

Thomas Woodvine, Student Number- 1800835

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Sound and Moving Image (Tutor- Robert Jones);

Question 3.

Provide an account of the function of silence in the sound-image relationship. Include at least two short analyses of film scenes of your choice to help articulate your discussion.

The use of silence within film is commonplace, silence delivers the audience an array of messages and emotions. Whether it's to build tension in a moment of anticipation or to emphasise an emotive performance. Silence is a multipurpose technique used by filmmakers, it is there for the filmmakers to substantiate and give gravitas to their narrative imagery on-screen.

Although, when it comes to audio in cinema, silence is almost never 'absolute' (audio that is cut-out/mute). Silence can be regarded as the room tone or environmental noise within the scene (as long as these diegetic sounds aren't overly intrusive to the tone of the scene, e.g. a musical score for a scene is a blatant use of sound to substantiate imagery and would not be associated with silence for the audience). As viewers, silence is subjective, it is relative to what sounds the viewer deems are absent or present (people can disagree whether a room tone is silent or not and what sounds must be absent to create silence), therefore "Silence [is] thought of figuratively rather than physically" (Schafer, 1969, P.10) and is interpreted by the viewer within context to the film. Therefore, viewers can derive metaphors (personal to them) from the insinuating silence, but when it comes to the portrayal and development of the characters within film;

Is silence an established way of using audio to develop and engage with the narrative of a character's mindset?



Above- Film posters for 'You Were Never Really Here' (Empire Design, 2018) and 'No Country for Old Men' (Miramax, 2008).

'You Were Never Really Here' (Ramsay, 2018) centres around ex-military and ex-cop, Joe, who is haunted by his traumatic and brutal past. Joe's life (caring for his mother as an outsider/hired gun) is pulled apart as he gets caught up in others' corrupted power. With the director, Lynne Ramsay, phrasing it as "a mid-life crisis action movie" (Independent Interview, 2018).

In the film 'You Were Never Really Here', the sounds of silence should be considered as the diegetic environmental soundscape of the film; from the bustling noises of New York, to wind rustling trees at a park. The presence of this silence follows the film's protagonist (adding emphasis to his reserved demeanour and his suppressed animosity), the film centralises on Joe and his (emotionally driven) experience through the narrative. The diegetic silence is exaggerated, as dialogue is kept minimal through the film, influencing the viewer to draw more information from the visual performance and the subtle diegetic sounds which give life to the performance. Pauses in conversations allow situations (the turning points in the narrative) to resonate with the viewer, we also get a grasp of each scene's room tone and subtle sounds which are kinetically linked with the onscreen imagery (giving objects/actions a kinetic feel of weight and importance).

'No Country for Old Men' (Coen Brothers, 2008) is another film which utilises silence and is nuanced by heightened diegetic soundscapes. The narrative of the film follows a traditional 'cat-and-mouse-type' flow, with the hopeful protagonist (Llewelyn Moss) and the pursuing antagonist (Anton Chigurh); Llewelyn discovers and stashes a considerable amount of money, he is then subsequently on the run, as he is being tracked down by the relentless and emotionless, Chigurh.

All the diegetic sounds in *'No Country for Old Men'* are very pronounced (this is primarily because of the quiet room tones in most scenes), and the tonal quality of each action (e.g. A coin being flipped, footsteps, splashing water) is loud and clear, this ultimately gives a plausible kinetic feel to the cause and effect of each action (and immerses the audience in the locale). The detailed and definitive quality of each sound in the film is most likely the reason as to why the film has no non-diegetic soundtrack. Sounds that would be ignored every day are defined throughout the film, the sounds add an intensity of emotion and energy to imagery (e.g. The sound of a door swinging into a wall could be interpreted as impatience or anger) and this applies to the audience's figurative view of silence (Schafer, 1969, P.10).

Audio-Visual Analysis of the Films

For the initial half of the film, *'You Were Never Really Here'*, the audience sees the film environments entirely through a third person perspective of Joe (an outside view of Joe's characteristics and mannerisms), therefore what Joe hears is shared with the audience and allows the audience to establish a connection of involvement with the character.

In establishing shots of the city (*'YWNRH'* Film, Time: 14.20 - 17.12), sound relates to the onscreen imagery and we see Joe walking through each shot. It's clear that this environmental soundscape draws from on-screen imagery because cars are seen, therefore, horns and engines are prominently heard. On consideration to the film *'Vivre Sa Vie'* (Godard, 1962), Chion explains how "Every locale has its own unique silence... care is taken to record several seconds of the 'silence' or room tone to that specific place" (Chion, 2019), we see this 'unique silence' in the establishing shots to YWNRH and the layering of sounds within these shots give the city a rich tonal environmental soundscape.

However, aspects of this sequence show imagery which imply sound, such as the struts holding up subway lines and construction barricades. Slowly overpowering the beginning of this sequence is the sound of a train arriving off screen but is implied with the visible subway struts. The 'off-screen sound' shows that on-screen imagery can drive the use of sounds which are directly taking place in the narrative world and assists the audience's placement alongside the character (who is also experiencing the off-screen sound). Along with the offscreen construction sounds, the environment soundscape for this sequence is loud and glaring, giving an overall sense of confinement within the noise polluted city and reflects Joe's 'broken' state of mind (represented by jump cuts to flashbacks; which are audibly loud and focus on distressing moments of his life).

As soon as Joe enters the convenience store, the bustle of the city's soundscape dissipates and is cancelled out as Joe walks to the back of the store. The storeroom tone creates a moment of tranquillity. The quietness of this room also gives clarity to the performance, Joe is visibly calm and determined (through performance; eyes locked on the second character and looking around the room considerately), implying the intimidating and careful demeanour of the character. Joe speaks with a quiet intensity (via a gravelly, hushed voice),

the volume of his dialogue is in keeping with the atmosphere, this also allows the room tone (the off-screen humming of what the audience can assume is something appropriate to the storeroom of a shop) to give a subtle bass to Joe's voice (underlining his calm, compelling disposition and balances with the store's volume) and ultimately a feel of realism.

On sound design of *'The English Patient'* (Minghella, 1996), Walter Murch has explained how recording in the soundscape of a desert;

“was absolutely quiet, which made for great dialogue recording, but the problem is, if you simply played it the way it was, it would sound artificial. So, we had to develop... an active silence... a sound that wouldn't raise any suspicions”

-(Jarrett M, 2000).

It would seem that plausibility is an important factor to sound design and that the audience are attuned to listening to voices within an environmental soundscape (the audiences' attention naturally gravitates to the dialogue, with the background noise grounding the situation and the scenic tone). The room tone at the end of the sequence is present throughout, it is an unspecific sound, however, the audience derives a feel of realism and avoids alienation of the performances (if no room tone was present, the performances would feel disingenuous and the audience would be detached from their perception of 'real world silence').

We further experience the subtlety of room tone at the turning point of the film, this sequence (*'YWNRH'* Film, Time: 54.00 - 57.00) highly relies on the emotive performance from Joaquin Phoenix (as Joe), silence is also an important factor to this scene as it affects the practicality of the narrative and the emotional conflict within Joe's mind.

The sequence begins with Joe arriving at his home, due to his caution of being followed he enters the frame by dropping down onto the second- floor balcony, the camera is looking out of the window as this happens and we hear the muffled sound of Joe landing (Delivering a feel of realism through the kinetic nature of the dampened sound and the imagery of Joe

crouched on the other side of the window). The audience experiences the room tone of the bedroom and not the exterior, from where Joe is looking in (the room tone is quiet, in anticipation of Joe's reaction). Joe is positioned in the centre of the frame, yet he is partially hidden by the wall next to the window, he briefly looks through the window, then moves back behind the wall, and from this we catch a glimpse of Joe's blank reaction, his reaction develops as it cuts to Joe now inside the room (his face is now stern and uncompromising). Once in the room, the silence is maintained (this is appropriate to the practicality in the narrative; there are intruders in the house, the quiet room tone emphasises the emotive and situational tension of the scene). Joe confronts the death of his mother; his body language and his lack of sound give an air of dignity to the character's suppression of emotion (this effectively forces the audience to sympathise with Joe and underlines a turning point to the narrative).

The quiet room tone places us within Joe's situational awareness, as we hear off-screen voices (muffled, so the viewer assumes they are downstairs) and the slight sounds of Joe's footsteps approaching the top of the stairs. The audience is 'drip fed' a sense of the character's turbulent past throughout the film, flashbacks develop the viewer's perception of the character and give an element of sympathy towards Joe (contrasting and also negating the violent criminal characteristics of Joe). The viewer is able to share a sense of the stress experienced by the protagonist, via the medium of jarring and loud sound bites. The sound bites are intrusive to the silences within all the scenes, the sounds primarily consist of Joe's traumatic childhood and the abrasiveness of the sounds give the viewer a kinetic uncomfortable response (a response similar to Joe's on-screen experience, which we see from the subtle emotive performances).

Joe is the main focus of the frame again, as he stands at the top of the stairs, Ramsay maintains Joe's emotional temperament through use of the '*Kuleshov effect*'; Ramsay cuts between Joe's face and his perspective (as he looks downstairs at shadows of the intruders elicited with his mother's death).

"One experiment in particular - with the actor Mozhukin, child, soup and coffin - is perhaps the classic piece of film research, customarily cited in discussions of editing

and montage aesthetics as proof that cinematic meaning is a function of the ordering of shots"- (Prince & Hensley, 1992).

This use of the 'Kuleshov Effect' in 'YWNRH' allows the viewer to share in the personal, emotional value of the scene (viewers project they're emotional reaction onto Joe's blank face, to automatically generate an understanding of how Joe feels and for this scene the audience would visualise Joe as exasperated) and the quietness brings stark attention to the potency of this visual effect.

'No Country for Old Men' is a film reliant on the use of diegetic sound, this can be seen from the clarity and volume of almost every action visualised on-screen. The 'Motel Hunt' sequence ('NCFOM' Film, Time: 46.40 - 52.15) begins with Llewelyn (protagonist) fashioning a hook to retrieve the stashed briefcase from the vent, we hear the slide of the hangers as they're removed from the wardrobe and then the crisp clicking sounds as he removes the hanger hooks for repurposing. Interjecting this process are shots of Chigurh, Chigurh quietly (same room tone as Llewelyn) studies the motel layout and initiates the build of tension. By using the same quiet room tone for all shots, detachment between the two characters is avoided and therefore they feel in closer proximity to one another, adding to the tension. The meticulous use of amplified diegetic sounds allows for sonic significance of each action, the viewer can clearly hear these sounds because they are in the process of something important (i.e. The narrative of 'Cause and Effect'; Llewelyn's escape plan and Chigurh's tracking).

The shots cut between; the industrious attitude of Llewelyn and the investigative style of Chigurh. Llewelyn's shots consist of his plan in action; imagery of him working towards the briefcase and a well-defined, kinetic audio feel of the actions involved. Meanwhile, Chigurh's inspection of a neighbouring hotel room is quiet and consists of few diegetic cues, this conclusively makes him seem attentive and observant to his visual environment (the performance also shows him pacing around the apartment and observing elements of the room).

Not only does the heightened volume of the diegetic sounds establish importance, it also drives the authenticity of the film, and this is emphasised by the lack of non-diegetic sounds or scores.

A sense of assurance is made by both characters in the sequence; Llewelyn removes the A/C vent (accentuated by the sound of metal reverberating through the vent shaft), while Chigurh removes his boots and produces a shotgun from his bag (all the while his tracker continuously beeps, this avoids rest within the tension of the scene's atmosphere and creates a feeling of a prelude).

As soon as Chigurh initiates a shoot-out at the motel, a cut to Llewelyn gives his visual expression (which is one of realisation), and now the two spliced scenes have become overlapped. Chigurh's actions continue to invade Llewelyn's process, as high intensity gunfire fills the volume of Chigurh's shot and the tail end of these gunshots can be heard (albeit muffled) in another cut to Llewelyn (hearing the shots from Llewelyn's perspective allow the audience to make judgement on how close Chigurh is, and feeds the viewer's sense of impending consequence).

After the violence, Chigurh proceeds to continue his initial patient attitude, by systematically searching for the briefcase. This hard switch is made uneasy as prior to his search Chigurh removes his socks and the quietness resumes, creating a feeling that past events have just been ignored. This eerie calmness, which is reinstated by the sound and imagery, show how effective harsh and defined cinematic techniques can add to our perception of characters on-screen (in consideration to an overlapping narrative and the emotions determined from the atmosphere).

'You Were Never Really Here' effectively utilises the sound of silence to establish the 'quiet rage' the viewer can visualise from Joaquin Phoenix's performance as Joe. We also see and hear a similar 'quiet rage' within the characteristics of Javier Bardem's Anton Chigurh (*'NCFOM'*). Both characters are defined by their subtleties in performance (seemingly nonchalant, yet also portraying their suppressed lethality and imposing physicality). However, audio is a massive contributor to what makes both characters feel real and grounded. Quiet room tones place emphasis upon how vigilant the characters are and how self-assured they seem (the audience is actively listening for slight cues in diegetic sound, which lead to violent outcomes in both films).

Both films also show the focus of how the characters wish to eliminate noise. Joe consistently suppresses the volume of his emotions towards events (to keep focus and control), whereas Chigurh tries to pre-emptively eliminate sound through the medium of a suppressed shotgun and silently flees from events within the film. Both characters desire a definitive (near absolute) silence, though it is never actualised, and sounds (of Joe's jarring flashbacks or the violent exertions of both characters) which define them are inescapable.

From analysing the two films, it is undeniable that emotion can be conveyed to the audience through strong visual performances (as seen in both *'YWNRH'* and *'NCFOM'*), and therefore in reference to my initial question, ***'Is silence an established way of using audio to develop and engage with the narrative of a character's mindset?'***, audio most definitely contributes to how filmmakers choose to convey the emotions (both Joe and Chigurh's quiet rage) and sub narratives (Joe's PTSD and Chigurh's wordless complacency) of a character to the audience.

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