

Provide an auditory scene analysis of a film / TV / animation / game scene of your choosing

After researching into a variety of scenes from various films, I have decided to analyse one of the most famous scenes from the film *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan in 2008 - this being the Joker's 'Why so serious?' scene. I chose this scene as it stood out in my memory of being powerful through the combination of image and audio, with the chosen sounds reflecting great relevance to the movement of the scene as a whole.

As cited by Alan Rudolph in 'Celluloid Symphonies': *"You can make an argument that music is the soul of the film. In movies it's like flavorizer - it heightens, it sharpens, and it's contradictory presentation of action and emotion."* (Hubbert, 2011, p.453)

The film *The Dark Knight* was composed by the German composer Hans Zimmer, and the American composer James Newton Howard. Both very well known composers, Zimmer has been behind films such as *Inception*, *Gladiator* and *The Lion King*, and Howard behind films such as *The Hunger Games*, *Maleficent* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. As evident in the examples of films these composers have each worked on, their methods and techniques are very effectively used to create relevant moods for particular moments in films, as they are in my chosen scene of the Joker's 'Why so serious?'.

The scene begins with the sound of rain and thunder, instantly creating an atmosphere of unease and causing the viewer to become unsettled as they watch. Some would argue the sun is a symbol of warmth and happiness, as it warms us in a physical sense, which could correlate the warmth it brings us through an emotional state. It could be argued that the rain here, has this same effect, symbolising sadness and portraying an uncomfortable feeling, as physically the rain makes us feel wet, cold and uncomfortable. Despite the attention of the audience being fixated on the actors, what they are doing and what they are saying, subconsciously they are susceptible to the audio, setting the mood through sounds for example, of the weather, music, movement and sound effects.

"Sound effects, like music, enhance a story and provide the sounds that best fit a scene's emotional atmosphere." (Mott 2009, p.79)

The sound of the scene then builds subtly through strings, sitting behind the thundering weather, which gradually increases in size, texture and volume. Texture is also added through the sound of 'ticking', in a sixteenth note pattern. This creates a rising tension for the audiences to experience, with the tones of the strings continuously increasing and descending, allowing space for silence. This silence creates a suspenseful atmosphere, with room for any spontaneous movements that occur. Through keeping the build of the audio thin and quiet in texture, there is allowance for a stronger, more effective impact through sudden rapid changes.

The Joker gets laid out onto the table in a black bag, which then gets pulled down to reveal his face. As this takes place, a distant reverberant drum becomes evident in the background, emphasising the importance of that specific moment - in which the Joker is believed to be dead. The background noise of ticking and the strings stay consistent here in velocity, dynamics and structure which compliments the next sudden change in style very nicely, when the Joker jumps up and the music becomes more aggressive matching the faster pace of the movements in the scene. The synchronicity at this point is effective through the sound matching the movements of the image.

As stated by Peter Larsen in his analysis of a scene from the film Metropolis, I believe the same sentiment can be applied to my analysis of this area of my chosen scene from The Dark Knight.

"Because the music and the images are coordinated, a perceptual equivalence is created. It is as if the rhythm of the music matches the movement in the images, and vice versa. One sees the movement and sees the rhythm of the music in the movement; one hears the music and hears the movement of the images in the rhythm." (Larsen 2007, p.67)

All in all, there are 5 movements prior to the tables being fully turned and the Joker taking full control of the situation in the scene. The first movement being when the Joker jumps up suddenly

and stabs the two men either side of him. The second movement takes place when the Joker is fully standing, moving straight into the third movement where he slides his knife into the mouth of the third man. The final two movements however are separated in terms of timing, but are similar in that these men are being held at gun point. For each moment of movement the audio stabs, matching exactly the timing of the movement itself, creating a stronger impact for the visuals. These 'stabs' of audio are rapid, strong and impactful, through the use of the loud, almost 'industrial sounding' effects. They are more percussive as opposed to musical, which give more of a punch and build towards the suspense of the scene.

The final movement however, follows a slight delay in terms of the pace of the 'stabs', this gives a sense of unsuccessful struggle, emphasising that the Joker has in fact successfully attained complete control over the men and the situation as a whole. This use of sound compliments the Joker's character very well as it emphasises his smoothness, his slickness as well as his suddenness. In only five simple movements the Joker has taken full control of the situation, and this is highlighted in the audio used.

Following these quick few seconds of the scene, the tension is momentarily released, but brought straight back with almost repetition of the music through the use of the same sound of strings. However, there is a difference in sound this time around as the continuous ticking is replaced with a progressive bass line, building a strong atmosphere of tension. As the audience at this moment have become accustomed to the original build, hearing it with added texture exaggerates the tension.

During my research, I found that Hans Zimmer states in his trailer for 'Teaching Film Scoring':
"There are no rules when it comes to making music for a film." (MasterClass, 2017)

The above statement could be interpreted in a variety of ways. My opinion is that there are some rules which need to be kept in mind when developing a concept for the mood of a particular scene. For example, when there is a tense moment, as is in my chosen scene, the music must be relevant to the scene, in order to ensure creation of a specific mood. Without the correct musicality or auditory, I feel the scene in question would lack successful delivery of expression. I

believe, when Zimmer talks of 'no rules' he is referring to the freedom of being instrumentally versatile, innovative and original, however whilst also ensuring there is a relevance to the context of the scene and constructing the correct mood for the narrative.

He also states, in the same trailer that "*...in music, you're basically having a conversation. There's a question and there's an answer.*" (MasterClass, 2017)

This relates to my chosen scene through the building and releasing of tension in reaction to the Joker's movements. The build of tension could be interpreted as the question, as it generates questioning from the audience in terms of what will happen next. In terms of music and sound, it gives the impression of being unresolved. This build will eventually either need to be resolved i.e. through being answered, or naturally die out. The release of sudden changes could be interpreted as the answer to the question, as at this stage the audience is experiencing through sight and sound, what the tension was in fact building to.

As the scene continues, the Joker once more puts the knife back in the mouth of the man, and the ticking begins to fade back in, increasing the level of tension further. The process of repeating the audio is clever as the audience is accustomed to hearing the clicking as the fundamental element of the composition's build in tension, which fades away to later fade back, causing a subconscious reminder for the audience of what the ticking entails. This subconscious reminder builds on the sense of suspense, leading the audience to believe there will be a repeat of actions.

From here, it begins to sound as though the strings are rising higher and higher. This however is a technique of an auditory illusion frequently used by Zimmer in his compositions for various films - a method called the 'Shepard Tone', named after Roger Shepard, a cognitive scientist. The Shepard tone consists of as many tones required for texture, all separated by an octave layered one above the other. These tones move up in scale, with the highest frequency tones gradually decreasing in volume, the middle frequency tones remaining loud through out, and the lower frequency tones or the bass tones increasing in volume almost fading in.

As is it possible to hear two tones rising in pitch at the same time throughout, this deceives the brain to assume there is a constant ascending tone. When this is repeated on a loop, the illusion of sound constantly growing is created, called a 'Shepard - Risset - Glissando'. This auditory method also works in reverse and has been used in many other sound tracks for games such as Mario Kart, tracks from Pink Floyd and in more recent films such as The Prestige and Dunkirk.

The strings then begin to increase in size and volume, as the Joker narrates his disturbing story from when he was younger. The audio used in the development of the scene begins to sound sharp which plays on the movement of the Joker almost metaphorically symbolising the sharp knife he is using. This works simultaneously to the build of tension and suspense also created through the audio. Building in layers of percussion, this begins matching the bass progression pattern, building up to the release - in this particular moment, being the Joker's famous line: 'Why so serious?' Immediately following this line there is a final stab before the man drops to the floor, with yet again the audio emphasising the importance to the movements in the scene.

This method of creating suspense through the audio of the scene, is vital in provoking the relevant feelings and level of awareness in the audience. *"We need sound design to focus the ears [...] We need it to enhance not only the volume of a spoken line, but also the sounds around the drama and inside it. Sound design can build suspense, can focus a spoken moment, and can direct the ear to listen with more care."* (Kaye et LeBrecht 1992, p.xvii)

With the tension having been built up for so long throughout the scene, when the audio finally drops as the man is killed, there is a sudden shift in atmosphere as the sense of ongoing building tension is suddenly released. This element of the scene is vital as it symbolises the authority of the Joker, acknowledging that he has complete control over the situation and the tension.

Overall, I feel the scene I have chosen is effective in its composition, as it is powerful through its simplicity. With minimal sound effects used, the subtle sounds and focus of composition for certain areas of the scene are even more compelling. Given the nature of this scene, the audio could easily become overdone in terms of using too much, and too many differing sounds.

Howard and Zimmer however, have successfully composed the scene, highlighting the vital areas whilst also allowing space, which is important in ensuring impactful moments when the audio emerges again. Full of suspense and shocking moments, my chosen scene has been composed to perfection in a simple yet very effective fashion.

Bibliography

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