

How does The Lighthouse portray the human struggle of persevering through solitude in it's score and sound design?

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Introduction

The Lighthouse (2019) is a surreal psychological thriller directed by Robert Eggers and composed by Mark Korven in their second collaboration, also being Robert Eggers' second feature film. Written by Robert Eggers and Max Eggers. Cinematography by Jarin Blashke. Sound design by Damien Volpe. Starring Willem Dafoe and Robert Pattinson (IMDB, 2019)

The Lighthouse follows two lighthouse keepers in the late 19th century that struggle to keep their sanity during the four weeks that they tend to a lighthouse on a remote island off the coast of Canada during an even further isolating storm. There has been debate on what genre the film could fit into, but due to the highly psychological nature of the film's narrative, questioning elements such as power dynamics, sexuality, and mythology. Almost leaning into being a character study. Robert Eggers stated that the film's subtext is inspired by Sigmund Freud within some of the dynamics between the two leads. (Jacobs, M. (2019)) However, due to the disturbing nature of the film, it is often seen as a psychological horror or thriller.

How does Robert Eggers compliment the development of these themes throughout the film using the score and sound design?

When initially collaborating with composer Mark Korven to craft the score of the film. Unlike his previous film "The Witch" which has a very traditional sounding film score, Eggers and Composer Mark Korven decided to go a more experimental route, breaking the rules of a traditionally composed score "Korven said in an official statement, "Robert [Eggers] and I were rather like the two wickies that went insane in 'The Lighthouse,' musically speaking. We travelled to some very dark

harmonic and textural places. We both enjoy not just breaking the rules, but blowing them to smithereens. The spirit of experimentation was always present.” (Erbling K 2019).

This breaking of the rules creates a soundscape within the score that is highly unusual and uncanny to the audience, often represented in low droning horn-like sounds a motif that is similar to the constant repetition of the foghorn. Throughout the film there are little to no traditional-sounding elements found within the score. What should also be noted is the fact that the score itself is extremely minimalistic, with many scenes lacking any music but with emotion and tension instead built through diegetic sound. Such as the wind outside cabin growing more intense to build tension in a simple dialogue scene. The constant use of wind, waves crashing and seagulls chirping is a constant reminder of the isolation the characters are facing throughout as these are the only things that exist within the limited world around them. During scenes that may seemingly seem mundane, such as one scene around 30 minutes into the film of the two leads silently eating at a table. The tension between them is driven by the disturbing and uncanny score, with a less minimalist feel to it. The tense droning during this scene, combined with the foghorn and the loud clanking of utensils drives the tension between the two leads even further, almost feeling like being trapped with someone you despise.

Sound designer Damien Volpe states that he spent over a month researching the history of foghorns in an effort to capture the sound of the foghorns that existed in the 19th century, however due to the low frequency nature of most foghorns which may not be audible when played on some devices. He had to resort to mixing it with a higher pitched siren sound that some lighthouses implement. (Gobar, M. (2019))

The mixture of these two sound frequencies creates something that feels threatening and alarming to the human mind, adding sound that when constantly repeated not only drives the characters insane, but also the audience. The foghorn also becomes a reoccurring motif to signal tension alongside something on the island going sideways, examples being Ephriam first encounter with the mermaid or the killing of the seagull. One thing to note is that this insanity inducing sound is contrasted by the calming and angelic sound within the lantern room.

This is one of the only times any kind of calm sound is heard within the film and could be a representation of both characters desires, whether in the form of control, which is a constant struggle for Ephriam, or as a lustful desire which seems to be desired by both, but Thomas treats the lantern as if it were a spouse and forbids Ephriam from even going near it. Ephriam’s lustful desire is represented by the mermaid which also follows a similar sound design to the lantern. When Ephriam/Thomas does reach the lantern at the end of the film the light angelic choir is juxtaposed by his distorted, painful screams. Perhaps as a

way of highlighting his complete descent to madness and not even his desires are worth anything to him anymore

Towards the end of the film when he does start to succumb to the madness, water starts leaking into the cabin, the rain was always background noise but the structural integrity of the cabin slowly deteriorating could represent Ephraim's mental state deteriorating. The wave crashing into the cabin and flooding it can represent that he is completely gone as there is no separation from the safety and the outside elements. Even as the storm is gone, he is still showing lasting effects.

The score also starts to become more maximalist and more like a traditional horror score, almost as if our two leads are constantly trading places as the lead and the monster in a horror film, adding to the power struggle between them. Before Ephraim becomes the one in power and the monster after fully succumbing to madness.

The use of diegetic elements such as the weather and the foghorn as an instrument of their own

The weather itself seems to be a character and instrument of itself, along with the foghorn. This may lead into the mythological undertones of the film, such as when Ephraim kills a seagull, which is considered to be bad luck as they have the souls of sailors. The wind immediately changes and brings on the storm which brings the isolation later in the film. The tense score immediately cuts out and is replaced with the gruesome diegetic sound of the killing. This is followed by the tense score returning just to show the wind changing direction.

After this moment two shots are similar in manner to previous shots in the film but have largely different connotations due to the change in sound design.

The shot of the two leads watching, waiting for the boat to arrive is similar to the shot earlier in the film of them watching it depart. However, the change in composition is not

the only thing making them seem more isolated. During the scene earlier in the film they were isolated by silence, this has been subverted with them being isolated by the extreme weather with heavy rainfall taking over the soundscape. The dinner table shot has not changed in composition, however it has largely changed in soundscape, now barely containing any score, and is portraying the isolation with the heavy rainfall with a brief use of the score to create tension, of being trapped indefinitely. This may also represent a change in the character's mental state as they no longer have the security of knowing when they will be able to leave the island.

Weather in mythology

The lighthouse takes some inspiration from classical mythological tales, which is supported by the superstition of killing seagulls is bad luck, along with mentions of Neptune and Robert Eggers wanting elements of ancient Greek music in the score when first pitching to Mark Korven "It would be a minimalist aleatoric soundtrack with a nod to sea shanties and ancient Greek music" - Robert Eggers (Macaulay, S. (2019)) . The ancient Greeks often believed the winds and weather to be the work of the gods, and sometimes divine intervention such as Poseidon (who's roman equivalent Neptune is mentioned in the lighthouse) prevented Odysseus from returning home after spiting his name. Poseidon uses fierce winds and violent waters within storms to prevent him from sailing home. Homer (750BCE). This parallels Ephriam and Thomas being unable to return home after Ephriam spites the powers above by killing a seagull. The sound design and score almost being taken over by the storm after this point displays what can be interpreted as the anger of the gods towards Ephriam. Preventing him from returning home.

Scene Analysis: Opening Scene

The film opens with a black screen with a low disturbing droning soundscape made up of various horn instruments. After almost a minute has passed, we see a small ship in the distance as the score slowly becomes more rhythmic. Before we even see the boat in the mist our first sign of life is the call of a seagull, foreshadowing the role they take on later in the film. The ever-present drone of the lighthouse itself starts in this scene, this unnatural diegetic sound creates a feeling of unease as it almost sounds like the muffled call of something from the deep.

After a full minute we get our first glimpse of the boat, however the camera is facing down towards the depths, with the sound of the waves crashing against the boat combined with the cyclical sound of the engine, these diegetic sounds almost overwhelm the score but at the same time becomes a drum-like instrument of its own, complimenting the foreboding droning of the score. These two elements combine to create a suspenseful yet anticipatory feeling. Once it cuts to the protagonists sitting at the front of the boat the rhythm of the engine almost completely overwhelms the score, but the score combats this by increasing in volume and decreasing in pitch. This sudden change in from a high pitch note to a lower pitched note turns the feeling of cautious anticipation into one of dread as the droning of the lighthouse starts to reappear, while we are seated in this boat, drawing closer and closer to this mysterious sound. While we watch our two protagonists simply stare into the fog ahead. Not interacting with each other or any part of the boat, simply swaying back and forth in rhythm with the drumming of the engine. Displaying an intrinsic connection between them and sound design.

Once it cuts to an over the shoulder angle of our two leads, the soundscape is completely engulfed by a gong-like sound for around two seconds, almost as if it was clearing the fog ahead, once this sound ends, there is an almost anachronistic radar sound as the lighthouse pierces through the fog. Drawing the audience's attention towards this distant light in the center of the frame. As the boat nears the lighthouse and the island it is situated on become clearer. Alongside this all the musical elements start becoming increasingly tense, building up tension as the horn of the lighthouse increases in volume. This leads the audience to believe that this tension is building up to something, such as the boat crashing into an island. This expectation is immediately subverted by an abrupt cut to the boat already on the shore, all non-diegetic sound completely disappears as we are met by the haunting silence of the island.

It can be argued that this scene establishes the soundscape that the rest of the film will follow, this minimalistic highly diegetic soundscape that places emphasis on the features of the island that remind the leads and the viewer of the isolated nature of the island

Despite implied interaction with the people on the shore, the scene completely skips past any dialogue that may have taken place, almost isolating our leads from any other human connection. Throughout the rest of the scene there is a complete lack of any score, or dialogue even between the two leads, almost establishing that they would rather exist in solitude than interact with each other. The natural diegetic soundscape continues, with heavy crashing waves that reinforce the notion of being trapped on this isolated island. The only sign of life being the constant chirping of the seagulls, almost overwhelming the sound of the waves, foreshadowing their larger role later in the film. This natural soundscape is

consistently pierced by the sound of lighthouse's horn. Once the duo near the entrance of the lighthouse the waves become more distant but are still loud enough to be a reminder of the isolation they are facing, the seagull's calls are inescapable no matter where you are on the island. The proximity to the lighthouse means the horn is no longer muffled and now sounds more foreboding and sinister, another constant reminder of being trapped in a repetitive life on the island. As the two leads pass the previous duo that occupied the lighthouse not a single word is spoken, not even an acknowledgment of each other, adding towards the element of human isolation, making the island feel even more isolated and almost like solitary confinement. Another abrupt cut that completely changes the soundscape occurs again.

The two leads silently watch the boat depart, completely isolating them from the outside world, there are no seagulls and no waves crashing, only the slightest sound of the wind blowing which is constantly overwhelmed by the overbearing and repetitive sound of the lighthouse's horn blaring. Once again there is not a single acknowledgement of each other or any word spoken, continuing to make the characters feel isolated. Once it cuts to the shot of the boat leaving, we do not hear the engine as it is too distant, only one wave crashes and one seagull chirps, completely subverting the soundscape previously established throughout the scene. As the boat disappears into the mist there are no signs of life apart from a lone seagull chirping, continuing to foreshadow their role in the film. This is also the only time we do not hear the blaring of the lighthouse's horn, as the focus is on the outside world fading away from visibility. This scene ends with an almost completely silent soundscape, minus the quiet and haunting wind.

Conclusion

Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* is a lonely and insanity-driven film. Everything found within Mark Korven's uncanny score and Damien Volpe's naturalistic and disturbing sound design, compliment the highly disturbing tone that Eggers' has crafted with this film.

These two elements converge at multiple points during the film crafting a soundscape that is both naturalistic and unnatural, a contrast that creates a disturbing feeling for those in the audience. This also creates questions on whether what is being seen and heard is real or something more metaphorical as there are many points throughout the film where it becomes surreal. The soundscape supports this surrealism by not abiding to what is expected of a typical horror score. This also supports why the lighthouse is difficult to categorise into any one genre.

The immersiveness of the sound design makes the audience feel isolated along with the characters, especially once the storm starts it begins to feel like we are indefinitely trapped within this isolated cabin slowly going insane. This is only a sliver of what can be analysed within the lighthouse as the film is rich with subtext

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