

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

“Discuss the key concepts of Michel Chion's ‘audiovisual contract’ and how it can be used to interpret the relationship between sound and image within moving image”.
Provide a short analysis of two (or more) film/animation/game scenes of your choice to help articulate your discussion.

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The relationship between sound and moving image has been extensively researched within French film theorist Michael Chion's work *Audio-Vision* (Chion, 1990); "shedding light on the mutual influences of sound and image in audiovisual perception" (Chion, 1990). He argued "we never see the same thing when we also hear. We don't hear the same thing when we see as well" (Chion, 1990), and so created the 'audiovisual contract' (Chion, 1990, p. 4) to aid in developing this theory; using key terms such as added value, temporalisation, empathetic and anempathetic sound, unification and synchresis; all of which identified through Chion's listening modes. This essay will explore Chion's audiovisual contract using Stanley Kubrick's *'The Shining'* (The Shining, 1980) to demonstrate the important relationship between sound and moving image.

Chion uses the term 'added value' (Chion, 1990, p. 5) to help describe the audiovisual illusion whereby "sound enriches a given image so as to create a definite impression" (Chion, 1990, p. 5). Chion argues the relationship between sound and image influence our perception; "engaging the very structuring of vision - by rigorously framing it" (Chion, 1990, p. 7). Kubrick uses this added value of non-diegetic music, alongside diegetic sounds and dialogue, to perceive to the viewer a tense and dramatic atmosphere within 'The Shining' (The Shining, 1980). An example of Chion's added value of text would be during Jack's exclamation of "Here's Johnny!". A false proclamation of his name alongside semantically listening to the rhythmic bangs synchronised with the axe Jack is using all allude to a character encompassed in insanity. Chion argues dialogue to be of utmost importance within cinema; written in 'Audio-Vision' (Chion, 1990), stating "it is the voice that is isolated in the sound mix like a solo instrument—for which the other sounds are merely the accompaniment" (Chion, 1990, p. 5). However, it could be interpreted that Chion also supports the importance of other sounds within cinema as "sound is the vehicle of language" (Chion, 1990, p. 10); inferring to the importance of the relationship between sound and image. Chion argues that added value works reciprocally; "sound shows us the image differently than what the image shows alone, and the image likewise makes us hear sound differently than if the sound were ringing out in the dark" (Chion, 1990, p. 20); the actions and dialogue of 'The Shining' (The Shining, 1980) could be interpreted differently if this sound image relationship wasn't demonstrated; highlighting its importance. This idea can be seen when Jack falls down the stairs after Debbie attacks him; the music slowly increases in volume as Jack approaches Debbie whilst also becoming higher in pitch and irregular in rhythm. These musical techniques are believed to "signal danger almost instinctively" (Zarrelli, 2016); aiding in the tense atmosphere Kubrick is creating. Chion would agree with Zarrelli but would also believe the music score during this scene is converging to when Jack falls down the stairs; stating that sound "have tendencies, they indicate directions, they follow patterns of change and repetition that create in the spectator a sense of hope and expectation to be broken or filled" (Chion, 1990, p. 55). Chion would argue Kubrick is using the technique of 'convergence' (Chion, 1990, p. 56) through the sound within this scene to anticipate a climax, which is established through the added value of the non-diegetic soundtrack; highlighting the importance of the sound image relationship within moving image. Chion discusses a contrasting technique called 'divergence' where the sounds deviate against the viewers anticipations to create dramatic effect; seen when Jack is manically throwing kitchen pans and the soundtrack disappears with only the diegetic metallic clangs of the kitchen remain to create further tension between the unsettling silence and contrasting loud bangs.

One important effect of added value is its perception of time in an image, which Chion believes “sound can exert considerable influence” (Chion, 1990, p. 13). Known as temporalization, Chion states this can have three functions; temporal animation, linearization and vectorisation (Chion, 1990, p. 13). Kubrick demonstrates temporalisation when Danny sees room 237 whilst riding his trike (*The Shining*, 1980). The rhythmic diegetic sound of the trikes wheels convey temporal animation over the image by “rendering the perception of time in the image as exact and detailed” (Chion, 1990, p. 13). Chion would criticise the ‘regular pulse’ (Chion, 1990, p. 14) of the wheels as being “more predictable...creating less temporal animation than a sound that is irregular and unpredictable” (Chion, 1990, p. 14), arguing irregular sounds “puts the ear and the attention on constant alert” (Chion, 1990, p. 14) and so would believe an irregular rhythm would create further tension within this scene. However, Kubrick could be using this rhythmic sound to ‘vectorise’ or ‘dramatize’ the image as after Danny sees what has happened in that room, he frantically leaves and so the rhythmic synchresis of sound and image of the wheels increases also to aid in conveying Danny’s panic. Chion would argue through this temporal vectorisation; “the shot is going somewhere and it is oriented in time” (Chion, 1990, p. 13).

During the scene, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" (*The Shining*, 1980), Kubrick uses Penderecki’s piece “Polymorphia” (Penderecki, 1961); an atonal and dissonant music score to create an unsettling and tense atmosphere which mirrors the actions on screen; using empathetic music to interpret the relationship between sound and image. Sbravatti discusses Kubrick’s soundtrack in his thesis “The Music in The Shining” (Sbravatti, 2010); believing it to be “of fundamental importance” (Sbravatti, 2010). Chion develops this idea in his book; ‘Le Son au cinema’ (Chion, 1985) whereby the soundtrack “directly expresses its participation in the feeling of the scene” (Chion, 1990, p. 8). In this scene, Chion would argue the music takes on the scene’s “rhythm, tone and phrasing” (Chion, 1990, p. 8); especially demonstrated with the sharp staccato instrumentation of a string ensemble mimicking Jack’s sudden movements. However, the sound and image relationship can also be directly contrasted, whereby the music juxtaposes the scene; creating a “backdrop of indifference” (Chion, 1990, p. 8). Chion describes this as ‘anempathetic’ music (Chion, 1990, p. 8); seen being used during Jack’s party hallucination where Kubrick’s dramatic and tense soundtrack ceases into a soundscape of diegetic, calm classical music; directly contrasting with previous scenes of Jack’s descent into madness as to accentuate the hallucination being the peak of his insanity. This anempathetic effect can also occur with diegetic noise, such as the party chatter of his hallucinations appearing ordinary. However, in the context of being an hallucination, juxtapose his frantic descent into insanity. This function Chion describes within Kubrick’s ‘The Shining’ (*The Shining*, 1980) is another example of the importance of the sound and image relationship.

Chion’s effect of added value is especially established during the ‘unification’ (Chion, 1990, p. 47) of sound and image. This function is integral to the relationship between sound and image whereby it “brings unity by establishing atmosphere as a framework that seems to contain the image” (Chion, 1990, p. 47). Kubrick demonstrates this during the “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” (*The Shining*, 1980) scene when Debbie becomes terrified by Jack’s actions. The chilling non-diegetic music and Debbie’s frantic behaviour aid in conveying her confusion towards Jack’s

actions; which is further supported through Debbie's diegetic stammering dialogue of "I don't know!". Chion would argue this to be a prime example of unification (Chion, 1990, p. 64) as the relationship between the sounds and images within the scene all allude to a great sense of panic and distress; an atmosphere which couldn't be conveyed through image alone, supported by Chion who states "sound is the vehicle of language" (Chion, 1990, p. 9); exploring the important relationship between sound and image. Unification also, in temporal terms; "unifies by bridging the visual breaks through sound overlaps" (Chion, 1990, p. 47) and so "binds the flow of images" (Chion, 1990, p. 47). This is seen during Kubrick's "here's Johnny!" scene (The Shining, 1980) when the tight synchresis of the diegetic bangs associated with the axe breaking the door are heard during both shots of Jack with the axe in frame and Debbie crying for help in the bathroom. The sounds within this scene aid in inferring the audience that Debbie is hiding from Jack and not just crying in a bathroom through the unification of sound and image. This function of unification has been criticised by who Chion calls "the differentialist school of criticism" (Chion, 1990, p. 47), arguing that "sound and image work in separate zones" (Chion, 1990, p. 47); ignoring the relationship between sound and image, dismissing its effect on the perception of the audience to further convey atmosphere within a scene.

Within the 'audiovisual contract', Chion coins the term 'Synchresis' to describe "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (Chion, 1990, p. 64), believing synchresis to be responsible for our conviction that the sounds heard in The Shining, such as the tapping of the keys on the typewriter Jack is using, are indeed from a typewriter. Chion believes the effect of synchresis to be "capable of being influenced, reinforced, and oriented by cultural habits" (Chion, 1990, p. 64), as one sound we associate with an image in one culture could be associated with something entirely different in another; highlighting the importance of the relationship between sound and moving image. Chion also describes there to be 'loose' and 'tight' synchresis as he believes this effect "does not function in an all-or-nothing way" (Chion, 1990, p. 64). Kubrick demonstrates instances of tight synchronism all throughout 'The Shining' with the use of footsteps, typing of the typewriter, character dialogue and the sound of the axe destroying the bathroom door. Chion highlights in 'Audio-Vision' (Chion, 1990, p. 64) that French film producers such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut favour this effect of tight synchronism when producing the relationship between sound and moving image as it creates a more coherent and convincing film structure. Chion highlights that French film producers would "find fault with the postsynching of Italian films", as their synchronisation is more forgiving; especially with character dialogue. This can be argued to be due to Italian films further focus of "the totality of the speaking body, particularity gestures" (Chion, 1990, p. 64); putting emphasis more on the movement within an image as opposed to the sounds within it; highlighting cultures different interpretations and importance of the relationship between sound and moving image.

The sound and image relationship Chion recognises through his 'audiovisual contract' are all identified by what he calls 'listening modes' (Chion, 1990, p. 26), in which there are three types; casual, semantic and reduced listening. Chion describes casual listening as "listening to a sound in order to gather information about its cause (or source)" (Chion, 1990, p. 26). This effect is useful when trying to identify the source when we cannot see it, such as when we hear cries from another room during a shot of Debbie; casual listening is used to infer that it is Jack's cries being

heard. Chion argues “we rarely recognize a unique source exclusively on the basis of sound we hear out of context” (Chion, 1990, p. 26). However, he believes that “the human individual is probably the only cause that can produce a sound that characterizes that individual alone” (Chion, 1990, p. 26); inferring to why it’s easy to identify it is Jack’s cries being heard. Chion believes casual listening to be the “the most easily influenced and deceptive mode of listening” (Chion, 1990, p. 26); effects such as synchresis constantly manipulate what we infer from casually listening as the sounds within film are not the initial causes of the sounds, but sounds that the moving image makes us believe it to be; highlighting the importance of the relationship between sound and image and its influence on the audience. Semantic listening refers “to a code or a language to interpret a message” (Chion, 1990, p. 28); focusing on and interpreting the words and text within an image. Chion believes “one can listen to a sound sequence employing both the causal and semantic modes at once” (Chion, 1990, p. 28), as the audience can hear what someone says whilst also hearing how they say it. He states “causal listening to a voice is to listening to it semantically as perception of the handwriting of a written text is to reading it” (Chion, 1990, p. 28). Kubrick demonstrates these effects through the character of Jack when he exclaims “here’s Johnny!”. Semantically we can infer he is stating a name which isn’t his whilst using casual listening to infer that it is Jack who is saying it; both effects aiding in representing Jack’s insanity. Chion highlights in ‘Audio-Vision’ that Pierre Schaeffer coined the term reduced listening to “the listening mode that focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and meaning” (Chion, 1990, p. 29). Chion states the sound object to be observed in itself, instead of being a “vehicle for something else” (Chion, 1990, p. 29). Through these aspects of Chion’s listening modes; the relationship between sound and moving image is highlighted by its importance when associating the sounds used in conjunction with the images on screen.

In conclusion, through Stanley Kubrick’s ‘The Shining’ (The Shining, 1980), Michel Chion’s functions within his ‘audiovisual contract’ can be interpreted to aid and influence the relationship between sound and moving image. Functions such as unification and synchresis play an important role when creating the sound and image relationship as it can influence the audiences perception as to what will happen next, whilst also determining the audiences feelings through the atmosphere created by the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, aspects which image alone couldn’t provide; highlighting the ‘audiovisual contracts’ importance of the sound and image relationship.

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