be coming from the environment, but we do not see their source. Sounds such as a typing, a fax machine, the sound of a zip zipping, hands brushing together blend together in these percussive scores. This is vaguely similar to a technique used in horror and mystery, albeit much more domestic, in which the sounds we hear, despite *potentially* being diegetic, never receive a visual partner. It creates an environment of stress and overwhelm (Chion et al., 1994) and further invites us into Barry's internal world of fear and isolation. He's hyper aware of the noise around him and he does not want to contribute to it. However, there's something that brings these orchestral melodies back. Whenever Barry notices something associated with Lena, such as her car in this scene, there is a very brief transformation into the orchestral motif. The harmonium also comes back into play during these stressful scenes, Barry sneaking away to once more play the notes of that leitmotif and creating a moment of relative silence in the percussive score. These moments of musical clarity stand at a stark contrast with the otherwise frenetic soundscape, highlighting the central conflict at the heart of the film's theme and Barry's internal world. Jon Brion achieved this, as referenced in an interview with Movie List in 2020, by creating a musical library in which isolated tracks and single bars or instruments could be layered atop of *any* other score or scene.

Throughout later scenes in the film, the metaphor surrounding the harmonium grows. Learning a musical instrument, as mentioned earlier, as a skill. This is reflected into the central themes. Letting yourself love and be loved is a skill, too. Both in which Barry continues to nurture throughout the film. We see this narratively, visually, and aurally once more. Barry frequently returns to the harmonium to play the central motif. At one point, when he finds the harmonium once more is making no noise, he even goes to repair it until it starts playing again. This is a key moment of growth for Barry where he would have previously been defeated. Where he intended to make music he *didn't* and instead of not being heard in the first place or backing away from the now metaphorical spotlight, he persisted through it until he could play his melody once more. As his relationship and skill with the instrument progresses (and, side-by-side, with Lena and his own self-worth), the integration of the diegetic noise and the soundtrack also grows more and more seamless. They feel one and the same. In an interview with *Movie List* (2020), John Brion describes this further. He talks about the harmonium and the process of playing the instrument, the billowing of the lungs— about how when you first play it, it takes a breath. He describes the instrument as a “living analogy” that they use throughout the film.

In the final sequence of the film, the evolution of the dissonance into harmony has fully transformed. Barry confronts The Mattress Man. “I am Barry Egan... and I have a love in my life, and it makes me stronger than anything,” He says. His character development is strongest here. At the beginning of the film, he was beyond nervous to reveal even his name, opting for an alias instead. He spoke about himself in hushed whispers, with nervous glances. Here, he shouts. He makes direct eye-contact. He has learnt to be himself and allow music, and therefore love, into his life. Visually, we see this communicated through Barry's suit, his blue blazer and trousers now accentuated with a red tie— Lena's colour. He is both actually and metaphorically integrating Lena into his life. This is also communicated via the light leaks during this confrontation. As mentioned earlier, a visual motif associated with the harmonium and Lena is the red, blue, and purple lights that appear around Barry when these things are also on screen. Now, with neither of these things in sight, Barry is surrounded by this light. He has let himself be seen and loved. He is no longer afraid to be seen.

As Barry runs to see Lena again, a beautiful and romantic orchestral piece plays loudly in what could be argued as the foreground, foley taking a backwards step. The melody Barry once played is now fully integrated into the score. He moves in sync with it as he skillfully navigates the winding hallways of Lena's apartment complex. His entire journey, he holds the harmonium in hand, bringing it directly to Lena. This upholds the metaphor even more. The honing of the skill that is required to love and be loved. The score comes to a quiet decrescendo as Barry and Lena confess their feelings.

CONCLUSION

In *Punch-Drunk Love*, as has been previously explored, the filmmakers use negative space, discordant and overwhelming soundscapes, and an awkward central motif to solidify Barry's loneliness and fear of being seen. However, these elements are gradually integrated, combining them eventually with a romantic orchestral score that fully embodies the motif that Barry first introduced. The harmonium, as a central metaphor and narrative anchor, helps ground this transformation visually and double down on the message of this contradiction and the film's message.

Finally, one last punch that proves the full integration of the protagonist and the score. The end of the duel between the central contradiction that this film explores. Barry sits down, Lena behind him, and plays the harmonium once more. He is on time with the score. Rhythmically and melodically harmonious— but he is still learning. This contradiction may be settled, but it still solidifies the central metaphor: loving (and letting yourself *be* loved) is a skill that must be nurtured.

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