

Question 3: From the film & music cluster lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay (or equivalent). Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners

Student number: 1810596

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Name of Lecturer: Rob Jones

UNCUT GEMS

Introduction

We are placed in an Ethiopian mine, and there is chaos. An ominous non-diegetic electronic drone indicates danger. A miner is being carried by his co-workers, he is badly injured. In the midst of this two miners retreat back underground. Far from the angry mob, they seem to know that something precious is down there. They chip away at some rock and uncover the glimpse of black opal. The non-diegetic drone changes its shape to reveal something otherworldly. Here we begin our journey as the camera dives into the gem. We explore inside, what seems to be, another universe. Michel Chion talks of how sound can bring added value to the image:

By added value I mean the expressive and informative value by which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it.

(Chion, 1994, p. 8)

In this essay, I have selected the Safdie brothers film *Uncut Gems* (2019). The film tells the story of Howard Ratner, played by Adam Sandler, a gambling addict who obtains a black opal in the hope of making his fortune whilst being pursued by loan sharks all playing out amidst a disintegrating private life. The film was universally praised by critics

but has had a mixed response from the public. Enter the words 'Uncut Gems sound' into Google and you the search engine will offer up a host of critical sentences, 'Uncut gems too loud' 'Does the music ever stop in Uncut Gems' The infamous audience review section within 'Rotten Tomatoes' follows a similar line of thought (Rotten Tomatoes, 2019). There is a general feeling that, for its critics, this movie is repellent and much of that criticism is laid at the sound design. Within this essay, I will explore why and how its creators engineered a soundscape that has divided an audience. Drawing on the academic research made into film sound and other contextual practices I want to question whether the film's creators want us to shrink back in disgust or listen harder for hidden meanings by analysing its sound world that enriches and adds value to the images on the screen (Chion, 1994).

The Sound of Uncut Gems

'They say you can see the whole universe in opals, that's how old they are' (*Uncut Gems*, 2019). The revealing of the opal is a cue to reveal the track ' The Ballad of Howie Bling' (Lopatin, 2019). Visually, via the camera lens, we begin to fly inside the Gem. We see the prismatic effects of light bouncing off the walls of the gem. Sonically, the engine room of the piece is the Moog one synth. Costing an eye-watering 7 thousand dollars the Moog one's selling point to the film's composer Daniel Lopatin was its polyphonic, multi-voice capabilities (Behind the Soundtrack: 'Uncut Gems' with

Daniel Lopatin (DOCUMENTARY), 2019). This gave Lopatin a rich well of sounds to forage through. Moog has historically had a strong connection within film soundtracks. Most notably, Wendy Carlos' work in which she reconfigured notable classical works using Moog synths on *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Shining* (1980). Lopatin, when acquiring the instrument, compared it to being an alien object that, at first, seemed intimidating but needed childlike exploration (The Sound of Uncut Gems, 2019). Lopatin, for the intro section of the piece, uses a patch within the synth to reflect the prismatic, evolving, almost mystical light effects we see on the screen. Here we see Chion's theory of Added value in practice. Our outer space journey is enriched by the cosmic sonic environment we are placed in. We are caressed by the synths filter envelopes circling around us. The music here is soothing, healing. On a technical standpoint, however, we at no point are consciously aware of how the musician is operating the instrument. We have entered the 'audiovisual contract' in which we accept the image, sound and music as a unified whole (Chion, 1994, p. 216). This acceptance is taken to extremes throughout the movie as the once cosmic visual landscape slowly changes from outer space to a more organic inner space. We appear to be inside a human body. The musical cue shifts to slow arpeggiated, melodic synth line, we are inside Howard Ratner's body as the camera allows us to be part of the characters endoscopy. Now the camera reveals a man at his most vulnerable, unconscious, half-naked, slumped on a bed undergoing an intimate medical examination. The majestic, cosmic music continues, however down to earth to visuals may be. Now a tone is set for much of the film in terms of the relationship between its musical score and the images we see. The Swiss musicologist Hansjörg Pauli defines this approach

as Contrapuntal music, music whose clear character contradicts the likewise clear character of the images (Singh, 2020). We are watching, or what will begin to progress as, a thriller whose roots lie in the gritty cinema thrillers of the '70s and early '80s. The plot of these films revolved around flawed anti-heroes. They would inhabit dangerous cities. The musical language of this time was firmly rooted within the rock, jazz and funk genres. Arguably more 'organic' musical languages. Much of the musical language of *Uncut Gems* takes its cues from electronic music pioneers such as Vangelis, Tomita, and Wendy Carlos. We are being affected less by the chord progressions and melody than the timbre of the sounds we are hearing. The score washes over us as it seems to bloom into new directions as the images move.

The score in context

There is also a definite sense of nostalgia at play too. Lapontin has been an accomplished artist within the field of electronic music for over a decade. Recording under the name 'Oneohtrix Point Never' he has been widely credited with creating the genre of 'Vaporwave' (Cole, 2020). Gaining notoriety at the second half of the 2000's Vaporwave took pop music of the 80's and '90s, advertising jingles, Muzak, a start-up sound to a Microsoft operating system from the mid '90s and a whole slew of pop culture references and slowed them down, looped them, disfigured their original meanings, recontextualised them. Despite not lasting long as a musical movement the philosophical thought processes it opened up are still being discussed today. The 'Vapour' could be likened to fog or an uncertain dread (Futures and Horta, 2017). The

fact that we cannot see what is ahead of us. The theorist Mark Fisher wrote about 21st-century culture and politics being trapped in a loop. That despite all the technological advancements made, cultural time has folded back into itself. That capitalist realism (the perception that there is no alternative to capitalism) has led to a slow cancellation of the future, that we too cannot see a clear future. Instead, we go back to the past. Using the term 'Hauntology' this, in turn , has shaped the outlook of many modern electronic musicians who have mined the past to create new work. Their imaginations have conjured up sounds which were "preoccupied with the way in which technology materialised memory" (Fisher, 2014, p. 47). The crackle of vinyl, the hiss of tape, or in Vapor Waves case the preoccupation with the sounds associated with capitalized western society. Lopatin's musical philosophy influences the musical score in the movie. The soundtrack wouldn't have half its bite were it not for the otherworldly synths of Lopatin's neon-lit, muzak-gone-maximalist score.

The music continues as we follow Ratner, on his phone, walking down a busy New York street. The piece has now latched onto a steady rhythm, we can hear percussion and an almost operatic ensemble of voices. Rather than fade out though for us to hear the conversation, the filmmakers add layer upon layer of diegetic sound on top of us. We hear Ratner's voice, the agitated voice of the person he is conversing with on the phone, the city traffic, the door buzzer to his place of work and the customers within his shop all vying for his attention, and our attention.

The diegetic sound of *Uncut Gems*

The diegetic sound in *Uncut Gems* fully utilises the technology available today. It's used to place us in a fully immersive world. Chion describes this as the 'Suprfield' space to contain high definition ambient natural sounds created and enhanced using modern multitrack technology (Chion, 1994, p. 150). The birth of this new sonic space can be credited to the onset of Dolby Stereo technology. Cinema is not simply sound and image, it generates sensations that are rhythmic, dynamic, kinetic (Chion, 1994, p. 152). These sounds within this superfield, because of the technical precision in which they can be captured and placed as a piece of audio, can exist outside of what we are seeing within the shot yet can dictate much of what a scene is trying to communicate to the audience. When making *Uncut Gems* the directors took onboard state of art developments within the recent development of Dolby Atmos to build a soundscape that goes beyond the superfield and into what recently been described as the Ultrafield (Kerins, 2011, pp. 91-111). Dolby Atmos has the ability to place up to 120 specific sounds or 'audio objects' within a 3D space. In a cinema with a Dolby atmos system, this would translate as these sounds being placed into specific speakers (including the ceiling) throughout the room. When making the film the directors used this technology to create a dense diegetic soundtrack that creates a high definition wall of sound. Whilst having the potential to utilise this technology to create a diegetic soundtrack that would clearly communicate plot and dialogue to the audience, the directors use it to overload our senses from all directions.

Here the filmmakers are putting the emphasis on the audience to practice semantic listening. This mode of listening is required to interpret hidden meaning with the film (Chion, 1994, p. 28). One scene where we have an opportunity to exercise this mode is contained within the lead characters jewellery store and in particular a faulty vestibule door. The door can only be opened by a buzzer within Ratner's office. Some important clients visit the office, it soon transpires that they are trapped within the vestibule. The buzzer is pressed several times, its sonic characteristics are inherently amplified and rendered to antagonise us. Despite this not being a life and death scenario, the exposition that has been used up to this point, creates a growing sense of tension. Using semantic listening we can dwell on the buzzer as being symbolic of the ever-growing pressure upon our lead. We are also paying attention to the empathetic sounds we are being presented (Chion, 1994, p. 8). The buzzer's shrill electronic tone is devoid of any empathy for the growing peril the character finds himself in, it's constant in frequency and volume. It represents the demands that are upon him from his enemies and his addiction. And, much like our broken character, it can seemingly never be fixed.

The Anti-hero

The 'dark triad' of personality is composed of Narcism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy and more and more have characters within popular culture displayed these traits (Crysel et al. 2012, p. 192). Ratner, within the film, displays all these. We know that these traits are not ones to aspire to. We baulk at the choices he makes yet

by means of the semantic musical code within the film we can also place Ratner on an almost heroic quest. Despite his flaws, his possession of this mystical gem could, providing he can defeat the dark forces against him, change his destiny. We can also examine Ratner through the same sonic medium and see another perspective. At the film's conception, an artistic choice for these musical choices was also drawn from new age, medicinal synth music and meditation focussed chakra music (Kiser, 2019). New-age music is a genre that developed in the second half of the twentieth century as minimalist music that aimed to evoke certain atmospheres, often tranquil and meditative. It has connections with the New Age counterculture movement from the 1970s taking in a wide range of ideas about alternative medicine, meditation, Far East doctrines and practices, admiration of indigenous cultures, neo-shamanism and neo-paganism, spiritual feminism, consciousness and self-help groups, spiritual psychotherapies, and channelling (Kiser, 2019) Within the late eighties and early nineties new age music became a commercially viable commodity, splintering off into sub-genres such as 'ethnic' 'world music' 'trance' 'muzak' 'environmental' 'space' and 'healing' (Ruar-Midbar, 2012) The 'healing' and more 'spiritual' aspects of new age music and its heavy influence on the non-diegetic soundtrack initially seem to be another counterpoint.

Conclusion

On the night of August 29 1952, the composer John Cage debuted his piece 4:33. The pianist performing the piece took to the stage and sat at the piano, intermittently opening and closing the piano's lid to its keys. After 4 minutes and 33 seconds he stood and took a bow, the performance had ended. Not a single note was played. Cage's piece still divides audiences. Initial reactions were of irritation and puzzlement (Dodd, 2017 p96) What Cage is doing however is shifting the attention to the audience. What are they really hearing during the performance? He is encouraging them to pay attention to the sounds with the room, the ambient sounds that would otherwise be disregarded as irrelevant to the performance. He framed the sonic environment they were in as something to pay attention to. These were philosophical ideas that took time to gestate and make manifest (Gann, 2010, pp. 1-33). From the outset, my question was whether the film's creators wanted to repel us with noise or draw us into something deeper.

The answer is that we are being drawn into the chaos within Howard Ratner's head. The barrage of diegetic sounds in which we cannot understand what exactly is being said, the constant ringing of phones and door buzzers depict the sound of a man in torment. There is no room for silence. But we are then given the contrasting non-diegetic new age soundtrack. The lifestyles of many of the characters, the choices they make, the expletive riddled dialogue are initially at odds with the pure, wellness of mind lifestyle promoted by new age music. Ratner himself is sick, he is an addict. We can argue that the non-diegetic sound though is the film's moral compass. One track within the score even sounds like a gong bath (a form of sound healing meditation). These musical choices indicate that Rattner *himself* is the uncut gem. A man spurred on

by good intentions but riddled with an addiction that needs healing. A fleshly man in need of spirituality. The soundtrack makes this journey to healing a possibility and always within grasp, as long as we listen.

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